

Pacific Youth Caucus on the Environment

By ANDREW STANTON environments.

Four full days, 60 saturated hours, numerous workshops, myriad smiles, an album of songs and three declarations later, the Pacific Youth Caucus on the Environment closed on Saturday April 21st. The event marked an important milestone for the 23 participants from 12 Pacific Island nations as it was the inaugural conference of their recently formed Pacific Youth Environment Network (PYEN). It also represented the first ever opportunity for environmental activists in South Pacific to network and remind each other of the support they have to offer. In short, it was a huge success.

Nauru, Niue, New Zealand, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, and Cook Islands were some of the countries in attendance. All delegates were between the ages of 18-25 and active in environmental or youth matters in their respective countries.

Youth representatives were from a variety of different sectors, including government, non-government, church, university, health, community and youth groups.

During the Caucus, delegates discussed a plethora of issues affecting all the islands such as climate change, indigenous knowledge and cultural identity, and waste management to more specific problems like the invasion of the Giant African Snail in Samoa.

As well as proving that the Pacific is not simply the idyllic picture postcard impression most of us have of the islands, the delegates demonstrated that young people are important stakeholders in decisions made about environmental issues.

“ We, the Pacific Youth Environment Network, have gathered on this day at Wollongong, Australia, to affirm our collective responsibilities to restore and protect our cultures and our

We urge the United Nations system and the countries that are to gather at the World Summit for the Environment to honour our concerns and to respect our rights to our intellectual and cultural heritage and to our lands and resources.

We reiterate our commitment to sustainable development and oppose current models of development being pursued by multinational corporations, industrialised Nations and our own governments that are proving detrimental to Pacific eco-systems and Pacific cultures.

We assert that the Pacific is not a place where “island paradises” are waiting to be exploited by the world’s industrialised and wealthy Nations nor are they “empty frontiers” available for the dumping of nuclear waste, genetically modified organisms, and all forms of industrial pollutants. “

Excerpt from the Wollongong Declaration, adopted on the 21st of April 2001

Personal account from Andrew Stanton:

We only had five days together so we didn’t waste any time at all. Most nights we were up until past midnight caucusing or drafting position statements. We began our proceedings on the afternoon of the 17th and formally opened with Dr Sharman Stone, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for the Environment the following day. Dr Stone was on her way to Samoa, to meet with other regional governments to discuss progress on the establishment of a South Pacific Whale Sanctuary. We later drafted a letter of support to the meeting, which was apparently received during a difficult period in negotiations. The delegate from Tonga read out the statement, and with this encouragement, the meeting



Participants at the Global Youth Service Day gala dinner.

proceeded with new renewed purpose.

The first day we received a number of presentations, including one by the representative for the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) on their education and training programme. Next was Professor John Merson, from the ABC Science Unit. He spoke about several community based initiatives for resource conservation and waste management in Fiji. Professor Beder talked broadly about the meaning of ‘sustainability’ in relation to ‘equity’ that was followed by a group discussion addressing individual interpretations of ‘sustainability’ and strategies for achieving it. This was mostly based on case studies and individual experience. Delegate from PNG, Raymond Unasi, spoke about five fold sustainability, in other words the need to approach this aim with consideration for social, political, economic, ecological and spiritual factors.

The following days were spent reviewing the United Nations Environment Programme Pacific State of the Environment report and drafting suggestions and recommendations for a youth version SoE. We also workshoped waste management and resource conservation issues, questions of resource ownership, development, poverty reduction and partnerships.

The rest of our time was spent revising our network structure, Strategy and Action plan, as well as producing position statements for Rio + 10 (next years Earth Summit in South Africa).

During these discussions, the urgency of environmental problems in the islands became apparent. Climate Change and Sea Level Rise were identified as the most pressing issues for many islands, specifically Kiribati, Cook Islands and Tuvalu. These countries are predicted to submerge completely within 50 to 100 hundred years (see article on Climate Change for more info).

Other issues included inappropriate development, particularly of the type pursued by institutions like the IMF and World Bank. Papua New Guinea has endured increasing instability as a result of the restructuring programs enforced on their country by these bodies. This is largely a result of the need to pay back the loan given them for the disastrous World Bank sponsored Ok Tedi mine. Seems that the only winners in this one were the OTML mining consortiums including BHP and Metal Mining Canada. Australian researchers are currently trying to work out why hundreds of people have since died downstream of the mine on the Fly River.

Fittingly, the PYCE was closed on Global Youth

Service Day. That night we joined with environmental delegates from 14 different Asian countries who were taking part in the concurrent Young Environmental Envoys Programme. Two local volunteers, Kristy Adams from Surf Life Saving and Rachel McBeath involved in respite care were awarded for their voluntary contributions to the community.

All up it was a great experience. Despite being a very diverse group, culturally and professionally we got on like a house on fire. Our enthusiasm was nothing less than impressive. I was told on a number of occasions that in most islands it is unthinkable to work past three or four in the afternoon. Maybe as a result of the sense of urgency regarding environmental problems, we worked four 15-hour days in a row! Although exhausted by the end of the week we were all satisfied with what we had achieved.

Our network, the Pacific Youth Environment Network, is now four times bigger than it was this time last year! There is already talk of another caucus in 12-24 months time and we have achieved a truly international profile – previously only a handful of people knew about us. We are also likely to be able to facilitate financial and technical support for the domestic projects of the network members.