

Rotuma for tomorrow:

A two-day sail can cause one to pace the boat in desperation as the inter-island vessel inches closer and closer to the island until at last it gets close enough to count the individual coconut trees growing along the coast. The island's beauty is arresting and it suddenly becomes evident why we need to mobilise our island community to manage our natural resources well. This has always been the goal of LājeRotuma; tumultuous in its planning and vision but with the purest of intentions. Ten years into our adventure, we hope that the travel situation will ease or that the island challenges we strive to overcome are abated. The LājeRotuma Initiative aims to enhance the community's understanding of their environment to enable them to manage Rotuma's natural resources for today and tomorrow. Our work as practitioners, educators and role as daughters and sons of our island home, involves much more than simply exploring our heritage and creating awareness on island ecology in the spirit of volunteerism. The world is changing and Rotuma, a remote island economy is linked to the world via improved communications. The demands for infrastructural development etched in national planning processes and the changing lifestyle is effecting social change at an accelerating pace. There are immediate needs to frame a comprehensive baseline of the island's natural resources which are fundamental to ensuring food security on the island in the face of developmental needs and in the midst of frequent extreme events of high temperature, drought and heavy rainfall. The conduct of community-based biophysical surveys of birdlife, transect walks up the undulating hills right down to the surrounding reefs help improve understanding of the island's environment.

Rotuma's geographical isolation creates ecological and anthropological intrigue about the people's origins and present culture, as well as the extent of biological diversity which is still largely unknown. The 43 square kilometer oceanic island is experiencing a continuous shift in the value and use of natural resources which accelerates the erosion of Rotuman knowledge and practices. Creating a culture of biodiversity conservation through organised field surveys, community sessions and eco-camps enables LājeRotuma volunteers to engage the island community in topical issues important to its economic growth while also protecting the integrity of the community.

Therefore, there is urgency to institute a measure of protection and management of the island landscape, inclusive of its surrounding reefs and islets - possibly 12 miles of near-shore marine habitat that is important for our people and our way of life - a plight shared by most Pacific peoples on islands that host a small resource base and an equally poor land management system. However, there are ongoing regional initiatives addressing this lack and regional cooperation is enhancing the coping mechanisms of Pacific island peoples. This is one of a series of articles sharing an in-depth knowledge of what Rotuma is as a physical entity and about her people's aspirations for a sustainable community that moves beyond subsistence with an ability for making choices.

For Rotuma today, plans for infrastructure development and the exponential rate of resources utilization are imminent. Like any other island community, Rotuma faces enormous challenges as their social, economic and finite environmental resources are reduced and destroyed.

Concerted efforts towards building a resilient Rotuma for tomorrow becomes a primary goal in a process led by LäjeRotuma, and promoted via the elders and youth of Rotuma to create a culture of biodiversity conservation as an integral part of Rotuman history - recognizing that traditional practices cannot be separated from its ethical, aesthetic values, or from its socio-economic reality.

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