

World Heritage

papers

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World Heritage in a Sea of Islands

Pacific 2009 Programme



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



World
Heritage
Convention



World Heritage in a Sea of Islands

Pacific 2009 Programme

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ISBN: 978-982-225-015-2 (Print version)
ISBN: 978-982-225-016-9 (Electronic version)

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Graphic Design: Original design by Recto Verso

Design/Layout: Warren Field

Front cover photo: The Rock Islands of Palau inscribed on the World Heritage List as a mixed property in 2012. © Stuart Chape

Printed in Thailand

APIA/12/037-200



Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those individuals and organisations including ICOMOS Pasifika, the Pacific Islands Museums Association, and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community who contributed content, professional expertise and images to the volume.

We wish also to recognise the warm hospitality of the communities of the Pacific Islands who have hosted the many activities associated with the World Heritage Pacific 2009 Programme and pay our respects to Sir Tumu Te Heuheu, Chair of the World Heritage Committee in 2007, who has been an inspirational leader for the Pacific region.

We also acknowledge the efforts of staff in the UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, Samoa in particular Akatsuki Takahashi and Diana Roma in initiating and managing this project.

We are very appreciative of the assistance provided by the Australian Funds in Trust towards the development, finalization and printing of this volume.

The proposal for this volume of World Heritage Papers was accepted for publication by UNESCO following approval by the UNESCO Publications Board. The draft manuscript was peer reviewed by three independent reviewers: Professor Richard Engelhardt, Dr Kate Feros and Dr Frank Thomas. We are grateful for their insightful and considered comments.

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Kishore Rao, DIRECTOR OF THE UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE CENTRE

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Community as the First C: Conservation and Development through Tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu

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The importance attached throughout the Pacific region to Indigenous ownership, stewardship and management of cultural heritage is reflected in New Zealand's 2007 "Proposal for a 'Fifth C' to be added to the Strategic Objectives", which insisted on the critical role of community in heritage protection (World Heritage Committee, 2007). The absence of a role for community in the 2002 Budapest Declaration on World Heritage (World Heritage Committee 2002), which proposed the first four "Cs" (Credibility, Conservation, Capacity-building ['in States Parties'] and Communication), could not be sustained either in countries with a vibrant Indigenous voice, such as New Zealand, or in those countries where local communities retain a significant degree of political autonomy, such as Vanuatu and other independent Melanesian nations (Ballard and Wilson, 2012).

Where a local community is the primary repository of the knowledge that furnishes a site with much of its meaning and significance, that community is thoroughly implicated in the protection of its own heritage. As the "Proposal for a 'Fifth C'" submitted, 'Heritage protection without community involvement and commitment is an invitation to failure', and the viability of the other four "Cs" hinges upon the commitment to its cultural heritage of the local community: 'Conservation, capacity building, credibility and communication are all intrinsically linked to the idea of community' (World Heritage Committee, 2007:2).

This central role for community is strongly evident at the World Heritage site of Chief Roi Mata's Domain, a continuing and associative cultural landscape in the Republic of Vanuatu, inscribed under criteria (iii), (v) and (vi), where the local Lelema community has taken the lead in the nomination process and in post-inscription management of the site (Wilson, Ballard and Kalotiti, 2011). In 2011, three

years after inscription and with assistance from the Australian Pacific Public Sector Linkages Program, the State party established an inter-departmental World Heritage Advisory Group, which acts largely in support of community agencies and initiatives. From the inception of the Chief Roi Mata's Domain project, the community has placed particular emphasis on the importance of a locally-owned and -managed cultural heritage tourism operation. Our understanding and appreciation of the role of this tourism operation as a business and as a potential force for conservation has evolved over time, to the point where we now contend - given the prevailing social, political and economic conditions at Chief Roi Mata's Domain - that tourism is a necessary and integral element in the long-term and sustainable maintenance of the site's Outstanding Universal Value.

