

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION
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**SEMINAR ON SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM IN
PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES.**

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FIJI

SOLOMON ISLANDS PERSPECTIVE

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1. Economic Impact of Tourism

Tourist expenditure creates impacts on the overall national economy of a country in several ways, but particularly in the areas of balance of payment; national income, employment generation and government revenue. The impact of tourism expenditure on each of these three areas is through direct, indirect or induced effect, as money circulates through the economy in several rounds.

Table A below shows the Solomon Islands visitor arrival decreased from about 16,000 in 1998 to 12,960 in 1999 and it dramatically dropped to around 9,432 in year two thousand. The balance of the payment data published by the Central Bank of Solomon Island give rough estimates of foreign exchange earnings from international tourism. Relative to the trend on visitor arrivals the foreign exchange earning decreased from roughly SI\$31.9 million (US\$5.7million) in 1998 to SI\$27.5 million (US\$4.9million) in 1999 and a further drop in 2000 to SI\$18.4 million (US\$3.3million). The number of visits decreased because of the ethnic crises.

In 1999 the average expenditure per tourist was approximately SI\$1889 (US\$366) per visit or SI\$262 (US\$51) per day. Total tourist expenditure was approximately SI\$24.5 (US\$4.7) million. In 1998 tourist expenditure was equivalent to 4.8 per cent of total domestic export.

A comparison of tourism earnings with other major Merchandise exports gives an indication of the relative importance of tourism in the national economy of Solomon Islands. (Table B). The government charges 10 per cent tax on accommodation and meals and the government receives a substantial amount from this source. In addition the government receives income from international departure tax. Tourism also generates direct revenue to the government through a variety of other sources including through airport landing fees, bed tax levy, domestic departure tax, ports charges, business licences and import duties.

As a typical labour-intensive industry, tourism generates employment in the various sectors directly and indirectly related to tourism at various levels. Presently the total number of jobs in the tourism sector is estimated to be between 1,200 to 1,400 people and it represents an approximately 4% of the estimated workforce for the country. Direct employment is generated in the hotel and catering sector, travel and transport operations, diving operations and the tourist organisations sector.

Table A: Foreign visitor arrivals 1998-2000

Year	Number of foreign Visitors	Change over the previous year (per cent)
1998	16000	14%
1999	12960	(19%)
2000	9432	(27%)

Table B: Top foreign exchange earners (merchandise exports and tourism)

Export items	1998		1999		2000	
	Foreign exchange earnings (US \$) '000	Rank	Foreign exchange earnings (US \$)'000	Rank	Foreign exchange earnings (US \$)'000	Rank
Copra	7,603	4	7,656	4	6,743	3
Fish	37,690	2	30,870	2	7,991	2
Logs	38,096	1	48,652	1	43,560	1
Palm Oil & Kernel	19,004	3	12,644	3	1,274	6
Cocoa	5,877	6	4,735	6	1,801	5
Tourism	6,198	5	5,341	5	3,572	4

2. Current state of Ecotourism and potential for further expansion

a. Definition of Ecotourism in Solomon Islands context.

Ecotourism is a fairly new concept and one that Solomon Islands has yet to come to grips with the issues involved with the meaning of this term. The natural resources of the

Solomon Islands are numerous, unique and relatively unspoiled and the scenic beauty of these resources are some of the main tourist attraction of the country. This has been recognised as a major asset for the promotion of the ecotourism potential of the country. Many of the natural resources are currently underdeveloped to cater for nature tourism with little information on the natural history of the country available to the tourist.

Surveys available in the country indicates that the bulk of tourists visiting Solomon Islands do not want to live in five star hotels, but rather want to experience the exotic natural environment and unique social and cultural heritage of the islands and their population. This has attracted general attention and over the past five years ecotourism development in the country has progressed steadily. This has also resulted in the formation of the Solomon Islands Ecotourism Association, which aims to promote the ecotourism products that are readily available. However, Solomon Island still lacks a definite policy and strategy for ecotourism. The absence of a framework has led to a fragmented and uncoordinated development of ecotourism.

For ecotourism in Solomon Islands to develop effectively in a planned and controlled manner, there needs to be a national understanding of the meaning of the term. Generally ecotourism is nature tourism or any tourism taking place in a natural environment. Ideally ecotourism to natural areas should be ecologically sustainable and not degrade the natural or cultural environment; encourage environmental and cultural appreciation and enjoyment; foster environmental and cultural understanding through quality interpretation of these environments; contribute to the social and economic well-being of the local community and finally it should contribute to the conservation and management of the environment it utilised. The Solomon Islands Ecotourism Association define ecotourism as “Tourism the Solomon Way”, which encompasses an experience of a mixture of small ecoquality accommodation in rural quiet setting, local hospitality and food, traditional culture, local tours both land and sea based activities and other soft adventures.

b. Principle Ecotourism Product

The major ecotourism products development in the Solomon Islands in the last ten years has been in the establishment of a growing ecolodge accommodation sector. The World Heritage Program administered by the Tourism Division of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Aviation has successfully inscribed East Rennell in the UNESCO, World Heritage list. The same program has also successfully developed and improved eight (8) ecotourism lodges in Marovo Lagoon, Western Province and five lodges in East Rennell, Rennell and Belona Province.

