
Samoa: A civil society approach to ensure community-based forest management

Samoa has a 2,935 square kilometre of land area comprising two main islands, Upolu and Savaii, and seven smaller islands. More than two thirds of the 178,000 population live on Upolu. The central highlands of Upolu and Savaii are sparsely populated. Most people live on the coast. Over 81% of the land is held under customary tenure, the remainder is held by the government (11%), Samoa Land Corporation (5%), and freehold (3%).

Of the 283,700 hectares of land in Upolu and Savaii, some 158,700 hectares retain indigenous forest, while 106,600 hectares are classified as cropping land, 9910 hectares are used for extensive livestock production, and 5,379 hectares support established tree plantations.

The biodiversity of Samoa has experienced a rapid transformation since pre-European contact, when the land was "clothed from the coast to the summit by virgin forest and the natives seem to amuse themselves by taming wood-pigeons, turtle doves, and parrots" as described by Bougainville between 1766 and 1769. At that time, Samoans co-existed harmoniously with the natural environment which met all of their needs. The trees provided housing and utensils, the soil provided for cultivation, the mountains provided watersheds for the clear rivers, and the wildlife provided food. The natural environment was then the backbone of a proud Samoan culture.

The demands of a modern society have rapidly changed the environment, particularly over the last three decades, and resources have been increasingly exploited in an unsustainable manner. Forest clearance for agriculture, over hunting, commercial development programmes, urban sprawl and logging operations have virtually and collectively contributed to environmental degradation. One dramatic measure of this impact is that over 64% of the country's indigenous forest was lost between 1954 and 1990. Very little lowland forest remains and pressure on the mid-slopes and upland areas is now increasing. Birds which once roamed the country freely, according to elders, are now found only in the uplands or are on the brink of extinction. The introduction of guns increased the hunting of pigeons to the point that they are harder to find in the forest. Old songs and proverbs are the only ways most of the country know of the existence of many of these pigeon and bird species. The fruit bat population, for example, have declined dramatically partly due to the hunting for export trade which took over 33,000 individuals between 1981 and 1989.

Compounding the human influences are the disturbances imposed by natural disasters and events such as cyclones, forest fires, and earthquakes. Two recent cyclones, Ofa (1990) and Val (1991) were the most severe in living memory and had dramatic impacts on birds and fruit bats. In time, the forests and animals and plant populations would recover from these events. However, the large-scale clearance of land, the introduction of exotic species, and over-hunting threatens this recovery. The hunting of pigeons before their numbers are back to pre-cyclone levels is an example of how human impacts can combine with nature to bring about accelerated changes to resources, driving species closer to extinction. These changes will ultimately affect the future of everything Samoan, unless the Samoan people work together to ensure the conservation and sustainable utilisation of resources for the future.

Many of the natural disasters that destroyed much of our forests are caused by huge areas of deforestation elsewhere and a result of climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use in industrialized countries of the north.

The issue of ecological debt is a cry of justice from countries such as Samoa. For too long, we as village communities, and our natural resources heritage have been continuously exploited by countries of the north. It is now time that the resource of the south, now stored and enjoyed by countries of the north be repatriated back to where those resources belong --the south. Samoa as a small country could make huge strides if a small portion of that multi-billion dollars worth of ecological wealth is transferred back to the south. We can then be able to realistically address many of our problems, one of which is the issue of forest degradation to forest conservation with the village communities as resource owners and managers of these resources.

For Samoa, it is clear that collective efforts of government, NGOs, and in particular the villages, as a multi-sectoral partnership, are a way forward to curb many of the threats on forests resources. As resource owners of 81% of Samoa's lands and forests, villages are pivotal in our efforts. The existing village structures driving governance, decision making, operationalising decisions, and in disciplining malpractices, are to be the vehicles that future forest conservation efforts will sustain.

The first environmental NGO in Samoa, established in 1990 by a group of local people who were genuinely concerned with the preservation and conservation of Samoa's environment, the management of forests, raise awareness on environmental issues, and promote sustainable use of natural resources, was Ole Siosiomaga Society Incorporated (OLSSI). During its 11 years of existence, OLSSI has been able to broaden its outreach on ways of preserving the environment and forest conservation through managing a number of environmentally sound and sustainable development projects, and engage in educational awareness as well as advocacy work on environmental and forestry issues. Much of the OLSSI work has centred on community participation and ensuring that they are the real recipients and beneficiaries of resources mobilized to implement these projects.

The multi-sectoral partnership will curb fires and deforestation, control subsistence practices in cutting new areas of pristine forests, ensure biodiversity conservation, catalyse collective conservation initiatives in the villages, will result in people taking ownership of forest management and avoiding activities that are detrimental to sustaining this vital resource.

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