The literature is replete with cautions about the potential for negative impacts of tourism on cultural heritage (Russo 2002, Shackley 2006). Not unlike the old joke about librarians welcoming members of the public except when they use books, cultural heritage tourism commonly features as a necessary evil, to be managed 'sustainably', at best. The emphasis is unidirectional, with tourism impinging or imposing upon a static and finite resource (Hall 2009: 118); managers at World Heritage sites are cautioned to promote forms of tourism that 'tread lightly' (Bandarin 2002), to minimise the tourist footprint on fragile and internationally significant heritage sites and thus ensure their longevity. Cultural commodification and compromised authenticity are frequently cited as direct consequences of poorly managed tourism. Concerns have also been raised about the potential for World Heritage and tourism to override or efface Indigenous and local community rights and interests (e.g. Johnston 2006: p.122), but this perspective assumes the domination of tourism by corporate industry or the state, and largely denies the agency and aspirations of local and Indigenous communities.

Rock art at Fels Cave, Chief Roi Mata's Domain. © Photograph by Kirk Huffman, May 1978, courtesy of Vanuatu Cultural Centre



Writing against the tendency of this 'tradition of melancholia' to treat the effects of tourism on indigenous communities as inevitably inimical to culture and tradition, Tate LeFevre has shown how indigenous managers of cultural heritage on the New Caledonian island of Lifou 'use tourism performance as a way to proclaim their Kanak culture globally in order to keep it strong locally' (2007, p. 89). Lifou communities achieve this goal by controlling the representation of their own culture and the nature and extent of their engagement with mass tourism. The success of this approach to tourism was powerfully evident recently, when one of the authors watched the Wetr Dance Troupe performing first for cruise ship tourists visiting Lifou, before continuing to perform late into the afternoon for themselves and the remaining local stall-holders, long after the last of the tourists had departed for their ship. While we must remain sensitive to the challenges posed by tourism, and by the requirements of global business standards and expectations, we need also to be alert to the opportunities for both conservation and development presented to local or Indigenous communities through their engagement with tourism.

Community at Chief Roi Mata's Domain

For a World Heritage site, Chief Roi Mata's Domain is physically unimposing. A narrow stretch of coastline along the north-western shores of Vanuatu's capital island of Efate is linked to the large inhabited island of Lelepa and the smaller and uninhabited nearshore island of Artok by a triangle of intervening sea. Each of the islands features a

location associated with the life and death of the sixteenth-century paramount chief, Roi Mata: his residence at Mangaas, on Efate; the site of his death at Fels Cave, on Lelepa; and the gravesite at which he was buried with as many as 300 live subjects, on Artok. Since that time, no one has lived on Artok, and no one has dared to lay claim to the title of Roi Mata.

Decision 32COM 8B.27 on Chief Roi Mata's Domain refers to 'the continuing association of the landscape with the oral traditions of Roi Mata, continuity of chiefly systems of authority and customary respect for the tangible remains of his life evident in the continuing tapu prohibitions on these places' (World Heritage Committee, 2008). Each of the elements of this statement alludes to the ongoing role of the Lelema community in the definition, interpretation and further development of the significance of the site. For the community, the 'value' of the landscape is more cogently expressed through the local concept of nafsan natoon, 'the talk that is', and the injunction to live one's life walking 'in the footsteps of Roi [Mata]' (nalfan Roi).

Articulating these two systems of value is the metaphor, increasingly in use amongst those involved in the Chief Roi Mata's Domain project, of the stool with three legs: land (or graon in Bislama, the lingua franca of Vanuatu); community (pipol); and customary stories (storian). All three components contribute to the value of this cultural landscape, and the continued vitality of each component is essential in sustaining that value. Conservation of the

Community as the First C: Conservation and Development through Tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu

material landscape and of significant locales, development of the community (including its health, food and water supply, education and economic opportunity), and the continued transmission of stories and other forms of customary knowledge and practice are challenges of equal importance for the future of Chief Roi Mata's Domain.

