



# A return to paradise in American Samoa

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**F**or some of us it might be the sight of dolphins or the solitary thrill of helicopter skiing but for me it is the view of a tropical island which affords the instant joy and optimism which seems like a glimpse of paradise. Possibly, the pinnacled silhouette of a Polynesian high island conveys that sense of perfect bliss with greatest intensity. In western opinion inspired by the enthralled descriptions of eighteenth and nineteenth century explorers and sailors, its seductive charm has lain in the exotic profusion of nature, the Polynesian's serene enjoyment of life, and most of all perhaps, in his talent for making useful things out of, say, a coconut frond or a seashell. Today, the halcyon sweetness of these islands's climate and people makes it sometimes hard for westerners to believe that head-hunting and cannibalism were once widespread throughout the South Pacific. Future generations may find it equally hard to believe that Samoa was once a place where the beauty of nature was effusive and sustained.

Sustainable development and ecotourism have become key words in our new global ecological consciousness and hopeful leitmotifs in face of disappearing wilderness. They relate no longer to a fragmented vision of the world but imply a planetary responsibility for the preservation of nature in which individual actions -of whatever nationality and geographical situation- will have an effect on the whole of our environment. When therefore, a natural setting under localized control is misused or menaces the planet's ecology, it becomes reason for concern to environmentalists.

Some indigenous people may question however the judgement of scientists and environmentalists regarding their own country and wonder if these views are not biased or artificial.

The doctrine of sustainability increasingly accepted as a legitimate departure from noxious industrialization in the west, can seem ironic in parts of the world where adaptation to nature was traditionally felicitous. If there is reason

for the view that such societies would revert to sustainability if given a chance, they may even then be prevented by the bitter reaction to their colonial history or by fidelity to custom, or again by social change. The unlikelihood, furthermore, that indigenous societies introduced to western ways could or would, in a purist fervor, reject completely the amenities of modernity is increased in some cases by rapid population growth, only relieved by emigration. Irony turns into tragedy when these past sustainable societies realize that even with the will to do so and despite continuity of some traditions, they cannot go back to self-sufficiency but must adapt, willy-nilly, to their relentless integration into a modern economy. The history of Polynesia is riddled with such tragedy: the balmy climate, the natural luxuriance of high islands such as Samoa, Tahiti or the Marquesas, the sparsely clad beauty of the islanders and their hospitality, all contributed more or less to the downfall of their cultural and economic autonomy.

American Samoa typifies the Polynesian dilemma. The group is composed of the main island of Tutuila with the capital of PagoPago; the Manu'a group of Ofu, Olosega and Ta'u, rendered famous by Margaret Mead's book *Coming of age in Samoa*, the small island of Aunu'u and the diminutive Rose atoll. By 1839 the British and the Americans had established regular trade in Samoa, followed by official representation of the British Empire with a consulate in 1847, an American consulate in 1853 and later in 1861, there was a Hamburg representation. While the British withdrew from Samoa in 1900, the Germans and the Americans established their sovereignty, the former in Western Samoa, the latter in what became American Samoa.

With only 5000 inhabitants until a half a century ago, American Samoa has now one of the fastest growing populations in the world with a 3.7% yearly increase, mainly concentrated on Tutuila. In contrast, Western Samoa, its cultural twin, but since 1961, independent neighbor, has a population growth of only 0.5% for a larger land surface of 1,130 square miles, American Samoa faces the prospect of doubling its 52,860 population (statistic of 1993) just after

the year 2010 for a land surface of 76 square miles. The situation of American Samoa is however by no means exceptional in the South Pacific where population growth generally averages 2.3% which for small land masses is considerable. This is an unexpected departure from previous tendencies since first contact with the west, when Polynesian populations in some cases dwindled to near extinction.

