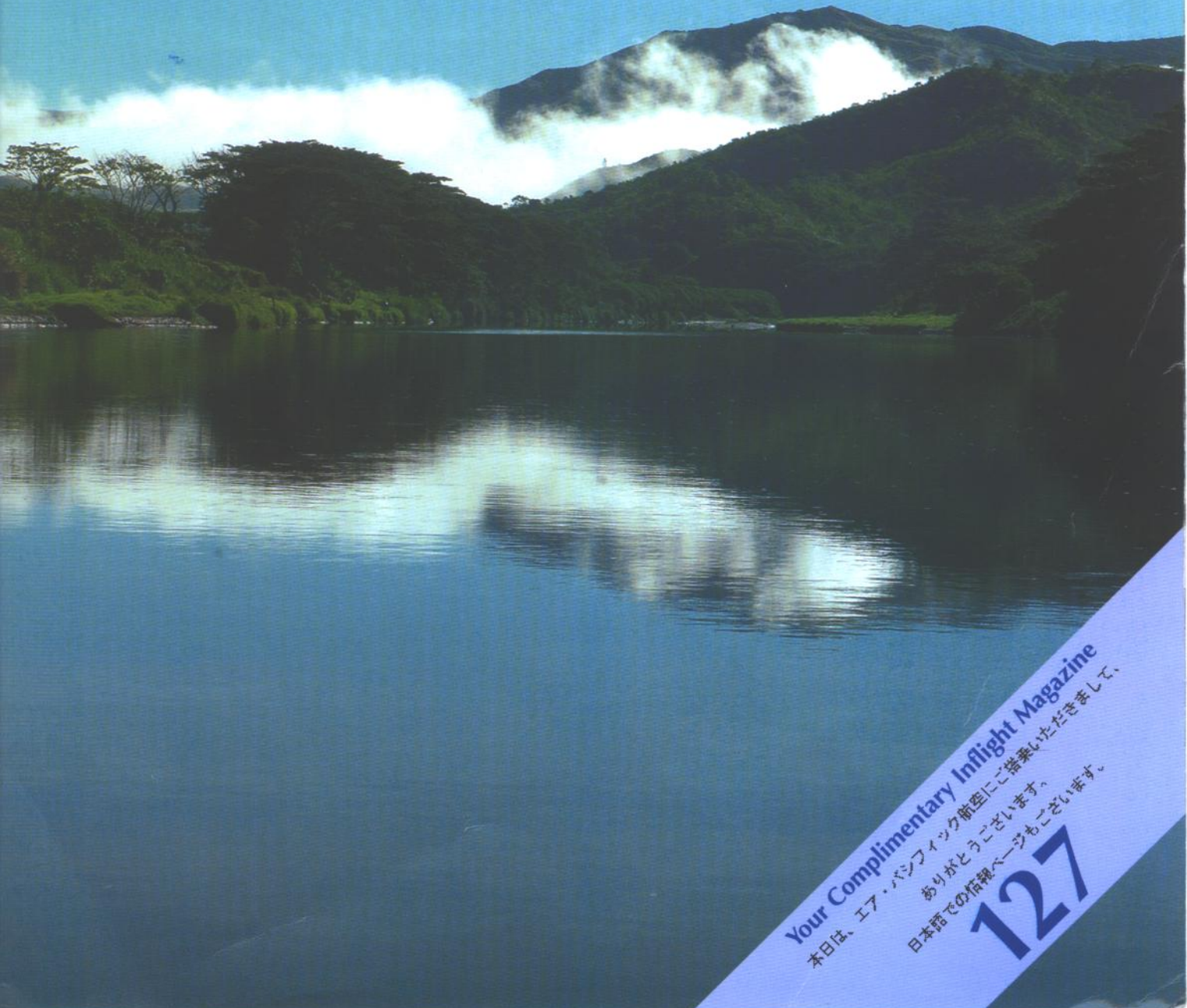


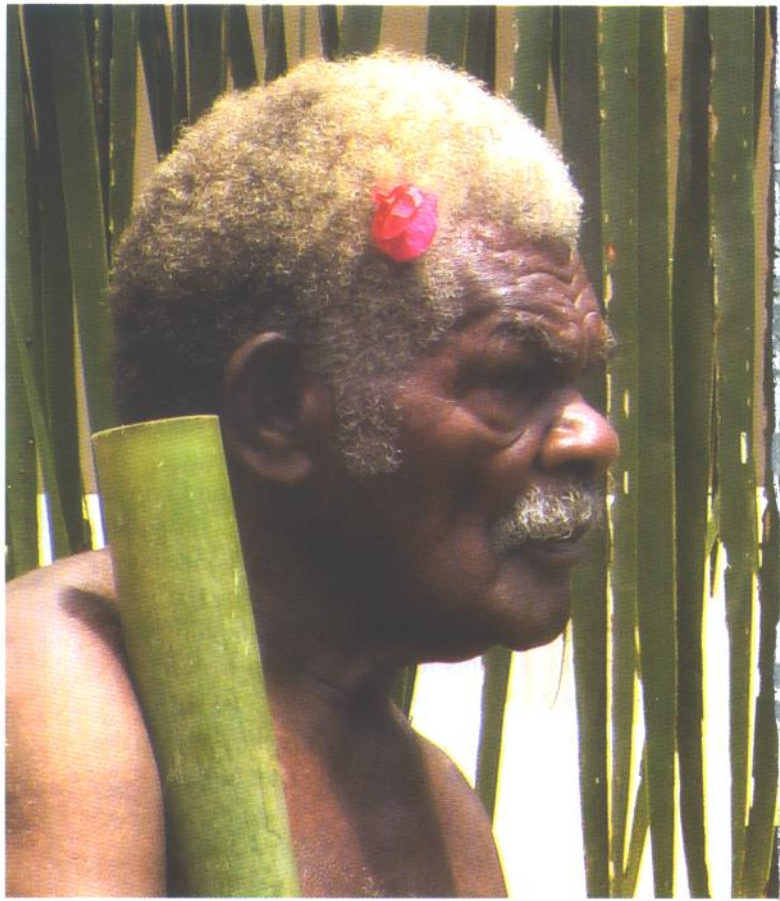


# Islands



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*The chief of Sara village, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.  
(Photo: John Lang)*

# *Espiritu Santo...* *a paradise found*

*By Duane Silverstein*

**O**n the beautiful island of Espiritu Santo in the 25-year old nation of Vanuatu, 50 dancers are leading me into their remote village of Sara. Their traditional custom chanting is hypnotic. When I close my eyes the rhythm conjures up images of Africa rather than the gorgeous South Pacific nation of Vanuatu. The dancers' war clubs and loin cloths enhance the feeling that time has stood still for the past two hundred years.

I have travelled to Vanuatu as director of Seacology, one

of the world's premier non-governmental organisations with the sole purpose of preserving marine and terrestrial islands environments throughout the globe.

Seacology specialises in "win-win" projects where the islands receive a critically needed benefit they request in return for making an important sacrifice on behalf of the environment.

Vanuatu is a chain of 83 islands which was originally given the name New Hebrides by Captain James Cook. Located northwest of Fiji, New Hebrides was jointly administered by France and England in an unusual arrangement dubbed the condominium. All this changed in 1980 when Vanuatu achieved independence.

The people of Vanuatu, known as ni-Vanuatu, held on to the best traditions of the English and French, which may explain why visitors to Vanuatu find some of the best

*Chief of Sara village with Duane Silverstein.  
(Photo: Keresi Vodonaivalu)*





*The author, Duane Silverstein, speaking at ceremonies at Sara village, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu.*  
(Photo: Keresi Vodonaivalu)

food and most efficient services in the Pacific. With its breathtaking location, its wonderful restaurants and pleasant climate, the capital city of Port Vila is one of the most charming towns in this part of the world. This would explain why many visitors to Vanuatu never leave Port Vila; however, there is so much else to see in Vanuatu.

Espiritu Santo is the largest island in Vanuatu. During World War Two, it was the home base for hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, including James Michener, author of "Tales of the South Pacific." The villages of Sara and Matantas are located near the north shore, a one-hour van ride from Luganville Airport.