Non-Government Organisation (NGO) such as the Solomon Island Development Trust, World Fund for Nature, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy as well as SPREP also assisted communities to establish ecotrekking and accommodation ventures in Makira, Western and Guadalcanal Provinces. Overseas Volunteers have also provided technical assistance and encouragement to communities in other provinces to venture into small scale tourism development and small private enterprise called Solomon Village Stay.

Other ecotourism products under development are kayaking business operated and managed by local people is also established in Marovo as an added ecotourism attraction. In addition dive tourism in World War II Heritage touring soft Adventure/Nature/Culture tourism, Bird watching and village stay tourism.

c. Principal threats to the sustainability of ecotourism and ecotourism products

There are several impediments that may possibly threaten the sustainability of ecotourism and ecotourism products.

Firstly, The Solomon Islands economy is currently underpinned by logging, mining and fishing. However unrestricted logging and fishing activities for commercial purposes in particular are unsustainable and causing environmental degradation and depletion of the resources, which is detrimental to the future development of ecotourism in the Solomon

Islands. The very nature of ecotourism is that it is heavily reliant upon the natural environment. Since it is essentially resource-based the sector will be in danger of undermining its very existence if the social and ecological implications of the industry are ignored. The environment is ecotourism very own resources therefore damage to, or destruction of the resources would threaten the very fabric and economic viability of ecotourism.

Secondly, most ecotourism operators have not received any training at all in hospitalities or tourism and rely upon a natural hospitableness and some cases advice from visitors and friends overseas. There is a strong need to provide training to operators in several operation and management areas particularly in food preparation and cooking, tour guiding, tourist expectations and cultures, businesses management, bookkeeping, health and safety and house keeping.

Thirdly, There is little coordination to effectively market and distribute the ecolodge product overseas. Most have no brochures, are not on the Internet, have no access to overseas wholesalers or travel agents and undertake no advertisement or public relation activities. Nearly all of these activities are far beyond the financial capacity and technical knowledge of individual operators.

Fourthly, Most ecotourism facilities are operated at a very low occupancy rates (less than 10%) as a consequences few generate sufficient means to allow for expansion or upgrading hence the operators may fail to deliver product quality.

Fifthly, world wide and regional competition especially those with well developed and clearly defined ecotourism product may put the Solomon at a very low competitive edge.

Sixth, The effect of the recent ethnic tension and certain unpleasant events that continued to erode our capacity to restore the country's image abroad.

Seventh, customary land tenure system which may give rise to land disputes and finally overdevelopment would damage the traditional culture.

d. Challenges and Opportunities for the expansion of ecotourism

Like the neighbouring Pacific Island Countries, the Solomon Islands share a common aspiration for economic development and improved living standards for the people. However this development cannot be at the cost of the environment. The Solomon Island people have lived in close harmony with the environment for thousands of years and are well aware of its importance to their way of life. It is facing a complex challenge, in common with many other countries of the world, of achieving economic development in a way, which will not significantly affect the natural environment.

Tourism in Solomon Islands faces a big challenge to compromise with the capacity of other sectors such as fisheries, logging, mining and other prime economic sector. Such activities have been the backbone of the country's economy. If these activities were stopped because they have detrimental impacts on tourism, the whole economy would fail. It needs to be carefully managed to balance the needs of tourism and the economic needs of the resource owners.

There is a great potential for further expansion of developing ecotourism in Solomon Islands but this development should be driven by private sector investment, which will only come through sustained profitability, which in turn will be driven by increase visitation. There is opportunity for the Division of Tourism to work in close collaboration with the other partners such as the Ministry of Forest and Conservation, Marine and Fisheries and NGOs to foster common interest in ecotourism to secure integrated efforts in the sustainable development of ecotourism.

3. Role of Government and Policies and Initiative

The government's involvement in tourism development is in a supportive role through policy development, training, regulations and infrastructure development. The Division of Tourism, which is located with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Aviation, is the policy arm of the government. The overall function of the division is to “ to promote the orderly development of tourism in the Solomon Islands. The government support the development of ecotourism by providing direct grant support to ecotourism projects, which is administered by the division.