Stewardship for Chief Roi Mata's Domain project has been provided at a national level by the Vanuatu National Museum and Cultural Centre, but limits to the resources available for a project of this scale and duration, as well as the fundamental autonomy of local communities in Vanuatu, have made community participation a virtue born of necessity. Douglas Kalotiti was the Cultural Centre's fieldworker for northwest Efate, a resident of Lelepa, and a member of the family that claims ownership of the three core locations of Mangaas, Fels Cave and Artok. He assumed an early leadership role in the nomination process, and became Chair of the local World Heritage and Tourism Committee, the first community committee charged with overseeing the management of World Heritage matters, including tourism. Until his untimely loss in April 2011, Douglas epitomised the commitment of the community to the management of its own cultural heritage, ensuring that the nomination truly reflected local values, and representing the community and the Republic of Vanuatu at the 32nd Session of the World Heritage Committee in Quebec, at which Chief Roi Mata's Domain was inscribed on the World Heritage List. He was also the first member of the project to grasp the intrinsic relationship between community development and heritage conservation, conducting his own census of the community and audit of land holdings in order to demonstrate, in weekly community talks, the importance of long-term land-use planning. Community representatives remain at the heart of management of the World Heritage site, dominating the membership of the national-level Vanuatu World Heritage Advisory Group, co-ordinating site management and conservation, craft production and water security, and running a community-owned cultural heritage venture, Roi Mata Cultural Tours, and a programme of bungalow development.

Tourism featured early in discussions with the Lelema chiefs and community, who were keen to see financial benefit accrue from their commitment to the World Heritage project. During 2004 and 2005, as the project was being initiated, three different international reality television shows paid handsomely to use the landscape, story and community of Chief Roi Mata's Domain as a backdrop, introducing a particular model of cultural heritage as a resource. Drawn by this international profile, real estate developers involved in the boom in long-term leasing of customary land across Vanuatu began to show increased interest in the Chief Roi Mata's Domain area (Slatter 2006). Preliminary payments, often illegal, were made to a large number of customary landowners in the Lelema community as a first step in acquiring 75-year leases, which are commonly subjected to sub-division for residential development for expatriate investors (Trau *et al* n.d.).

Roi Mata Cultural Tours

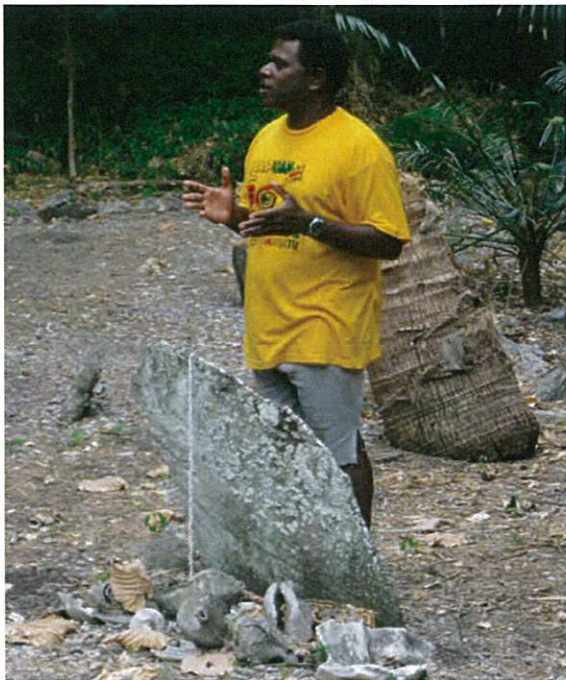
The short-term 'windfall' incomes associated with the brief sojourns of the reality television shows established a largely unrealistic standard for cultural heritage tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain. The model of a small-scale, slow-growth tourism venture generating limited income for a restricted portion of the community, preferred by the Cultural Centre and its volunteers, was never going to match expectations, and is still frequently the focus of frustration expressed about the slow pace of local development.

