What’s New in Polynesia

THE INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE PROGRAMME is a project of the Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Network, and its object is to support indigenous peoples’ activities that help to preserve local traditional knowledge, or provide recognition and compensation for innovations made by indigenous peoples at the local, national, regional and international levels. The small grants program will provide up to US$12,000 per project to support research activities that build indigenous organizational capacity in research techniques such as conservation of biological diversity, the continuation of indigenous cultures, or laying the foundation for sustainable livelihoods. For guidelines on applications, contact Ms Aroha Te Pareake Mead, PO Box 13-177, Johnsonville, Wellington, New Zealand.

RESEARCH ON KAVA continues at the University of the South Pacific where six active lactones have been extracted from Piper methysticum (kava). These work as anti-anxiety agents. A system has been developed whereby up to 30% of active kava lactones can be extracted. Kava from Vanuatu was found to have the strongest drowsiness effect. An herbal kava drug, Kava-herbal Serenity is now sold in Fiji’s drug stores. Classified as a narcotic and hypnotic, a mild relaxant and a weak euphoric, the dried root of kava is used for tea, and in capsules and tinctures.

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BIRD EXTINCTION IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS was discussed in a lecture by Professors David Steadman and Janet Franklin, given at the University of the South Pacific. Early Lapita settlers brought to extinction a large number of birds including rails, parrots, pigeons, doves, megapodes, and song birds. These birds were easy to obtain and a preferred source of food. In addition, the introduction of rats, pigs, and dogs by early Polynesians played a major role in extinction. On smaller islands, native birds depended on native forests. Because of the destruction of habitat, now an on-going process, there is greater danger of even further extinction. During the first 300 years of settlement by Lapita people of the Ha’apai group in Tonga, nearly two-thirds of the original land birds were wiped out.

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MORE ISLANDS LOST TO CLIMATE CHANGE: Tebua Tarawa and Abanua in Kiribati have disappeared beneath the waves as sea levels continue to climb. Although those two were uninhabited, other islands with inhabitants are at risk. Most of the 29 atolls in the Marshalls are suffering and, on one, World War II graves are being washed away.

All the islands have had damage from flooding and high tides, with populated areas being affected. Even if not suffering directly, salt poisoning of the soils as a result of the higher water tables is a serious problem.

Pacific News Bulletin 14(6), 1999

Niue

LANGUAGE DAY ON NIUE

“LEO PASIFIKA: THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON OCEANIC LINGUISTICS” was held from July 5-9, 1999, on the tiny South Pacific island of Niue, situated between Tonga and the Cook Islands. Some thirty experts on Oceanic languages presented a range of papers on this remote Polynesian nation which hosted such a conference for the first time. Organized by Dr Wolfgang Sperlich, Elizabeth Pascal, Dr Steven Roger Fischer, and His Excellency Atapana Siakimotu, Consul General of Niue in New Zealand, the conference enjoyed the generous support of the Niuean government.

Niue is a semi-autonomous state in loose association with New Zealand (all Niueans are also New Zealand citizens). Only slightly larger than Easter Island with 259 square kilometers, Niue (pronounced Nee-o-ay) is one of the largest raised coral islands in the world. It is luxuriantly tropical, with fine swimming and superb fishing possibilities for visitors. The Niueans are “old-Polynesia” friendly: wide smiles and waves greet you along the road. Ten years ago there were 3,000 left on the island; now only some 1,600 remain. More Niueans (the Premier cites the figure 18,000) now live in New Zealand than in Niue. Three-quarters of the island houses stand derelict, their owners gone forever. Driving around the island is like taking a ghost-town tour, but with coconut-heavy palms and luxuriant growth and scudding clouds over pristine, and there are empty LDS churches ... with not a soul in sight.

The policy of Niue’s present Premier is to encourage tourism before all else, and for this reason the participants of the conference “Leo Pasifika” were wined and dined with more than customary Niuean hospitality. In addition to four days of academic papers came hours of dignified Polynesian speeches welcoming honored guests from as far afield as Tokyo and Germany. Loud, polyphonous Polynesian singing, accompanied by wonderfully sensuous and often riotously humorous dancing, followed each local presentation. And sumptuous feasts featuring long tables overflowing with crayfish, taro, papaya, yams, sweet potatoes, baked fish, raw fish in coconut milk, roasted chicken, and whole suckling were the daily fare, much to the participants’ surprise.

Beyond the importance of the scholarly presentations (participating in the conference were some of the world’s leading experts on the languages of Oceania), the immediate presence and active participation of Niuean language teachers and language preservation groups left a profound impression on all non-Niueans. As the surf crashed on the coral reef below the resort hotel’s deck, and the wind soughed in the high coconut-laden palms, participants presented studies of individual languages of the Pacific, discussed various issues, and thrilled at the Niuean hosts’ own serious appeals to save the Niuean language from English’s steady encroachment. (Niuean children now speak more English than Niuean). It is hoped that several of the ideas elicited from these discussions will help to address this problem properly in the years to come. Indicative of the Niueans’ commitment to language preservation and study is the rare gesture by Niue’s Premier: the small nation’s chief stood at
the departure gate the evening everyone was leaving Niue, to
shake each person’s hand, thank them for attending the confer-
ence, and wish them a safe journey home. Very few of the par-
ticipants had been to Niue before this conference. But all left as
friends, vowing to return one day.