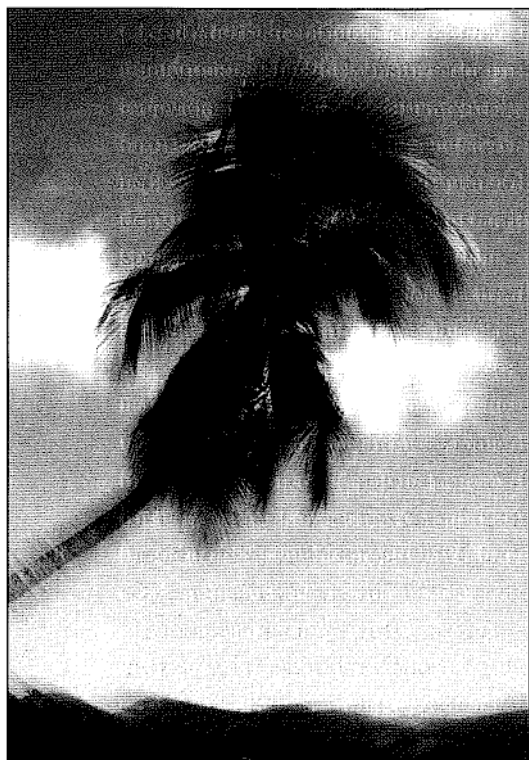
In preparation for a Washington DC conference on travel and tourism in 1995, the Governor of American Samoa stated the economic importance of tourism for the archipelago and appealed for the improvement of existing infrastructures, development and diversification. In addition, emphasis was put on the important role that local cultures should play in the successful development of tourism.

Tourists are extraordinarily few on American Samoa. One source gave 729 tourists for the whole of 1994. Indeed as a tourist, I was assailed by mixed feelings of delight and uncertainty as my taxi driver drove along the shore road. In the balmy darkness, I received contrasting impressions of untouched Polynesian beauty and of clumsy modern development. Later, leaning over the cement ledge of my balcony at the Rainmaker hotel, in order to see the bay, I had to overlook what appeared to be a small sized concentration camp with glaring neon light and barbed wire: in fact, a dock for large ships unfortunately placed under the windows of the sole modern hotel of American Samoa. Though large and relatively expensive, the Rainmaker is neither luxurious nor clean nor very attractive. One cannot, furthermore benefit from its proximity to the bay since severe pollution makes it unwise to swim. The paucity of hotels is in my view an attractive feature of the archipelago. Unlike in Western Samoa, where there are several comfortable hotels, the quality of service of the existing ones in PagoPago makes one wonder if the average tourist isn't well-advised to stay away.

If controlled development and improved infrastructure are important to the growth of tourism, the vitality and preservation of local culture are even more so, as stressed at a Washington DC conference. Traditional Polynesian culture relies heavily on its natural environment. Take the plants away and traditional local medicine cannot thrive; deplete fallow land and taro plantations which need virgin or next to virgin soil must be fewer. Damage the reef and lagoon, fishing is impaired; destroy the forest, wood sculpture, boat and house building must rely on imported material; violate the traditional sacredness of certain areas and the aito or spirits, which are such a vital part of Samoan culture have no fit place to congregate.

Clearly, American Samoa, like its independent neighbor and most of the rest of Polynesia, is looking towards the tourist industry to boost its unhealthy economy, currently based essentially on federal aid and the production of canned tuna - both sources of income allowing American Samoa to supply itself with almost 200 million dollars worth of imports per year.

In broad daylight and at first glance, the whole Samoan group is a diminutive picture of Polynesian perfection. Upon closer inspection, the beauty is there but sadly degraded. The capital of PagoPago has nothing of the sanitary skyscraper look of Hawaii's Waikiki, but rather, the dubious and insalubrious charm of its decaying colonial structures and of the premature aging of its ill-maintained modern buildings and streets. Somewhat the setting of a Polynesian Heart of Darkness. Far worse however than just a look of tropical *laissez-aller* which has after all its seduction, are environmental problems which are many in both Samoas but particularly noticeable in American Samoa because of restricted space and galloping demography, mainly on Tutuila. The damage of unsightliness: streams draped in disregarded rags or paper and diapers, dotted with used soda cans and so on; a good part of





the coast has been disfigured by unattractive commercial buildings; the waters of the bay of PagoPago are murky and pollution has made it dangerous. Even near manicured villages such as Vatia on the northern coast, in Tutuila's National Park (officially launched in September 1993), unsightly piles of trash can be seen. In other areas of the Park, remote from any village, garbage has been dumped, relying on the lush vegetation to camouflage it conveniently. Vegetation does in fact cover such blemishes quite rapidly but the idea of a trash ridden nature park remains mind boggling. In the lagoon of Ofu which is also part of the National Park, I snorkeled right into a great blue plastic sheet stuck to the coral and found other unorganic residues of westernized living on the beach. Neither was I spared during my brief drive on the island of Olosega the blatant sight of a village dump. Admittedly, the same thing and worse can be seen in parts of the west as, for example, on the highly touristic and mostly unprotected Mediterranean coast of France. Nonetheless, in a previously

sustainable society where in the past, used containers and wrappings could return undetected to the nature they came from, the effects of westernization are far more shocking and dreadful.

