



Islands



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A tale of two villages

By Duane Silverstein

In the remote village of Nasigasiga, on the beautiful island of Vanua Levu, several men line up to do a traditional spear dance. They are wearing leaf skirts, their faces are painted black as was the custom with warriors of ancient times, and they are all holding spears. One of the spear dancers looks more than a little out of place. That dancer happens to be me. How did an American from California come to be doing a traditional spear dance in one of Fiji's remote villages?

I have travelled to Fiji as director of Seacology, one of the world's premier non-governmental organisations, with the sole purpose of preserving marine and terrestrial island environments throughout the globe. Seacology specialises in "win-win" projects where islanders receive a critically needed benefit they request in return for making an important sacrifice on behalf of the environment.

Nasigasiga is 40 miles from the nearest town, located deep in the hills of Vanua Levu and accessible only by



a long unpaved road. The lengthy hike is rewarded by vistas of this beautiful village that may just as easily be called Shangri-la. Like many villages in Fiji, Nasigasiga is in critical need of a kindergarten. Also like many Fijian villages, Nasigasiga has title to a large amount of land. This is where



Members of the Seacology team with children of Nasigasiga.

Seacology came in. We constructed a new kindergarten in exchange for an agreement to set aside a 400-acre forest preserve. Seacology recently visited Nasigasiga for the grand opening of the new kindergarten.

Our visit began with a sevusevu, or presentation of kava, the popular drink made from the root of the pepper plant. Though few westerners would call kava delicious,

it is consumed for its calming effects not its taste. After the sevusevu, the formal kava ceremony ensued. The kava ceremony has changed little over the last several hundred years. The kava is still mixed the same ritualistic way in the same wooden bowls and often the tapa costumes worn are the same outfits used by the great-

great grandparents of the current villagers. As "chief" of Seacology, I am one of a small number of people asked to drink the ceremonial cup of kava on behalf of the whole group.

It is now time to open the kindergarten. An incredibly cute child from the village, wearing a traditional tapa cloth dress, is standing by the entrance of the kindergarten

holding a pillow upon which rests a key to the front door. When Beto Bedolfe opens the door on behalf of Seacology, the entire village breaks out into wild applause. This is a very historic and joyous day in the history of the village.

We then move to another part of the village for an incredible feast. The women of Nasigasiga fan the food to keep away the flies. Next on the agenda is the dance performance. A village elder takes me aside and asks me if I would participate in the spear dance. I find it impossible to say no to anyone from this village. I change into the traditional garb, grab a spear and do my best to follow the steps of the other dancers who know what they are doing. The villagers howl with laughter at my dancing.

The ceremony ends with the presentation of gifts by the villagers. The mats and cloths quickly pile up and the presentation of a roasted pig is greeted by oohs and aahs from the Seacology group. As the village chief said, we "have come as strangers and leave Nasigasiga as brothers and sisters for life."

This is Seacology's fourth annual expedition to Fiji. Our home base is always the Jean-Michel Cousteau Fiji Islands Resort, one of the world's leading eco-resorts. In the words of Mike Freed, the managing partner of Cousteau Resort, "We are honoured that Seacology has chosen the Cousteau Resort as their base in Fiji to do good. There are virtually no organisations aside from Seacology that show as much respect for the islands. Seacology's next visit takes place in Naikorokoro village just south of Fiji's old colonial capital of Levuka on the island of Ovalau. In exchange for the establishment of a 44-square kilometre marine reserve, Seacology has provided Naikorokoro with a kindergarten and renovated the village's community center.

A group of students from John Gray High School on Grand Cayman Island in the Caribbean heard about Seacology and raised and donated money for the project. Thanks to the generosity of Air Pacific, several of these students from Grand Cayman Island joined Seacology for the opening of the new kindergarten in Naikorokoro. Again the village extends the incredible friendliness and hospitality for which Fiji is known. This time the celebration ends with the villagers, the Cayman Island students and members of the Seacology group doing a snake dance through the village community center. As director of Seacology, I am thrilled that for US\$12,500 we have established a marine reserve, constructed a new kindergarten and shown the world a wonderful model of international cooperation.

The Seacology group is moved to tears upon our departure from Naikorokoro. Our sadness turns to joy knowing that we will return to Fiji next year to open more projects in some of Fiji's most remote and beautiful villages.