During 2005-06, an Australian volunteer, Carly Greig, developed the first tourism plan for Chief Roi Mata's Domain through a series of community workshops (Greig 2006). The principal outcome of the workshops was an action plan for establishing the Roi Mata Cultural Tour, premised on vision statements from members of the community: '[The tourism project] is a dream that each person gathered here shares, just as we share our Church, our school and much more. It encourages us to have more respect for our own cultural strengths'. The ideals expressed in these statements are of a tourism operation that serves to unite the community, bring benefit to all, improve health and education services, protect the region's natural and cultural heritage, and provide for future generations. It is from this baseline that the relative success of the Roi Mata Cultural Tours venture is assessed locally.

Roi Mata Cultural Tours is entirely owned, managed and staffed by members of the Lelema community, operating under the umbrella of the Lelema World Heritage Committee. The tours depart from the Roi Mata exhibition at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, where photographs and texts describe the basic story of the life and death of the last holder of the Roi Mata title, and some of the grave goods from the Artok burial are on display. A re-enactment of Roi Mata's peace-making ceremony is staged on the beach at Mangaas, before visitors are guided through his residential precinct; they then travel by small boat to Lelepa Island, where they are shown Fels Cave and its remarkable gallery of rock art; and finally they cross the short sea passage to the forbidden or tapu island of Artok, to visit the grave site, marked by two large headstones. As the story unfolds, and we learn the details of his life and deeds, the nature of his death, and the astonishing drama of his burial, the landscape becomes animated and suffused with an awareness of the extraordinary power of this singularly charismatic chief, reaching across four centuries to guide the manner in which members of the Lelema community conduct their lives today.

Interpretation of the site remains a significant challenge for the tour. The Lelema community has had little practice at articulating or explaining those values to an outside audience of widely varying familiarity with Pacific conditions and cultures. While Fels Cave is physically impressive, and its rock art visually striking, the residential site of Mangaas and the grave site on Artok require interpretation for visitors to begin to appreciate their significance and their possible form 400 years ago, when Mangaas was the site

Douglas Kalotiti training community tour guides at the grave of Roi Mata, Artok Island, 2009. © Alison Fleming



of massive region-wide peace ceremonies, and Artok the scene of a mass burial without parallel in the Pacific. Disappointment is an occasional response from those tourists insufficiently prepared with interpretation. Maintenance of the quality of the tour, and further elaboration of the interpretive programme, including an illustrated guide book and a revitalised dramatisation, is essential for the tour to realise its full potential.

Demand for the tour has fluctuated with seasonal flows, changes in the status of Vanuatu within the global tourism market, and challenges inherent in the management and marketing of the tour (Trau, 2012). Irregular flows in business see many of the tour's trained guides seek more dependable employment elsewhere. The slow pace of growth of the tour as a business, while a boon for the development of interpretation and the training of community participants, has been an enduring source of frustration for many, and especially for the chiefs, who are under relentless pressure to deliver economic opportunities to the community. Growth in the tour is unlikely to result from an increase in the number of tourists per group, which is capped in the Cultural Tourism Strategy at 10 per tour, but there is certainly room for increase in the frequency of tours and for improvement in quality (and thus some increase in the scale of fees charged).

Nevertheless, approximately one-third of all adults of the Lelema community have been involved in the tour, as managers, trained guides, dancers, cooks, craft-makers and -sellers, boat operators and drivers. Tour-related salaries and profits may disappoint, but they have been relatively widely distributed across the community – certainly by compari-

son with most other income-generating initiatives in the community. A programme of bungalow development in conjunction with the tour has been designed explicitly by a local committee to ensure that those benefits continue to flow as broadly as possible within the community.

Beyond its narrower business function, the tour has expanded upon existing modes of cultural transmission and refocused attention on nalfan Roi, on walking in the footsteps of Roi Mata, within the community. Particular attention has been paid by community leaders to the potential of World Heritage and the tour venture to encourage an understanding and appreciation of local tradition amongst younger generations, and special tours have been arranged for the community's school-age children. The site and the tour have also captured the interest of the national Department of Tourism, whose Director, George Borugu, has assumed the position of Chair of the Vanuatu World Heritage Advisory Group and announced plans for an annual national Roi Mata Festival.

