

October 2003

Issue Two

Watermark

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Important dates:

22 March
World Water Day

4 October
Feast of St Francis
Patron Saint of
Ecology

*"In a globalised world
the water concerns of
the poor become the
concerns of all".*

Pontifical Council

Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (NSW)

People of the One Sea

The peoples of the South Pacific contend with many issues as they work to meet the needs of their families and their communities. These issues include health; migration and resettlement; subsistence agriculture and fishing; identity and self-determination; and the exploitation of minerals, forests and fisheries.

Linked to all of these issues is the issue of water. Rising sea levels, lack of access to fresh water, salinity, drought and an increasing number of tropical storms – all of these problems pose immense social, economic, political and religious challenges.

Within the darkness, however, there is also much light. The South Pacific is truly unique and precious. It is boundless in its hospitality and magnificent in its power and beauty. The problems faced by each nation in the South Pacific are faced by all nations in the South Pacific, for we are all people of the one sea. Whether we are Melanesian, Polynesian, Micronesian, Australian or New Zealander, these challenges provide us with the opportunity to overcome them together.

This edition of *Watermark* offers some valuable insight into life in various parts of the South Pacific. On the following pages there are stories that highlight the importance of water to the South Pacific's peoples, governments and churches. It is our hope that these stories will ignite in Australians a renewed sense of solidarity with the peoples of the South Pacific so that we can fight together for the ecological integrity of our region. This fight must start within ourselves and so we have included on the last page of *Watermark* some personal challenges that each of us can undertake out of respect for our closest neighbours and for the sea that unites us.

As our imagination grows, as we include in our consciousness all that the South Pacific holds and touches, may we be enlivened, so that we might give life to the South Pacific and its peoples.

Too Beautiful To Destroy



Life in the South Pacific

Nauru

Nauru is currently in the midst of a critical water shortage. In 2001, Nauru asked the World Health Organisation to provide advice to its government agencies on how to draw up sound water policies for the future. At that time the island had been experiencing drought for three years, there was very little stored water and the desalination plant on the island constantly stopped operating. In drawing up its report, the World Health Organisation noted the following constraints to improved water conditions:

- the economic difficulties facing Nauru make supplying water on a daily basis difficult,
- most of the household water tanks, and nearly half of the household gutters, are in need of repair, and
- the lack of good soil and water will make food production difficult on rehabilitated mined out areas.

Banaba

In 1900, the Banabans were “discovered” by a London-based company exploring rich deposits of phosphate on their island. The trusting Banabans welcomed the new visitors, not understanding the lengthy legal documents with which they signed away their land. Over the next 40 years, the Banabans saw their beloved homeland disappear before their eyes. As mining devastated the island, water supplies became contaminated and the islanders were forced to rely on rainfall as their only supply of drinking water. In 1942, the invading Japanese transported the Banabans to labour camps to grow crops for the Japanese forces. After the War, the Banabans were taken to Rabi Island. Since then some have tried to return home to reclaim their island and spiritual homeland, however, only 50 hectares remains of the once lush tropical island. The rest has been mined and left destroyed beyond repair.

Kiribati

“The major source of water in Kiribati comes from freshwater lenses under the atolls. The people dig wells but must take care not to fracture the lens otherwise the water becomes brackish. Rainfall is often fickle and given most people have a thatched roof on their dwelling, rainwater is difficult to collect.

Our house in the village of Buota has an iron roof and a 34,000 litre wooden tank to collect rainwater. For several days we had been aware of an increasingly bad odour pervading the air. Some detective work led us to the tank where we discovered the bloated carcass of a very dead rat. Attempts to retrieve the source of the stench permeating the entire 34,000 litres were futile because bones and rotten flesh sank to the bottom. What to do? Open the valve and let out all our precious water? Never! Two bottles of bleach, boiled water and a grate to stop anymore unwelcome visitors and all was well once more.”

Janice Ruff SMSM ex-Kiribati

Papua New Guinea

“Over-population and (dynamite) fishing practices exacerbate the problem of rising sea levels.”

*Justine McMahon
Caritas Australia*

Solomon Islands

“The lifestyle of the Solomon Islanders has evolved, like the rainforest around them, over many generations. When you destroy the individual’s lifestyle, you destroy the individual, which is why, inevitably, the health of these islanders deteriorated dramatically in areas which have been logged. Their fishing and gardens are destroyed so we see malnourished children in the hospital... Their water supply is destroyed so we see skin infections and water borne diseases...”

*Dr John Collee
Observer*

Tonga

“Popua, [a settlement on the main island of Tonga], is situated in a swamp with a quality of life that the people are not happy with. The main reason is water, or lack of it. The village water pipe...is often turned off... Along with this is the problem of flooding. Children in Popua cannot go to school after heavy rains because the coral roads get covered with rain and seawater. Complicating things further is the problem of sewage which floats on top of the water.”

Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand

Tuvalu

“Contamination of gardens by salt water will make Tuvalu uninhabitable long before water covers the atolls.”

