

THE SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

Arthur Lyon Dahl

B.P. 1146, Noumea, New Caledonia

ABSTRACT

The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme groups 22 island countries and territories to deal with their common environmental problems. It is a joint programme of SPEC, SPC, UNEP and ESCAP, with a secretariat based at SPC and financial support from UNEP as part of its Regional Seas Programme. The first preparatory phase began in January 1980 with the preparation of country reports and expert reviews of important topics. These provided an indication of government priorities and of the state of the environment in the region, leading to the adoption of a Declaration and Action Plan at the Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific in Rarotonga in March 1982. Priority areas of the Action Plan concerning legal measures, radioactivity, hazardous waste dumping, toxic chemicals, a network of pollution control centres, research on marine and coastal problems, traditional environmental knowledge and management, and environmental information and training are now being actively implemented, and further projects are in preparation.

Introduction

Each Regional Seas programme area has its own distinctive characteristics. The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) is unique in its origins and orientation, as is appropriate to a region consisting entirely of island states with well established regional organizations and traditions of co-operation. The earliest regional intergovernmental organization, the South Pacific Commission (SPC), is nearly as old as the United Nations, having been founded in 1947. In addition, the region has long been sensitive to environmental issues. The traditional island cultures have developed over generations within the constraints of their environment, and where resources were limited they generally evolved management strategies and controls to ensure that resource use was sustainable.

The term "South Pacific" is not strictly accurate, as the region includes not only all the tropical South Pacific Islands of Melanesia and Polynesia from Papua New Guinea to Pitcairn, but also extends northward through the islands of Micronesia, most of which lie north of the equator (see map at beginning of section). The region covers about 29 million km², almost seven times that of the Caribbean, which makes it by far the largest Regional Seas programme in area. The land area, on the other hand, is only 551,000 km², of which Papua New Guinea makes up 84%. There are roughly 3 million inhabitants in Papua New Guinea, and 2 million in the other 21 countries of the region, ranging from over 600,000 in Fiji to less than a hundred on Pitcairn. Population densities (persons/km²) range from 6 or 7 in Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia to 348 on Nauru. The GNP per capita of US\$ 1,775 (in 1978) is considerably below that of the Caribbean (SPC, 1982).

Origins

SPREP evolved out of a decade of regional environmental interest and activity. As far back as 1970, the South Pacific Commission proposed recruiting an ecologist on its staff, and this was supported by a resolution from the Regional Symposium on Conservation of Nature - Reefs and Lagoons, held in Noumea, New Caledonia in 1971 under the joint sponsorship of SPC and the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), a meeting which identified many environmental problems of regional concern. The governments

of the region approved the post and a special project on conservation of nature in 1973, and I was recruited from the Smithsonian Institution to take up the post of Regional Ecological Adviser in 1974. A wide variety of activities in environment and conservation were included in the SPC work programme until replaced by SPREP in 1980.

The SPC initiated discussions with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on possible co-operation in the region in mid-1974. Maurice Strong, Executive Director of UNEP returned the visit to SPC later that year, and in 1975, at a speech at the Pacific Science Congress in Vancouver, he proposed a "mini-Stockholm" conference on the environment for the Pacific. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) also supported this suggestion. Further proposals from SPC lead to initial UNEP encouragement in 1976 for what was then called a comprehensive environmental management programme for the region. At the request of governments, the development of this programme became a joint activity between SPC and the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation (SPEC) the same year (SPC and SPEC, 1977). After a series of preparatory technical meetings of government experts, and the agreement of UNEP to provide initial funding, the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme was launched in January 1980.

South Pacific Regional Environment Programme

The first phase of the programme was designed to help the countries and territories of the region to identify their own environmental problems and priorities. Each government was requested to submit a country report to the programme (SPREP, 1981a, 1982a), and a number of experts were requested to prepare reviews on topics of regional interest (SPREP, 1981b). The process produced a "Stockholm-like" increase in governmental awareness of the significance of environmental concerns to their immediate interests. On the basis of this information, the SPREP secretariat was able to outline the state of the environment in the South Pacific (Dahl and Baumgart, 1982). It was clear that the South Pacific was no longer the carefree paradise of the tourist posters, nor was it yet the polluted Mediterranean. There was an obvious need for preventive measures before the environmental decline went too far.

