

Sustainable Livelihoods for Island Women

By Duane Silverstein



My story of the critical role women can play in protecting the fragile ecosystems of islands begins in Tuvalu, one of the smallest, most remote, and lowest lying countries on Earth. Because the highest elevation on this Polynesian nation is a mere 5 meters above sea level Tuvalu is extremely sensitive to the effects of climate change which brings

rising seas, increased flooding and stronger storm surges to its coast. Mangrove forests can help ameliorate this problem by creating a natural barrier against flooding and violent waves while preventing erosion.

The Tuvalu National Council of Women has long recognized the importance of their country's mangroves. Along with the people of the Tuvalu atoll of Nanumea, they approached Seacology (www.seacology.org), the NGO I head whose sole focus is preserving island environments, for support of a win-win project. Nanumea has a population of 660 people and outside of government employment, there are no paying jobs on the island. Everyone lives off the bounty of the land and sea in a subsistence fashion. Therefore, Nanumea was seeking support for the renovation and expansion of a Women's Centre where the local women can make traditional handicrafts for sale in the capital city of Funafati. In exchange, the people of Nanumea would begin a two acre lagoon based mangrove nursery and reserve, planting over 1,000 mangrove seedlings along the coastline. Seacology was pleased to fund this project.

Several months ago I visited this project along with Seacology President Ken Murdock. En route we stopped at several islands in the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, and Tuvalu

that had not received a group of visitors since World War II. We were pleased to cut the ribbon for the opening of the Women's Center on Nanumea and join many of the local women in planting mangrove seedlings.

We produced a short video of this project which can be seen here: seacology.org/news/display.cfm?id=4262

This is just one of Seacology's 215 projects, which are found on 116 islands in 45 countries around the globe. It nonetheless had a profound impact on me. Not because of the extraordinary friendliness of the people of Nanumea and not because of the extreme beauty of the island – though both of these moved me. No, this project got me thinking about the status of women on islands and the important role they can play in conserving the environment. There are likely only a handful of people on earth who have visited more remote island villages than I have. Most of these villages from widely different cultures have several things in common. Though almost all of the village residents earn low wages, the women of the villages earn even less than the men. Additionally, and somewhat paradoxically, one of the best ways to get something done on these island villages is to have the women do it as they are very well organized. So I concluded that one of the best things Seacology could do to conserve threatened island ecosystems is to help provide island women with sustainable livelihoods in exchange for an agreement to make sure the local forests and marine areas are protected. I am convinced that this will be a cost effective and equitable way to improve the economic status of women while protecting island environments. I hope that Seacology will be able to launch more such projects in the future.

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**Photos: Top - Planting Mangroves (Giovanna Fasanelli)
Inset - Opening women's centre (Ramona Wilson)**