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# THE STORY OF A LAGOON VILLAGE

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# How the Salt Water People Live

An interim report for an island community and its adaption to change.

## THE SOLOMON ISLANDS



On a remote peninsula in the Solomon Islands there is a small community who call themselves ‘The Saltwater People’. They have lived there for a long time. They were there long before the nearby township swallowed their land to farm, because they were fishing people who also traded fish with bush relatives; they have built houses of palms and salvaged driftwood. They have crafted wooden canoes and every day they have fished.

People sat, and watched the sea by day and by night. They knew the seas. They knew the fish. They knew the storms and the colours and moods of tides. Young men were taught fishing and some of the people made craft items of lagoon corals. They learned musical instruments and traditional dances. Tiny children learned to swim from canoes and fell in and out of tepid salty water. Food was easily gained and no one felt the need for another life.

So life went on and the years passed. The island’s population increased and the central government changed but there wasn’t much change in the daily life of the village.

## OUTSIDE CHANGES IMPACT ON THE VILLAGE

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The reef sheltered the lagoon and protected the village, while being a fish nursery and habitat. The introduction of a Government policy allowing overseas Purse Seiner fishing boats to fish within a 200 mile exclusion became a major contributor to the diminishing fish stocks. A recent form of fishing - dynamiting the reefs, resulted in the fish habitat being measurably destroyed. Across the islands more powerful motorized fishing boats encroached on traditional waters and the fish populations declined. The fish were smaller and harder to catch. Traditional shells as currency gave away to government currency and much more had to be purchased. School cost money and so did kindergarten. Children dropped out of school or were sent away. Although some villagers left to work in Australia or New Zealand, life continued its leisurely march. Few people learned a new trade or skill to replace fishing or earn an income. There was no TV, few radios, or phones.

## TIDE OF CHANGE

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When a young woman filmmaker, Amie Batalabasi, of village descent, went home for her grandmother's funeral, a strange thing occurred. With king tides the sea rose higher than ever people remembered it doing. They saw the tombstones of their ancestors being eaten away by a rising sea. Amie filmed the rising sea and the response of the villagers to it. The documentary 'Tide of Change' was made. In it some people talked about their helplessness in the face of this threat. Some said they had to move, others said they needed to trust God. They also feared a tsunami and, if one happened, the village would be washed away because it lies on a spit of land and the bridge was broken. Fear and tension were evident in the film, with the lack of skills and preparation for seas rising or tsunamis striking.

The island land was already taken for agriculture by other clans and the Salt Water People couldn't simply move. They didn't know what they would do if they couldn't be fisher folk.

Amie's Film travelled. She showed it to some friends in Australia and asked what, if anything, could be done. Amie's best friend Amanda Cuyler suggested contacting me (Rowe Morrow).

Having developed a short course for communities to ready themselves for disasters, endure, then recover, I offered to go and see if the villagers would like to undertake this training. New Zealand Quakers, Marilyn and Michael Payne, having seen 'Tide of Change', put the money towards this training.

## DISASTER TRAINING

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So, with the blessing and introduction from Amie's father, John Batalabasi, I went to the village. This training showed the greatest fears of the village were tsunami, rising seas and the broken bridge. Their conversations revealed they also lived precariously. Fresh drinking water was sourced daily, by dugout, from the other side of the lagoon, and there was very little food or choice of food. Everyone used the lagoon as a toilet, washing water was scarce, and some children had skin problems. Money for fruit, vegetables and meat was scarce. Teenage boys were under-employed and many children didn't go to school. Illiteracy, or reversion to illiteracy, was common. There was nothing to read. The village was very poor. The people were kind, funny and concerned.

Following the requests of the trainees, and in discussion with Amie and John, communication continued ... but it can be very difficult and often slow; the post office is unreliable and letters and parcels don't arrive. No phone, faxes or computers, so we worked through John and Amie (who can sometimes phone John's brother, Tony).

John reported that, after the disaster training in the village:

- 1) Some villagers had approached the local government and demanded the bridge be fixed, and it was.
- 2) Then there was a minor tsunami, and everyone followed the planning they had made for such a contingency, which worked well, except the bridge is too small and they need to get over it quickly. They are now making plans for a better escape route.
- 3) The village chief took the course planning papers and worked through them for the neighbouring villages, so more people could use the information and develop plans.

## Honiara Disaster Planning Workshop

Whilst in the Solomons, I made contact with Kastom Gadens in Honiara, (the traditional gardening local NGO, with all Solomon Islands staff, and with an excellent history of training). They were offered disaster training on my return from the small island. They were keen to accept it as they remembered high seas which cut off the roads in Honiara, and they couldn't get home to their families.

The Kastom Gadens staff made extensive notes during the training and then incorporated disaster training in their work throughout the islands. They used the training as In-Service up-skilling. They requested more training to become recognized and registered Permaculturists. This would enable them to work with other trainers and situations similar to theirs in East Timor, and the Philippines.

Hannah Molony, from Tasmania, an inspired trainer, went and took the Kastom Gadens staff through to an internationally recognised level so they can now work with colleagues in similar regions. Hannah was partly funded from donations from Val da Lama in Portugal and Maryanne Bell.

Two Kastom Gadens staff visited the Lagoon community and trained some people in small scale, beside the sea, gardening. The village lacks land for growing food. Houses are right on the water.



