Commentary

# 8. 'Islands of understanding': Environmental journalism in the South Pacific

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WE'RE expected to know too much. Journalists who specialise in science and the environment have to grasp, communicate and synthesise scientific, political and economic issues. And we have to do it on deadline with accuracy, authority and readability. Sometimes it can be overwhelming.

A few years ago, at a science writer's panel at Rockefeller University in New York, where I live and work, someone asked the speakers how they keep from drowning in a sea of information every time they have to write about a new topic. One of the speakers said he made 'rafts of understanding' for each new subject he wrote about; he learned just enough to keep his head above water. I recalled the analogy repeatedly as I travelled the South Pacific between December 2005 and February 2006 to report on environmental stories. Ultimately it provided an extended metaphor for the reason I flew thousands of kilometres around the world, spent two-and-a-half months living out of a backpack and visited five countries, hopping from one plane to the next.

The need for 'rafts of understanding'—the context and knowledge necessary to tell stories about complex and daunting environmental subjects—is a reason I came to the South Pacific, even though I may not have been able to articulate it when I left New York. In my time there, I found the natural limitations of islands have a way of clarifying environmental problems and focusing our understanding of them. I write this as an outsider, someone trained

in environmental journalism who visited a place where the subject is, in my opinion, largely overlooked, critically necessary and perhaps (more than where I come from) highly visible and easy to report on. I think that the South Pacific, with its abundance of ways of looking at and interacting with the environment, provides more than rafts of understanding, but 'islands of understanding'.

My journey to the South Pacific was conceived shortly after I finished graduate school at Columbia University, where I studied both journalism and environmental science. Upon graduation, I was awarded a Pulitzer Travelling Fellowship, which supports international travel for the top few students from the school each year. I travelled to Fiji, Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. I found more than stories; I found a way of looking at environmental issues that transcended both my prior experience and my understanding of environmental journalism.

Before this trip, I thought stories about the environment were exclusively about how people, through greed or ignorance, destroyed the environment. But environmental journalism is more about how people affect the environment and how the environment affects people, about feedback loops of environmental damage, about how people adapt, about glimpses into the future that I think islands, with their isolation, and limited space and resources, can best show us. My experience also made clear to me the way environmental issues and stories permeate many of the other problems and stories we report on, both in the islands and at home in New York.

Dedicated environment reporters are luxuries that few publications, even in the United States, can afford. So much of the time it is the responsibility—I don't hesitate to use that word—of reporters on other beats, including business, communities and politics, to report on environmental stories. Many of these stories, including those related to tourism, logging, trade, education, sanitation, food production, water, energy, public health, public policy and international relations, have strong environmental components for the journalist prepared to see them.

Sadly, environmental journalism is a growth industry. The problems and issues that it addresses are only likely to get worse or have greater effects on the everyday lives of readers, especially in the South Pacific, where the particular environmental aspects associated with islands make environmental concerns both impactful and receptive to storytelling.

To borrow a term often used to describe the interesting ways that animals and plants evolve on islands, I think of this suite of characteristics as the 'island syndrome'; a set of circumstances that oceanic islands share that relate to how environmental problems evolve (Whittaker, 2001). First, islands are limited in natural resources and space. As a result, these natural resources—such as fish, timber, and minerals—can run scarce in a matter of decades instead of centuries, and their management has little margin for error. Lack of foresight in this area will become obvious both visually and in its effect on people, and will quickly generate human stories from environmental problems.

In larger countries such as the United States and Australia, we export our environmental problems—either to other countries (imported timber) or to remote parts of our own countries (waste management and air and water pollution) (Porter et al., 2000). This kind of externalisation of environmental problems is rarely possible on islands in the South Pacific because of socio-economic factors, isolation and visibility. Isolation and a lack of financial resources mean that environmental issues—waste, deforestation, pollution—must be dealt with locally. And because space is limited, such problems quickly become apparent, in the form of a bare hillside, a pile of trash or a dying reef. There is no hiding an environmental problem and the difficulties it creates for local communities on an island, especially considering the high population densities in many island nations.

