



Pacific Calling Partnership information sheet

Heritage of the Pacific Islands and Climate Change

What is Heritage?

Heritage comes from the cultural, social and natural characteristics of a community and is closely related to its historyⁱ. It provides identity and uniqueness to a nation or ethnic group. A resolution regarding Culture and Sustainable Development of the United Nation General Assemblyⁱⁱ acknowledged the natural and cultural diversity of the world and recognised that cultures and civilizations can contribute to, and are crucial enablers of, sustainable development.

Heritage can be sub-divided into Natural Heritage and Cultural Heritage. Cultural Heritage is sub-grouped as tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. Tangible heritage includes physical objects like commodities, artifacts, traditional foods, monuments and other human-made materials which represent a particular society or ethnic group. Intangible Cultural Heritage is the practices, representations, knowledge, and beliefs which we see in a community's cultural events, folk arts, literature, paintings and architecture.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Pacific Nations: Culture links to land and Ocean

The Pacific islands comprise three ethno-geographic groups of islands: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. The culture and heritage of the Pacific nations is closely related to each local community, varying island to island based on local distinct characteristics. Community members carry their own heritage and culture which came from their ancestors and which are integral to their life.

Some notable examples of tangible cultural heritage are Tapa clothes, Umu (earthen oven), pandanus mats, traditional canoes, woodcarvings, and shell money.^{iv}

Examples of intangible cultural heritage are the kava ceremony, fire walking, stone fishing, tattooing, canoe racing and dance. Dance in Kiribati is a popular part of local culture. Dancing is not regarded as a mere display or entertainment, rather it conveys the expression of love, sorrows, conflicts, and lifestyle involving food-gathering, fishing, canoeing, and relationships – people to

people and people to land and water. Movements of the body demonstrate the meaning of a song.

Tapa Cloth is made from the bark of a tree and has traditionally been used in rituals and celebrations notably in Samoa, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.^v



In Kiribati, it is a part of the cultural practices of the local people that the placentas of their new-born babies need to be buried, paying tribute to the land as a source of their life and demonstrating the vital links between land and people. Another cultural practice in Kiribati is that when a person needs to cut a tree for housing, making a canoe or building a maneaba (a sacred meeting place for the community) they first apologise to that tree and explain why it is necessary to cut it.^{vi}

Threats to Heritage

While the heritage of a nation gives it natural and cultural identity, in many parts of the world culture and heritage is under challenge. Global trends like urbanisation, political instability, alienation from geographical locations and climate change can all undermine culture.

For Pacific Islands, low-lying land and scattered locations mean that sea level rise, intensified flooding and ocean acidification increase their vulnerability and will lead to an increasing frequency of land disputes, thus threatening social cohesion. The traditional staple foods put at risk by the effects of climate change, such as fish, breadfruit, coconut and pandanus do not just

provide food security, they are also essential items in feasts and celebrations.

Climate induced migration poses the biggest threat to the unique cultures and identity of the Pacific Islands. It is always a struggle for migrant communities to preserve their cultural practices when living within other cultures and in different geographical locations. Migration threatens to break the unity of community connections, familiarity with language, the passing on of traditional myths and beliefs associated with land and ocean and the knowledge of local medicine and traditional healing practices such as massage and traditional counselling. For island nations that become submerged the continuance of culture will become even more problematic.

Traditional head massage eases stress and cures headaches



For Samoans, living together in their ancestral location is a feature of their society. Climate change effects are forcing Samoan people to relocate into new communities thus disrupting their cultural practice of staying together^{vii}. Sea level rise also causes a shortage of many traditional goods which form an integral part of the culture of Pacific Island nations.

Pacific island communities serve seafood at every traditional gathering and social event^{viii}. Marine biodiversity ensures the continuance of dishes that are an essential part of their culture. Climate change induced ocean acidification damages or changes

existing biodiversity and in consequence the availability of traditional foods.

Newly planted taro



The production of swamp taro or pulaka, a starchy root widely consumed in Tuvalu and Samoa, is facing decreased production because of saltwater penetration into freshwater lenses^{ix}.

Pacific World Heritage Action Plan 2016-2020

The Pacific World Heritage Action Plan 2016-2020^x proposes a strategic roadmap on how to protect the present and upcoming threats to the cultural and natural heritage of the Pacific nations. It also focuses on climate change issues in relation to safeguarding the culture and heritage of the Pacific Islands from environmental impacts.

The report proposes sixteen regional activities for the preservation of local cultural heritage. Emphasis was given to climate-induced risk management and impact assessment training through the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program.

The report stresses that Pacific Island heritage needs to be managed through traditional practices that reinforce the inseparable relationship between communities, cultures and environment that underpin sustainable development. It points to the special vulnerability of the Pacific region to climate change and aims to make sure that Pacific communities can be actively engaged in conserving their heritage.

ⁱ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/heritage>

ⁱⁱ <https://en.unesco.org/news/general-assembly-adopts-new-resolution-culture-and-sustainable-development>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://resources.riches-project.eu/glossary/tangible-and-intangible-cultural-heritage/>

^{iv} <http://southpacificspecialist.org/cultural-heritage-in-the-south-pacific/>

^v <https://www.tapapacifica.com/>

^{vi} Maria Tiimon Chi-Fang, The Pacific Calling Partnership, Edmund Rice Centre

^{vii} <http://climate.org/submerging-paradise-climate-change-in-the-pacific-islands/>

^{viii} Maria Tiimon Chi-Fang, The Pacific Calling Partnership, Edmund Rice Centre, Sydney

^{ix} https://static-content.springer.com/esm/art%3A10.1007%2F10113-016-1012-5/MediaObjects/10113_2016_1012_MOESM2_ESM.pdf

^x <https://whc.unesco.org/document/142213>