It is apparent that the successive Solomon Island government have in the past adopted a cautionary plat form approach to tourism development. The National Tourism Development plan (1991 - 2000), which is an important policy document for the government recognised the potential of such niche market as ecotourism when it established a policy that tourism should grow at a moderate rate in order to minimise its disruptive and harmful socio-economic, cultural and environmental impact. It has specific emphasis on sustainable tourism development, which can be categorised as Ecotorism. The goal is to provide a conducive environment for tourism growth ensuring, at the same time, the protection and enhancement of the nations natural, cultural and historic features.

In a move to try and assist the Ecotourism Association of Solomon Islands to further assist indigenous people, the Solomon Islands Alliance for Change Government (SIAC), which came into power in 1997, came out with a very clear policy statement on tourism. This means that more emphasis should be placed on indigenous people. The objective of SIAC Government policy statement is to:

- a) Encourage and support indigenous Solomon Islanders to enter the ecotourism sector.
- b) Facilitate training to equip Solomon Islanders with necessary skills to provide internationally accepted services

c) Provide support to government and private sectors in change of marketing and promotions of Solomon Islands as a tourist destination.

d) Ensure that all tourism development is in line with the national tourism policy especially the protection and enhancement of local cultures.

As the development of ecotourism progresses, the government must be mindful of certain issues in the context of community and policy and planning to ensure sustainability.

The government need to provide opportunities for community participation in tourism that would ensure community values were appropriately reflected in the planning process. Planning should incorporate the development of dialogue between the community, local authorities, host government and the tourist industry to promote a shared vision of ecotourism. Ecotourism planning should promote social responsibility in the context of community needs. In planning for the future it is imperative that local people do not lose access to natural areas and resources. Ecotourism ventures should not proceed without a full and comprehensive study of the environment and the development of an environmental protection plan. Long term carrying capacity or use capacity levels must be established at each venture. Ecotourism should be used to help establish protected areas as part of sustainable development and develop national policies to provide a management regime to support the conservation of natural and cultural sites.

Overall, all sections of government and industry with a policy role and/or responsibility to tourism, natural resources, planning, management and economic development require realistic workable and achievable policies that are comprehensive, cross demarcation boundaries and yet are fully complementary. The government and industry require a long term strategic plan for ecotourism that both parties are fully committed to, that is comprehensive in terms of its coverage of the issues, and which integrated the concerns of all relevant bodies.

All sectors of government and industry which have a role, need/or responsibility for the planning of any aspect of tourism conservation and/or management require medium term tactical and short term stringent responsibilities as set out by the long term strategic plan.

For marketing, product development and resource management, develop a parallel research and monitoring program and review it regularly and at frequent intervals.

4. Recommendations for the development of ecotourism

The Solomon Islands is competing against an ever-increasing number of destinations that can offer competitive ecotourism product in the South Pacific and the world at large. Therefore it is of paramount importance that the Solomon Island is aware of its strengths and weaknesses as an ecotourism destination so that these issues can be addressed in policy formulation, development strategies and marketing. The major strengths are the unspoilt nature of the natural resources that is also rich in the abundance and diversity of flora and fauna.

In order for the ecotourism in the Solomon Islands to be sustainable, it must be developed in accordance with the wisest use of the natural environment and its resources. It should allow for the use by ecotourist, ecotourist operators and other recreational users but care must be taken not to damage or destroy the natural environment. The Solomon Island people themselves and the ecotourists need to have respect for the environment. The ecotourism operators must ensure impacts are minimised. This will require a range of management actions including educating the communities and visitors' awareness and pre-tour briefings.

The industry must also operate within the biophysical limits of the ecotourism sites visited. The operators should take into account the biological and physical carrying capacity of the sites at which they operate. Controlling and limiting the number of ecotourist and by limiting the frequency of visit to avoid overcrowding can achieve this.

Sustainable ecotourism should also aim to maintain biodiversity and ecological systems and processes. Clearly this will require that consumptive activities such as logging, fishing and habitat destruction by the communities need to be controlled. The under-development of large-scale tourism infrastructure makes this place relatively untouched and therefore must be maintained.

The government should focus on creating the right environment within which the private sector development can take place. In order to develop a sustainable ecotourism, government strategy should be to strengthen existing operators that are willing and capable of meeting the required (consumer driven) product standards and pricing conditions (distributor driven), which can then be enforced by Ecotourism Association and will be a prerequisite to sustainable product distribution.

Conclusion

While the prospect and opportunities for ecotourism are very attractive in the Solomon Islands it is important to note that it requires the maintenance of the ecological and aesthetic values of the natural environment and cultural resources. Ecotourism can lead to increased employment, income and foreign exchange, yet it is vulnerable to environmental degradation. A greater understanding of this lucrative and specialised market will enable the Solomon Islands to reap its reward.