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# Performance art and plastic bags in the Pacific

Petra Campbell

Pacific Islanders have a powerful cultural link with the natural world of oceans, sea creatures and birds, and the vibrance of their traditional dance, song and drama is part of this deep attachment. The scourge of non-recyclable waste devastating their precious island homes has become new subject matter for some of these performers. Petra Campbell reports on progress.



In front of the newly built Parliament House on the tiny Pacific island of Tuvalu, actors are rolling around the ground gasping for breath in the final convulsions of an ugly death. While diving for fish in the lagoon, the Red Boobie got caught in a plastic bag and drowned trying to resurface. The beloved Tuvaluan turtle is choking to death having mistaken a plastic bag for a jellyfish while cruising in the Tuvaluan marine reserve, where it is supposed to be protected. Then a whale is discovered washed up on the beach. He is cut open by a Tuvaluan fishing family who discover in horror dozens and dozens of undigested plastic shopping bags in its belly. As bag after bag of plastic is pulled out of the whale's stomach, the schoolboy cries 'Tuvalu, stop using plastic shopping bags, they are killing our sea animals and our birds. We must keep Tuvalu free of plastic'.

The play was performed to mark Tuvalu's transition to becoming the world's first plastic shopping bag free country. As there is no national TV on the island, the Kilongatasi Theatre Group went on to perform the play on radio. Soon after, the International Help Fund Australia (IH) and IH Germany, which assisted Tuvalu with its plastic shopping bag free campaign and funded the replacement calico and paper bags, ran a public information program and talk-back show in conjunction with the government on issues dealt with in the play.

**BOTH IMAGES:** Tonga **ABOVE:** Two women compare their economic status - one uses cloth and the other disposable nappies. **RIGHT:** A group of 'rubbish eating monsters' with a taste for various kinds of recyclables.

Tuvalu is a typical example of Pacific Islands in waste management crisis: it imports everything it needs and wants, which once consumed must be disposed of. Although the main island can be walked from one end to another in an hour, Tuvalu has new roads. This brought in used cars of 'a certain age' which in the salt air last only one or two years. In this densely populated flat coral atoll every square metre is allocated. No holes can be dug. There is nowhere for the garbage to go, except off-island, but exporting waste is economically unfeasible and islands cannot fund the programs themselves. All this is a threat to the island's marine, terrestrial environment and supply of drinking water.

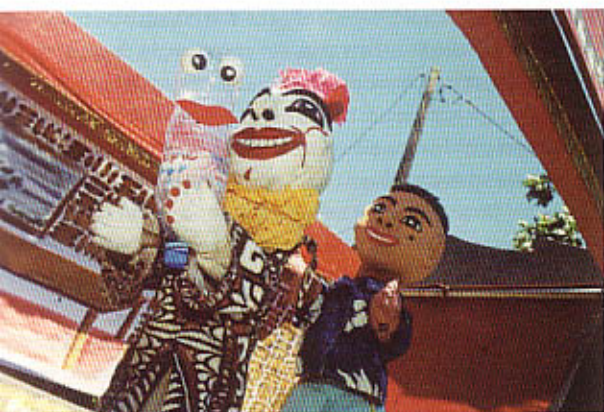
The problem is now so huge that the Samoan-based Secretariat of the South Pacific Environment Program (SPREP) declared 2005 The Year of Action Against Waste and is working with its 21 member countries to finalise a Regional Solid Waste Management Strategy that will act as a blueprint to support countries and territories to develop national action plans and activities.

But fortunes invested and strategic plans won't work without the support and education of the populations concerned. As Pacific Islanders have traditionally depended on song, dance and theatre to communicate, they are relying on these mediums again to raise public awareness on environmental and waste management issues.



Kiribati, a low-lying coral atoll like Tuvalu, is trying hard to battle traditional cultural practices and perceptions as well as funding constraints. The majority of the population on mainland Tarawa still washes and defecates in the same lagoon that provides their daily fish. But it is also the island getting the most praise for its efforts in waste management and has won the most awards from SPREP for its public information campaign centred on two performance groups, the disabled group Te Toamatoa and the Itibwerere group, which have been performing for recycling projects and the International Waters Program waste-sorting promotions.

The waste management department of the Kingdom of Tonga, relies extensively on the use of drama and song to get messages out into the community, right down to the school level, and involves competition and awards.



Over the past year a community drama has been touring every rural village and major urban settlement on the main island of Pongatapu. The drama consists of four skits concerning plastic waste, nappies, composting and the environment in general. There are also two dramas covering a range of social and environmental issues touring secondary and primary schools.

In Tahiti, the waste management department, the Société de l'Environnement Polynésien, uses a traditional French artform to communicate with Tahitian school children: marionettes. A story about the long-awaited day that home sorting bins are delivered is about to play 165 times around the two main islands. Recyclables come to life and await the day they are reincarnated into new objects. They are able to taunt all those who don't recycle properly. Plastic bottles become pillows for children to sleep on. The son who recycles properly sleeps well on his new pillow, whereas the son who didn't care was kept awake all night by his angry pillow.

What is common through these diverse islands is a love of their cultural traditions and the joy and energy of the performances. There is historically a close relationship to nature which makes performance art an effective means of publicising modern themes of waste management and ecology.

The most colorful performing culture in the Pacific is that of the Polynesian Easter Island, or Rapa Nui. Easter Island is one of the most dramatic examples of environmental degradation in the history of mankind. Centuries ago, ancient Easter Islanders totally deforested their island to carve the giant stone Moai - the inspiration of Kevin Costner's film *Rapa Nui*. With no trees, the soil could not grow food and there was nothing to build boats with to go fishing. The island was plunged into cannibalism. Along with slave trade and disease brought in by seafarers, the population plummeted from 6,000 to 111 by 1887. Every year at the two week Tapati festival, the Rapa Nui reenact a legend which reinforces their mythical connection to the earth and is often centered around UHO, the sacred turtle which in one story carries a beautiful woman on its back from Hiva, where Rapa Nui people originated, to Easter Island. She chooses to live with the turtle over competing suitors because the turtle showed her generosity and love, like mother earth does.

Today Rapa Nui faces a second ecological crisis. The island now has a permanent population of 3,800 together with 40,000 tourists a year, yet 95% of the island's toilets are pit latrines. Only one fresh water supply feeds the island. The current landfill sits on top of this fresh water supply which is now seriously threatened with contamination. They cannot even export recyclables as the only shipping route is to Chile. Chile will not accept recyclables for fear of importing dengue fever larvae.

Other Pacific Islands can apply for international funding but Easter Island doesn't qualify for much funding because it is a state of Chile, not considered a developing country.

The spectacular Rapa Nui performance groups therefore need to sing, dance and carve their way to every headquarters of every international donor agency and wealthy government possible to get the attention and funding needed to urgently address their potential catastrophe so that the historic tragedy that nearly saw one of the most unique cultures in the Pacific disappear, never repeats itself. ☺

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Petra Campbell is CEO of the not for profit non governmental organization International Help Fund (IH) Australia, and Pacific Director of International Hilfsfonds Germany. IH's programs in the Pacific are centered on waste minimisation and removing recyclables from the solid waste stream, processing them on the islands and exporting them for recycling. In Easter Island IH is providing assistance in waste management and water sanitation.



**TOP:** Tiaporo, the devil-son refuses to recycle whereas Tao sorts his garbage, Tahiti.  
**ABOVE:** 'Kari Kari', traditional dance from Rapa Nui.