

Micronesian Sea Traditions - Palau's Marine Protected Areas
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Surrounded by water, Palauans have developed a life which is inextricably linked with the oceans. We derive food, identity and traditions from our relationship with the ocean. The long standing success of this symbiotic relationship is based on responsibility that each Palauan is taught from childhood that they are caretakers of the sea.

Prior to the El Nino event which killed much of our soft and hard coral, Palau had been unexposed to such wide spread devastation. Seeing the corals die, knowing that we could not stop it made many Palauans want to give up their role as caretaker. We were on the verge of losing heart, especially since once the corals died many of the fish also left, and with them a great deal of our livelihood. This was a clear example of the dramatic effect that a small change in a single part of the ecosystem can have a cascading effect on all other parts. However, we went back to our roots and saw building on traditional approaches with modern scientific advances as the way forward to crafting effective measures to save our oceans.

Palau's practical experience with the ecosystem approach extends back thousands of years. The traditional practice of *bul* is an important example. *Bul* involves the Council of Chiefs placing reef areas off limits to fishing during known fish spawning and feeding periods. This respects vulnerabilities in the ecosystem while ensuring that there will be robust fish to catch during other times of the year.

This traditional *bul* system has become the basis for Palau's network of protected areas and its new Protected Area Network (PAN) law. Micronesia is home to most of the world's coral biodiversity -- Palau alone has 1300 species of fish and 700 species of corals across its islands. Few know these species and waters as well as the Palauan fishermen who have grown up in them. The importance of local perspective thus is self-evident when considering what areas to set aside.

Palau has 21 nationally-designated protected areas and intends to add more. The PAN law looks first to local leaders and their traditional guidance, and then to scientists, to identify vulnerable ecosystems and coordinate the community, national, and international assistance necessary to institute appropriate protection.

The PAN law is intended not only to respect local ecosystems and meet Palau's commitments under the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD), but is also serving as a model for MPAs across Micronesia. The Secretary-General has reported that small island developing states (SIDS) have among the lowest percentage of areas set aside for conservation and that this seriously threatens their ability to meet Millennium sustainable development goals. This is not the case though in Micronesia where Palau's President Tommy E. Remengesau Jr., in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, has formed a challenge to the World to follow Micronesia's example of setting aside 30% of nearshore marine, and 20% of forest ecosystems for conservation by 2010. Although the focus of these protected areas is decidedly local, we simply cannot achieve these goals without international assistance.

Palau is also using lessons learned about ecosystem vulnerabilities at the local level to protect itself from threats arising beyond its jurisdiction. Palau is working closely with scientists to find ways to protect its coral reefs from bleaching by global climate change. And while there is much about the deep sea that we do not know, we know enough to understand that everything is connected and that, if left unchecked, it is only a matter of time before the destructiveness of

bottom trawling is felt in concrete ways. Palau has banned all bottom trawling within its waters and by any Palauan or Palauan company anywhere in the world. Palauan law also obligates Palau to seek an interim prohibition on unregulated bottom trawling in international waters. Much like the rationale behind the *bul* system, this law seeks to protect deep sea fish when they aggregate around seamounts for breeding and feeding, and are thus most vulnerable.

In Palau it is more than just a saying, “we do not inherit the earth from our parents, we borrow it from our children,” it is a deeply held belief. And the Pacific philosophy that the oceans unite us rather than divide us is one which we hope will be borne out in our interactions in the United Nations in the days to come as we seek real solutions for protecting this most precious of resources.