Two experienced trainers will attend the SE Asian Permaculture conference in the Philippines with Disaster planning as a major focus in November 2015 to increase their capacity to spread their knowledge and learn from colleagues.

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# Ways Forward

The next steps for the Salt Water Community

## SMALL PROJECT SUPPORT

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There are no known successful projects for these endangered island communities. The Edmund Rice Centre is working with some islanders, however this particular project is innovative and original.

It is indisputable that the lagoon villages will eventually have to move. The people themselves are unconfident, and lack skills to raise income other than through fishing. It is unlikely the whole village would be able to move in its entirety and they would have no sources of income. They are extremely loathe to be dispersed as a community, or to move. This problem is repeated for hundreds and probably thousands of coastal and island dwellers in the world's oceans. The answers are not to be found in forcibly moving the people, but encouraging them to see a way forward.

The first training enabled them to request the bridge be mended and so raised their ability to intervene for their own safety. This was a major activity. It is essential to listen, respect and respond to the villager's requests and fears. Sometimes their perceived fears are not the highest calculated risk - for example, drinking water supplies are endangered and yet they fear a tsunami more.

By implementing a series of small projects, we aim to empower the villagers to confront their predicament and develop the best possible solutions.

In the short term this will include:

- 1) Improving the immediate quality of their lives e.g. food, water, health
- 2) Enabling some people to earn sufficient incomes with confidence, and increasing their opportunity to move. This is particularly important for young people who are currently not receiving any training.

## THE PRACTICALITIES

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John Batalabasi visited his village early in 2015. In discussion in a village meeting, John was able to find what the villagers wanted and needed to do next.

A copy of his report is attached. This is a summary of their priorities:

- 1) There are no toilets in the village and the lagoon is very polluted. It is proposed to put two well-designed toilets in the kindergarten.
- 2) Throughout the Solomon Islands, homes are increasingly being burnt down due to small Solar Lighting Systems which parliament members gave to the villages and which were installed by locals who have no experience in solar panels. A fire at the village would explode and move fast and this is a very present and dangerous situation. Training young people in solar repair and care would prevent disaster and enable them to earn a small income and an occupation.
- 4) Training villagers as 'barefoot' medicals with first aid would improve village health significantly and give livelihoods to some people. Many health problems in the village are preventative ones like nutrition and AIDS and children's illnesses.
- 5) Providing training to the community in small scale food production and sanitation would address short term needs.

## CROWDFUNDING SUPPORT

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In the meantime, funds surplus to a crowdfunding project to produce permaculture learning materials, books and film amounting to \$Aus7,700.00 were received and banked. The crowdfunding had stated that any additional funds would be used to try to move forward for the Salt Water People.

Paula Paananen, an experienced permaculturist, trainer, and development worker is working closely with John and Amie and will take over co-ordination of the project with John and Amie. Paula is experienced with severely disadvantaged fishing communities on Lake Victoria in Africa.

We have agreed to use \$6000 of the funds to meet the budget John has given for the four small project components. We know the costing is not completely accurate however the costs are likely to be higher than given due to shipping costs of all materials to Honiara and then to the village.

1.	Health and Sanitation through innovative toilets • Lilisiana Kindy	2 toilets	Iron, fuel, concrete, drum, cupboard Learning materials	1000 200 100	1300
2.	Solar Power Training and Safety Repair Kits: Training: Demo unit and handouts, installation and repairs, build 20 kits to remain in village for self installation	Training For 20 John Batalibasi to facilitate training & pay own fare to village  20 start- up kits	Learning Materials  20 @ \$70.	100  1400	1500
3	Preventative Health and Safety and First Aid Training for Lilisiana and adjoining villages Include discussions around safety at sea	Experienced community health nurse/trainer Fare from Australia  First Aid kits for trainees	1500  \$700.00		2200
4	Small scale food, sanitation and water training   TOTAL: \$6000	Training with Paula Paananen in food production and sanitation, including training materials			1000

It is probable that unaccompanied freight may be \$300 to \$400 from Brisbane to the Solomons for solar, health and kindy resources.

## THE NEXT STEP

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John and Paula plan to go to the village and undertake the first trainings. They are setting the dates. They will begin with the Kindy Toilets and will engage young people in their building



and design. Paula will assess the community needs and give training. John will teach 20 trainees how to prevent village fires due to faults with solar panels.

The second stage will be the first aid training and further discussion with the villagers about how they can take charge of their future. It may be they need assistance with financial planning and very small enterprises.

## SUMMARY

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The community (like many other fishing communities), has a long history of self sufficiency based on the availability and predictability of natural resources. The film ‘Tides of Change’ clearly demonstrated the challenges that ‘The Salt Water People’ are facing. The community has been consulted and has identified its priorities. Previous training in disaster preparedness has been successful and the fact that people have identified their priorities is a step in acknowledging their predicament. The proposed projects are small in scale, but will be delivered with the broadest possible outreach.

The community is surprised and delighted with the crowdfunding support. All training and project development will be delivered pro bono. The projects will be easily accomplished and designed to share the funds among as many villagers as possible.

We anticipate the following outcomes:

- Improved health and nutrition
- Knowledge and understanding of sanitation - implementation of effective island toilets
- Possible livelihoods from electrical repair, gardening, toilet building, first aid and community health work
- A community that is empowered to engage with local government to make an informed approach to accessing any available local support.

The ultimate outcome would be that the village can manage its own precarious future.

**Rowe Morrow**

**June 8, 2015**