The country reports showed that 60% of the countries had significant problems of soil erosion, more than half were concerned about the environmental impacts of the extraction of construction materials like sand and gravel, and 30% had major mining activity. Water shortages and water pollution also affected 60% of the countries. Loss of forest areas concerned 70%, and two thirds had problems of endangered species and nature conservation. More than half faced conflicts of land use and land tenure, given the limited land area available on many islands. In the coastal zone, reclamation and coastal erosion were each a problem in a third of the countries, overfishing and mangrove management were difficulties in over half, and three quarters suffered from significant pollution in coral reef areas. Waste disposal was a nearly universal problem; more than 90% had difficulties disposing of liquid wastes without creating pollution, and 60% could not find satisfactory means for getting rid of their solid wastes. Toxic chemicals such as pesticides, to which small islands are particularly vulnerable, were another worry for a majority of the region. Radioactivity was a special case, since the long continuing use of islands in the region for nuclear weapons tests and the proposals for ocean dumping of nuclear wastes have made this a major political issue. Finally, more than 60% of the governments were concerned about their population growth relative to the carrying capacity of their islands.

The preparatory phase of SPREP concluded with the Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific, held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, in March 1982, at which ministers and other high level delegates from nearly all participating countries adopted a South Pacific Declaration on Natural Resources and the Environment, and an Action Plan for Managing the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region (SPREP, 1982b).

It is significant that every single country and territory in the region participated actively in the preparatory phase of SPREP, showing the widespread support for the aims of the programme. Some countries even established environmental committees or bodies to implement their environmental priorities identified for SPREP.

Immediate priorities

The Action Plan adopted at the Rarotonga Conference identified a wide range of areas of environmental need, but certain priorities were also expressed. The programme therefore launched immediate activities in several of the priority areas. A technical group of international experts was organized to prepare a review of radioactivity in the South Pacific, so that the technical questions could be distinguished from the political and moral issues on this difficult subject (SPC/SPEC/ESCAP/UNEP, 1983; Bacon *et al.*, this volume). A similar review was commissioned on the disposal of hazardous wastes in the Pacific Ocean (SPC/SPEC/ESCAP/UNEP, 1984). It was clear that the regional policies on this subject could only be implemented through international and regional legal agreements. SPREP therefore encouraged countries to become party to the London Dumping Convention, and organized a series of meetings to draft a Convention for the Protection and Development of the Natural Resources and Environment of the Pacific Region and associated protocols (SPREP, 1983a; Pulea, this volume).

Given the lack of baseline data on pollution by toxic chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides, and the reported extent of pollution by urban drainage and other liquid wastes, SPREP began consultations with regional universities and research organizations on the creation of a network of sub-regional pollution monitoring centres with analytical laboratories. The discussions also extended to research and training needs and the possible co-ordination of approaches, particularly with respect to the marine and coastal environments (SPREP, 1983b). A detailed feasibility study was commissioned of the mapping of coastal resources in the region for planning purposes, but resources were not adequate to undertake such a project immediately.

A major effort is being made in the area of environmental information and public awareness, including the preparation of a directory of research centres, a bibliography of environmental literature, and environmental radio broadcasts. Emphasis is placed on the importance of preserving what remains of traditional environmental knowledge and management practices for their possible usefulness in solving current problems. Approaches for training village leaders to better manage their own land and resources are being developed, since in the decentralized structure of the Pacific much responsibility for resource management will always rest at the local level. The programme also made provision for direct assistance to countries with specific problems.