Less obvious aspects of environmental degradation originate largely from man made activities. These environmental issues have been aired in reports by government agencies such as the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources or the Environmental Protection Agency, publicized in pamphlets and television ads or street billboards. They report damage to the coral reef, near extinction of some natural species, severe pollution of coastal waters, ground water contamination, polluted run-off, leeching from cesspools or badly constructed septic tanks, gradual disappearance of wetlands and lowland rainforest, increased erosion...The gruesome list is by no means exhaustive.

The development of tourism in American Samoa thus faces perhaps greater handicaps than in other parts of Polynesia. The establishment of a

National Park on land leased from the Samoans for a period of fifty years, will not favor the development of mass tourism and resort complexes. The near 9000 acre National Park is expected to help promote a more responsible behavior towards the environment and attract more visitors to the archipelago. Many Samoans have greeted the initiative with open arms, if only because of the financial advantages it offers them. The alternative to mass tourism is ecotourism, supposedly a more discreet but expensive formula in which the traveler, in a fascinating contradiction, pays to see what was once free of charge, for the very reason that nature's beauty is declared priceless. In Western Samoa, the process has begun with sometimes surprising results such as in the village of Lefaga where a villager reclining under a thatched fale I told me to pay one tala<sup>2</sup> to be allowed to walk on a beach. The latter was appropriately nicknamed Return to paradise after a film bearing that title had been made there. In a land where beaches are ubiquitous, I could not help annoy-

ance at having to pay to walk on one, however modest the price.

While the Park in American Samoa has helped to settle some land ownership conflicts, the leasing has also stimulated old land rivalries and created new ones. Not surprisingly then, others see it as another form of intrusion in Samoan life, with a new set of rules established by the Palagi, that is the westerner, with the implication that the Samoan knows little about the nature of his islands and treats it improperly. By the same token it implies that the Palagi knows better. It is tempting therefore for Samoans to react by holding the west responsible both for the causes of environmental degradation and for its restoration. The Park is only one element of the misunderstanding on ecological concerns. Though American Samoa has retained its traditional communal social structure through the authority of the matai or titled men and local assemblies called fono, an understanding of global environmentalism is not automatically included in community feeling. In the same way, though a Samoan living on the US mainland will consider the whole of Samoa as home, his world will become far more restricted in Samoa where his primary allegiance will go to his village, making the neighboring village less of a concern. Thus, disposing of garbage near another village has in his view the benefit of keeping his own village clean.

Sand mining is another issue in which Samoan priorities are clearly different from those of environmentalists: sand is needed for Samoan funerals and though, consequently, beaches disappear, tradition must be satisfied. In the same manner, rapid population growth becomes an unrelated abstraction as soon as an individual wishes to have a family or again, when the western religion to which he has adhered forbids birth control. There is between the Samoan villager and the ecologically concerned a different understanding of the passage of time. If the environment continues to be immediately useful to the Samoan, nothing in his way of living needs in his opinion to be changed. But for the westerner, evidence of environmental damage is already overwhelming and promises long-term damage.

How therefore will these different notions of priority and time affect the development of sustainable economy and ecotourism? Is ecotourism really a solution for a 'return to paradise' when some among American Samoa's chiefs consider environmentalism as essentially a western gimmick rather than as their own reality? A recent study on deforestation in Western Samoa noted that protection of the forest could only succeed if strong local political authority supported cooperative efforts for that purpose. Similarly, in American Samoa, instead of increased environmental education, a return to traditional respect for the sacredness of nature may be more effective in the protection

of its biodiversity. Given the importance of the chiefly system, this change of attitude towards the environment can be successfully achieved if the chiefs adopt an environmentalist point of view.

It is a change that all Polynesians must ineluctably reflect upon and decide about now that their populations are growing fast and that most of their islands have already succumbed to crucial transformations. With environmental reality closing in on them, the economic usefulness of the natural beauty of their islands becomes obvious.

An unfortunate aspect of a willful 'return to paradise' and its exploitation through ecotourism is however, the unnatural self-consciousness about nature which it breeds in both indigenous people and visitors and the consequent commercialization. Though the urbanized palagi, in his eager, almost desperate search for uncluttered, pristine nature may not judge such self-consciousness so harshly and accept it more readily, it is jarring to the Samoan and all Polynesians whose relations with their natural surroundings through hunting, fishing and agriculture have been so intimate and instinctive before western contact. The very idea of Paradise after all is of something effortless, boundless and eternal. A solution to this artificiality may lie in the intangible or spiritual value which can be given to nature's beauty. And for this, Samoans and all Polynesians need only to look toward their own traditions.