*Justine McMahon
Caritas Australia*

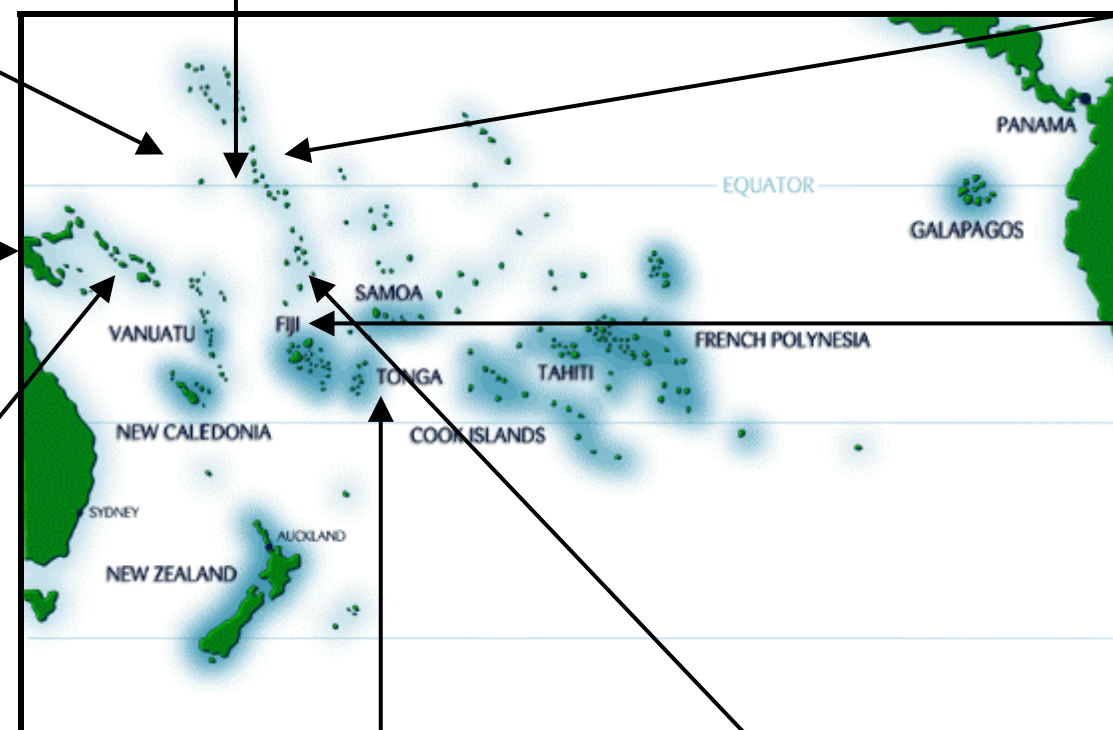
Fiji

“Sara is a gracious Fijian lady who has faithfully worked for over fifteen years as a laundress at a home for the elderly called the Fr Law Home just below us. There are approximately twenty-five senior residents at various stages of physical and mental disabilities. Since there is neither hot water nor a washing machine Sara washes the bed linen and clothing by hand and when there are water cuts which can last for several days she and the Sisters who staff the residence carry the washing to a nearby stream which has already passed by several squatter settlements so the water is not exactly pristine clean.

Fanny and Tina are two sisters attending the nearby primary school which is situated on a hill. The water pressure is frequently not enough to reach the school and when the two water tanks at the school run dry the school is closed down and the children sent home from school.

Last Friday night I attended a celebration in a church hall. It was a most pleasant evening for those invited but for the women who catered a real headache as the water main serving the worn out and paper thin pipes for the whole area had burst and thousands of homes had no water. They had just a bucket of water to wash the dishes from the hundred or so guests attending the function. Life takes on a different perspective and many hardships are created when our most precious resource, water, is absent.”

Sr Denise McMahon SMSM Fiii



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You can read past
issues of
Watermark
on our website.

Protecting the Integrity of Creation

This I Will Contemplate

- All life springs from water. Water is life – life for the poor – life for the world.
- Water is a gift of God, requiring a reverential and sacred attitude.
- 'Yes, as the rain comes down from the heavens and does not return without watering the earth, making it yield and giving growth to provide seed for the sower and food for the eating, so the word that goes forth from my mouth does not return to me empty, without succeeding in what it was sent to do.'

This I Will Nurture

- A critical consciousness of the impact of global warming on the communities of the Pacific.
- A 'rights-based approach' – water is a human right for all.

This I Will Defend

- The efforts of the Pacific Islands communities to protect their rights to water and home.
- The work of groups who are involved in advocacy at local, national and international levels.

This I Will Live

- I will strive to buy recycled, environmentally friendly products.
- Personal Conversion: I will choose one activity to which I can commit myself personally, and another with my community.
- Structural conversion: I will support a national or international campaign that is working to reduce global warming, or to ensure a just legal framework for the protection of and access to water.

Fragile Ecology

**We pray for the fragile ecology of the heart and mind.
The sense of meaning.**

**So finely assembled and balanced and so easily overturned.
The careful, ongoing construction of love.**

**As painful and exhausting as the struggle for truth
and as easily abandoned.**

**Hard fought and won are the shifting sands of the sacred ground,
this ecology.**

**Easy to desecrate and difficult to defend,
this vulnerable joy, this exposed faith, this precious order.**

This sanity.

We shall be careful.

With others and with ourselves.

Amen.

Michael Leunig