Distinct features of SPREP

As mentioned above, the area of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme is distinctive in consisting of tiny islands in a vast area of sea without nearby continental margins. Most of the 22 participating countries and territories (American Samoa, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Caledonia, Niue, Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Pitcairn Island, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Wallis and Futuna, and Western Samoa) are micro-states struggling with problems of small size, isolation and a lack of resources. Five developed countries with territories or former territorial interests in the region (Australia, France, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States) also support the programme.

Unlike most of the Regional Seas Action Plans, SPREP originated in regional environmental activities outside of UNEP, although UNEP assistance and encouragement help to bring it to fruition. It is based in strong regional organizations with a long history of regional co-operation in many fields. It has a unique structure, with a Co-ordinating Group representing the four co-operating organizations (SPEC, SPC, ESCAP and UNEP) which reports to the two major intergovernmental meetings in the region, the South Pacific Forum and the South Pacific Conference. The SPREP secretariat is located at the South Pacific Commission headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia, and is currently headed by Dr. Jeremy Carew-Reid, SPREP Regional Co-ordinator. SPREP is thus a combined effort of the major intergovernmental organizations with environmental interests in the region, and is directly responsive to the wishes of governments as laid down in the Action Plan and as reviewed at their annual meetings.

While UNEP has placed responsibility for the support of SPREP with its Regional Seas Programme Activity Centre, SPREP has always been concerned with all of the South Pacific environment, terrestrial as well as marine. On an island it would be artificial and unrealistic to separate the two. For the island countries, problems on land are at least as pressing as those in the sea, and the priorities of SPREP are weighted accordingly. SPREP also tries to be sensitive to the special geographic, economic, social and cultural dimensions of the region. It is not always possible to take the same approaches as elsewhere when there is a relative lack of scientific and technical capabilities, and the possibilities for independent national action in support of a regional plan are much more limited. All this emphasizes the importance of regional co-operation in resolving pressing environmental problems which is the basis of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme.

REFERENCES

- Bacon, M. P., G. Lambert, T. A. Rafter, J. I. Samisoni and D. J. Stevens. 1984. Radioactivity in the South Pacific Region. In A. L. Dahl and J. Carew-Reid [ed.], Environment and resources in the Pacific: a regional approach. UNEP, Geneva.
- Dahl, Arthur Lyon, and Ian L. Baumgart. 1982. The state of the environment in the South Pacific. p. 47-71. In SPREP. Report of the Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 8-11 March 1982. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. Reprinted as UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies, No. 31 (1983).
- Pulea, Mere. 1984. Legal measures for implementation of environmental policies in the Pacific Region. In A. L. Dahl and J. Carew-Reid [ed.], Environment and resources in the Pacific: a regional approach. UNEP, Geneva.
- SPC. 1982. South Pacific economies 1980: statistical summary. Edition No. 6. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 36 p.
- SPC and SPEC. 1977. Comprehensive environmental management programme. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 73 p.
- SPC/SPEC/ESCAP/UNEP. 1983. Radioactivity in the South Pacific. Topic Review No. 14, SPREP. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 211 p.
- SPC/SPEC/ESCAP/UNEP. 1984. Hazardous waste storage and disposal in the South Pacific. UNEP Regional Seas Reports and Studies No. 48. UNEP, Geneva. 25 p. and appendices 114 p.
- SPREP. 1981a. Country reports 1980-1981. Numbers 1-18. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 398 p.
- SPREP. 1981b. Topic reviews 1981. Numbers 1-13. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 202 p.
- SPREP. 1982a. Country report No. 19: Wallis and Futuna Islands. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 14 p.
- SPREP. 1982b. Report of the Conference on the Human Environment in the South Pacific, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, 8-11 March 1982. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 71 p.
- SPREP. 1983a. Report of the Expert Meeting on a Convention for the Protection and Development of the Natural Resources and Environment of the Pacific Region (Noumea, New Caledonia, 24-28 January 1983). South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 42 p.
- SPREP. 1983b. Report of the First Consultative Meeting of Research and Training Institutions in the South Pacific Region, Suva, Fiji, 18-20 April 1983. South Pacific Commission, Noumea, New Caledonia. 52 p.