Amongst the ancillary benefits of the tour are the stimulation of customary craft production, such as the weaving of baskets based on nineteenth-century Lelepa artefacts held in museum collections and the carving of two metre-high standing slit gongs, which are being made again for the first time in over a century and used in tour performances. Traditions, such as the carving and use of traditional canoes, and the rhythms of slit-gong performance and choreography of dancing, are being revived and re-interpreted; the troupe of dancers on which the tour draws for its dramatisation has developed a reputation of its own, performing in 2010 at the Dreaming Festival in Australia.

Most importantly, perhaps, World Heritage tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain has demonstrated the potential of at least one financially viable alternative form of land use to land-leasing, albeit of a different scale and duration. One of the authors returned from a recent international conference on Indigenous tourism in Perth, convinced that land leases offer the single greatest threat to the integrity of the community and to the future of its cultural identity.

Conclusions

Is cultural heritage tourism necessarily inimical to the Five Cs? In the case of Chief Roi Mata's Domain – and presumably many other sites either in developing countries or under indigenous management and stewardship – tourism is neither an inevitable threat to conservation nor a challenge to some commonly assumed "pristine" condition. To the contrary, it is potentially a vital component of community-led conservation and an important opportunity for the enhancement of cultural transmission and revival.

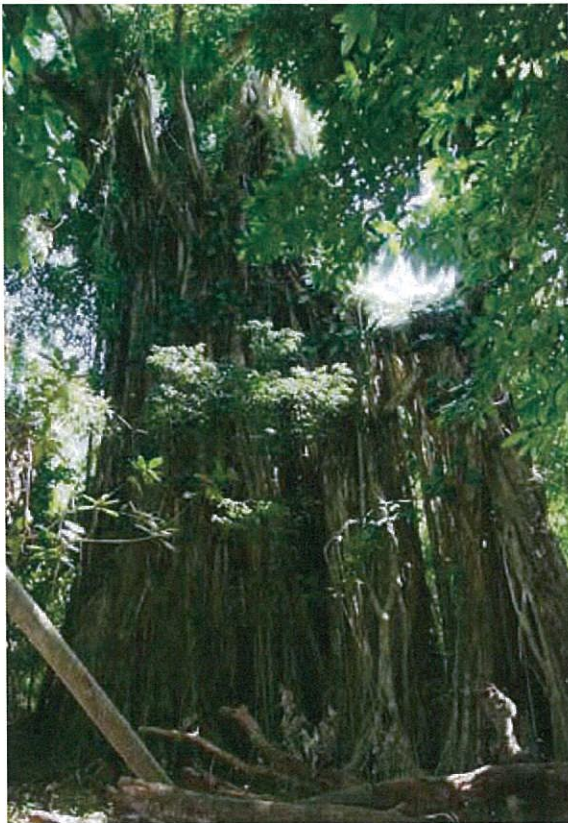
Community-owned and -managed cultural heritage tourism at the World Heritage site of Chief Roi Mata's Domain now forms an integral part of the overall management and conservation of the site and its values. Regarded as essen-

Community as the First C: Conservation and Development through Tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu

tial initially by the community in exchange for reserving portions of its land holdings for World Heritage rather than other land-use options, tourism at Chief Roi Mata's Domain is both more and less than a business. The Roi Mata Cultural Tours enterprise may always be less financially successful than it might otherwise become in the hands of others and, like all projects involving income generation, it will always be implicated in local and national politics, but its functions and influence extend far beyond the simple logic of income generation. Wisely managed, the tour is a force for conservation and the enhancement of cultural heritage values, providing a structured process through which the community can manage and ensure the transmission of those values. Tourism will continue to play a significant role in the landscape of Chief Roi Mata's Domain because the local community constitutes an integral part of the landscape; because the community controls and is the key to the unfolding interpretation of the landscape; and because the community's self-development requires some contribution or return from its investment in interpreting its landscape for the global community.

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ABOVE & RIGHT: Chief Roi Mata's Domain Vanuatu. © Vanuatu National Cultural Council

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Chief Roi Mata's Domain, Vanuatu. © Vanuatu National Cultural Council

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