The ride passes through seemingly endless coconut plantations. In 1993, these two villages had the foresight to set aside the 6735-acre Vatthe Conservation Area (VCA) which includes Vanuatu's largest



*School children at flag raising ceremony in front of the Seacology-funded community hall.*  
(Photo: Keresi Vodonaivalu)



*Vanuatu Director of the Environment Ernest Bani and Seacology's Duane Silverstein and John Lang cut the ribbon to open the new community centre. (Photo: Keresi Vodonaivalu)*

*The Seacology-funded community centre at Sara village, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. (Photo: John Lang)*

intact lowland forest. When the VCA was established, the people of the nearby villages were told they would receive many benefits for setting aside the ecologically important reserve.

Unfortunately, these benefits never materialised and faced with the short-term financial gain timber companies might pay for logging rights, their commitment to continue the VCA was beginning to waiver.

This is where Seacology came in. We asked the villages what they wanted in exchange for continuing the forest preserve.

They responded that they were in need of a community hall for village meetings and celebrations. I am here in the village of Sara to attend the opening dedication of the





*Sara village, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. (Photo: Duane Silverstein)*

Seacology-funded community hall.

After a group of custom dancers leads me to the new community hall, a group of young students sings the Vanuatu national anthem as the flag is raised.

Many important government officials are here for this occasion and the Environmental Minister of Vanuatu, John Lang from Seacology, and I cut the ribbon to officially open the building.

A traditional feast follows including pig cooked in an underground oven, taro and sweet potatoes. This is followed by a kava ceremony.

Though few Westerners would call kava delicious, it is consumed for its calming effect not its taste.

Throughout the Pacific, Vanuatu is known to have the strongest kava. After one cup, I can tell that this reputation is well deserved!

The chiefs of the two villages then present me with a very special gift of a nalnal - a traditional chiefly weapon. The ceremonies conclude with entertainment by local bands and a traditional custom dance performance.

This occasion will be spoken about for many generations in the villages of Matantas and Sara. More importantly, this ceremony and the community centre itself will ensure the Vathe Conservation Area will be around for the benefit of many generations to come.