“Leo Pasifika” was more than a simple linguistics confer-
ence. It was the rediscovery of a South Pacific many of us had
believed long gone. This was the best gift of all from the won-
derful people of Niue.

[Publisher’s note: The conference proceedings—“Leo
Pasifika: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on
Oceanic Linguistics”—is being edited by Steven Roger Fischer
and Wolfgang Sperlich and published by the Institute of Polynes-
ian Languages and Literatures, PO Box 6965, Wellesley Street,
Auckland, New Zealand. Estimated publication date: December
1999.]

TAHITI
FOR THE FIRST TIME, French authorities admit that cracks have
been found in the coral cones at Moruroa and Fangatauata atolls,
the nuclear test sites in French Polynesia. Although they argue
that the sites are safe, the admission of fractures throws doubt on
their other claims about the effects of nuclear testing.

PITCAIRN
THE BOUNTY CANNON was raised from its resting place off Pit-
cairn Island on January 8th after 209 years on the bottom. A
small pneumatic hammer was used to cut away the rock from
around it. The Governor and Island Council gave permission for
the cannon temporarily to be removed to Australia to undergo
conservation. It will then be returned to Pitcairn where it is ex-
pected to become the core of a Pitcairn Island Museum display
of items from the Bounty.

The latest head count for Pitcairn is 46, with 34 being Pit-
cairners and 12 outsiders. Approximately 40 ships a year come
to the island.

The Pitcairn Miscellany 42(1, 3) 1999

HAWAI’I
THE HŌKULE‘A’S VOYAGE TO RAPA NUI IS UNDERWAY. Two
new ki‘i, wood carvings draped in flower lei, were lashed to the
stem of the sailing canoe to help guide the canoe on its voyage
to Easter Island. The Hōkule’a left in June on the most difficult
voyage yet for this famed sailing canoe. By mid-July it landed in
the Marquesas, but only after missing the islands on the first
pass by sailing 200 miles too far to the west. There was some
worry that the Hōkule’a might sail too close to reefs in the area,
but managed to get downwind of them and reached Nuku Hiva
safely.

From there, the canoe sails to Mangareva ( Gambier Is-
lands) and then to Rapa Nui. The final leg of the journey will be
the real test, and one that is potentially the most dangerous. The
Honolulu Star Bulletin (16 June 1999) noted that the fiberglass
hulls of the Hōkule’a have developed fine cracks since the ship
was built 25 years ago, but the canoe was taken down to the
“bare bones” and repaired before the trip.

The captain, Nainoa Thompson, said that Hawai’i’s navi-
gators always felt the Rapa Nui voyage was too difficult, but the
“instinctive spirit of all Polynesians to want to be ohana” con-
vincing them to make the trip. With the voyage to Rapa Nui, tra-
ditional navigators will have retraced all the major migration
routes of their Polynesian ancestors. The Hōkule’a has logged
nearly 100,000 miles, the equivalent of sailing around the world
2½ times. The voyage to Rapa Nui will be tracked by 100,000
students throughout Hawai’i and one million worldwide via
internet, radio satellite telephone, and radio calls from the ca-
noe. Five women are included in the crew of the Hōkule’a, two
of whom are apprentice navigators.

Follow this historic voyage on the web page of the Polyne-
sian Voyaging Society.

What’s New in Hangaroa
THE PROJECT TO PAVE THE COASTAL ROAD of the island is ex-
pected to start early next summer. Most of the problems with
monuments along the road were satisfactorily solved, with stone
walls being erected in order to prevent vehicles from driving
directly into the sites. What this means for tourists is that vehi-
cles now must park a fair distance from some of the sites
(including Vaihu, Akahanga, and Te Pito Kura) forcing visitors
to walk.

A VERY DRY SUMMER on the island was followed by torrential
rains in July that caused severe damage to the sites at ‘Orongo.
A wall fell down after a heavy rain, and several others became
destabilized. One is a long stone house with paintings inside,
located to the north of Mata Ngarahu (the focus of ‘Orongo and
where the petroglyphs are concentrated), it is feared that most of
it could fall down the cliff into the sea. Another house that was
previously restored is near collapse, as is a section of a wall on
the crater-side of the platform where visitors stand to see the
petroglyphs. Officials are considering the closure of Mata Nga-
rahу. If this site is not stabilized, its life span will be a short one.

THE PROJECT TO BUILD A NEW SCHOOL for the island was ap-
proved. It will be constructed on land that was part of the old
leper sanitarium, north of the village. Plans call for a cultural
space with a museum, and a gymnasium. It is said that the total
cost will come to more than US$800,000. UNESCO has set
aside funds for the project and will organize an international
competition for the work. The design must take into considera-
tion the climate, distances, customs and “architectural styles”.
One positive aspect is that few archaeological remains are in
that area, five km from the village center. It is possible that the
village now will begin to expand in that direction.

El Mercurio de Valparaíso 14 July 1999

PLANS ARE AFOOT TO PROMOTE TOURISM on Easter Island. A
US$240,000 project is underway to create a new tourist image
for the island, with the idea of improving the main economic
activity of the island. The plan was elaborated by the Chamber
of Commerce and Tourism and hotel owners. In charge of the
project is Victor Hugo Aguilera of the Centro de Innovación
Tecnológica Empresarial (CINDE) who commented that one of
the basic needs is training courses. Also, market strategies are
needed to determine weaknesses and to direct future plans. The