Isolation also breeds diversity in the South Pacific. Isolated from one another, many inhabited islands in the South Pacific develop their own culturally specific environmental problems and management techniques. Among thousands of populated islands at various levels of development, there is a near endless variety of material for environmental stories about problems and solutions. While one island can serve as a cautionary example of how not to manage an environmental problem, another might be a case study of how traditional knowledge built over the course of centuries can head off severe environmental problems before they start.

Limited space and the accelerated pace of environmental development mean that islands present opportunities to test comprehensive solutions and management plans that can be examples to the entire world. For example, plans are are being developed to help some islands become entirely energy sufficient through renewable sources (Greenpeace, 2006), and the improve-

ment of coastal management policies to address sea level rise caused by global climate change (South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission, 2006). These plans can be complex and comprehensive, but also circumscribed enough to be understood, and explained by journalists.

Through this way of looking at environmental problems, the island itself can become a 'raft of understanding', a limited space with highly visible issues in which to examine and tell a much larger, more widely applicable environmental story. Two of the island nations I visited on my trip, Nauru and Tuvalu, are illustrative examples.

Nauru, the world's smallest republic, is a case study of the effects of resource extraction industries and minimal environmental planning. The 21 sq km island has limited resources; the phosphate that once made it one of the richest countries in the world has actually run out. Both the resource and its revenue were heavily mismanaged, so the environmental damage was not mitigated (McDaniel & Gowdy, 2000). Any story on Nauru is, unavoidably, a story about how people affect the environment and how the environment affects people.

More than 90 percent of Nauru land is unusable, impassable and barren. Water and power are only provided for a few hours a day, if at all, and many store shelves are almost bare except for imported, packaged foods. Fresh food is difficult or impossible to find and, largely for dietary reasons, Nauruans have the shortest life expectancy in the region.

While Nauru showed is an example of larger environmental problems, the story also has other facets: economics (how they lost billions of dollars), politics (how is the current government trying to make things right), health (how genetics and diet interact) and culture (how people there are rediscovering lost traditions now that the money is gone).

Nauru's downfall came not with the complete loss of their phosphate reserves, but from the mismanagement of funds designated to rehabilitate the island's environment and maintain the physical plant for the mining operation. Now there is a new attempt to restart the mining and the new government has an opportunity to start afresh. Only time will tell if the administration will be able to manage the island the second time the way it should have been managed the first time (with environmental rehabilitation as a key priority). Unfortunately, the plan has been very slow in implementation and is going to cost millions more than Nauru may be able to acquire. Nauru's story

is about a complex problem—resource extraction, environmental damage and its effects on people—that is distilled within a single resource, a single population, a single ecosystem, a single island.

Another intimidatingly complex problem to report on is global climate change. Reporters around the world have flown to the atoll nation of Tuvalu to report climate. A friend there asked me why I think this is. I could not speak for the Japanese camera crew or Australian radio correspondent I met there, but I told her that for me Tuvalu is an 'island of understanding' for a topic so incredibly complex that I hardly knew where to begin in trying to understand it. The natural limitations of Tuvalu were an asset to me as an environmental journalist (Patel, 2006).

Tuvalu cromprises five coral atolls and four reef islands, none more than 5m above sea level. While it is not yet certain how climate change is actually affecting the country, when the tides were high in early 2006, large portions of land were inundated with salt water. People were worried. Tides were higher than they could ever remember them. It is hard to say how much worse the problem has become or why, but there is a lot for us to learn in how Tuvalu, and the rest of the world, responds to climate change in the short term (with immediate adaptation measures like slowing erosion) and long term (possible relocation to another country). By telling the story through a single island chain, I found the opportunity to pare down the science I needed to understand an observable case study and a compelling human story.

Nauru and Tuvalu, in particular, helped me understand why I went to the South Pacific. The 'islands of understanding' they provided were indispensable. If local journalists in the South Pacific also begin to think about environmental problems this way, they can perhaps tell environmental stories about their homes to the rest of the world.

The problems of small islands are magnified by their size, isolation and lack of resources. But larger island nations, such as Fiji and Vanuatu, are also beginning to experience similar issues. And in time, unless steps are taken to make the environment a priority (environmental journalists have a key stake in this process), the same problems will also envelop continents (see Diamond, 2005). To me, the study of the islands of the South Pacific provides an excellent frame of environmental reference for storytelling—we can learn enough to understand complex environmental issues and show readers how environmental problems impact upon life and culture.

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