

Reviving Cultures of the Ocean

Pacific Nations are under increasing pressure as the climate warms up. *Koha* Managing Editor, Mere Takoko, recently travelled to the realm of Hawaiiki to learn how cultural revitalisation is key to heritage protection in the Pacific.

Just over three hundred kilometres northwest of Tahiti is Maupiti. Here, Tiare flowers surrounded by fine sand beaches provide visitors with a sense of calm and peace. Just like its big sister Bora Bora, the small island is shadowed by impressive rocky peaks. It's a haven of Polynesian life where the customs of yesteryear live on.

Earlier this month over 120 delegates from Pacific islands as far away as Papua New Guinea and Rapanui, travelled to Maupiti for a UNESCO sponsored World Heritage Workshop to safeguard knowledge, spirituality and traditional practices. The local community of Puatiriouraiuaiahu-Raipuaea have prepared for months to host these experts of Pacific culture and history.

Like many islands in its close proximity, Maupiti is renowned as a gathering place for Ariki. Now, after almost two centuries, the local people of the island hope the workshop will reforge an alliance formed by nine East Polynesian Kings at the royal marae of Vaiahu during the reign of Kamehameha II. Here to answer their call for unity from Aotearoa is Te Ariki Tumu Te Heuheu.

"It's only through collective cooperation that the Pacific is able to move forward in many ways both in terms of heritage but also in terms of the social and cultural needs," says the former Chair of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

Te Ariki is a long time campaigner for preserving the Pacific's unique culture and heritage. With growing concerns about the already visible signs of climate change in the region, there is increasing recognition that Pacific knowledge and practices of

land and sea tenure need to be revived.

"The reality is that we live in an environment where we have to take cognisance of what's needed from a global perspective because climate change is not confined to the Pacific. Climate change is something the whole of the world is having to understand," says Te Ariki.

With harrowing scenes of the Samoan tsunami fresh in the minds of delegates and experts predicting that sea levels will rise by at least 1.5 metres this century, low lying islands like Maupiti are among the most vulnerable and isolated communities on earth. The royal marae of Vaiahu, which locals say once spanned an area of 600 metres, has already been reduced to a surface area of 100 metres.

In Maupiti, which is the resting ground of legendary Polynesian navigators such as Kupe, Hiro, Ru and Hina, the deterioration and disappearance of important heritage sites represents a loss to the whole Pacific community. To date, only 13 Pacific Island countries have signed up to the UN Convention on World Heritage and there are few resources available to ensure that sites are restored and protected.

Giovanni Boccardi, Chief of the Asia-Pacific unit at the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, believes this is largely because Pacific heritage cultural and natural values are not really recognised internationally.

"We want to start working at the site level. We want to show that heritage protection is important not just because of biological or artistic historical values and reasons, but because it's at the heart of the sustainable development of communities," he says.





Top: UNESCO WORKSHOP - Delegates make their way across the traditional grounds of the royal marae of Vaiahu, much of which is now submerged.

Mid Left: NZ DELEGATION - Te Ariki Tumu Te Heuheu leads the New Zealand delegation.

Mid Right: HOUSE OF KNOWLEDGE - Maupiti boasts some of Polynesia's most sacred sites and is home to famous eponymous ancestors such as Kupe, Hiro, Ru and Hina. Ancient knowledge is preserved today in stone carvings that rest in sacred places throughout the island.

Bottom Left: GATHERING CHIEFS - The royal marae of Vaiahu is a gathering place of Ariki. During the reign of Kamehameha II, an alliance was formed by Ariki from the Pacific Triangle to ensure the protection of Hawaiiki.

This page: HEART OF UNITY - Teoroi Phirmin from the Whare Ariki of Maupiti leads delegates to an official welcome ceremony held by the local community of Puatiriouraiwaiahu-Raipuaea.



One of the drivers for UNESCO sponsoring the workshop was to develop a regional action plan to get as many sites as possible on the World Heritage list. Currently only four countries are recognised as having sites of cultural and historical importance: Solomon Islands, Rapanui, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea.

UNESCO also aims to work with communities to preserve cultural traditions. With one of the highest proportions of indigenous peoples in the world, many Pacific communities still live within traditional land and sea tenure systems. As such, the region is a haven of traditional knowledge, which is vital to helping Pacific communities adapt to climate change.

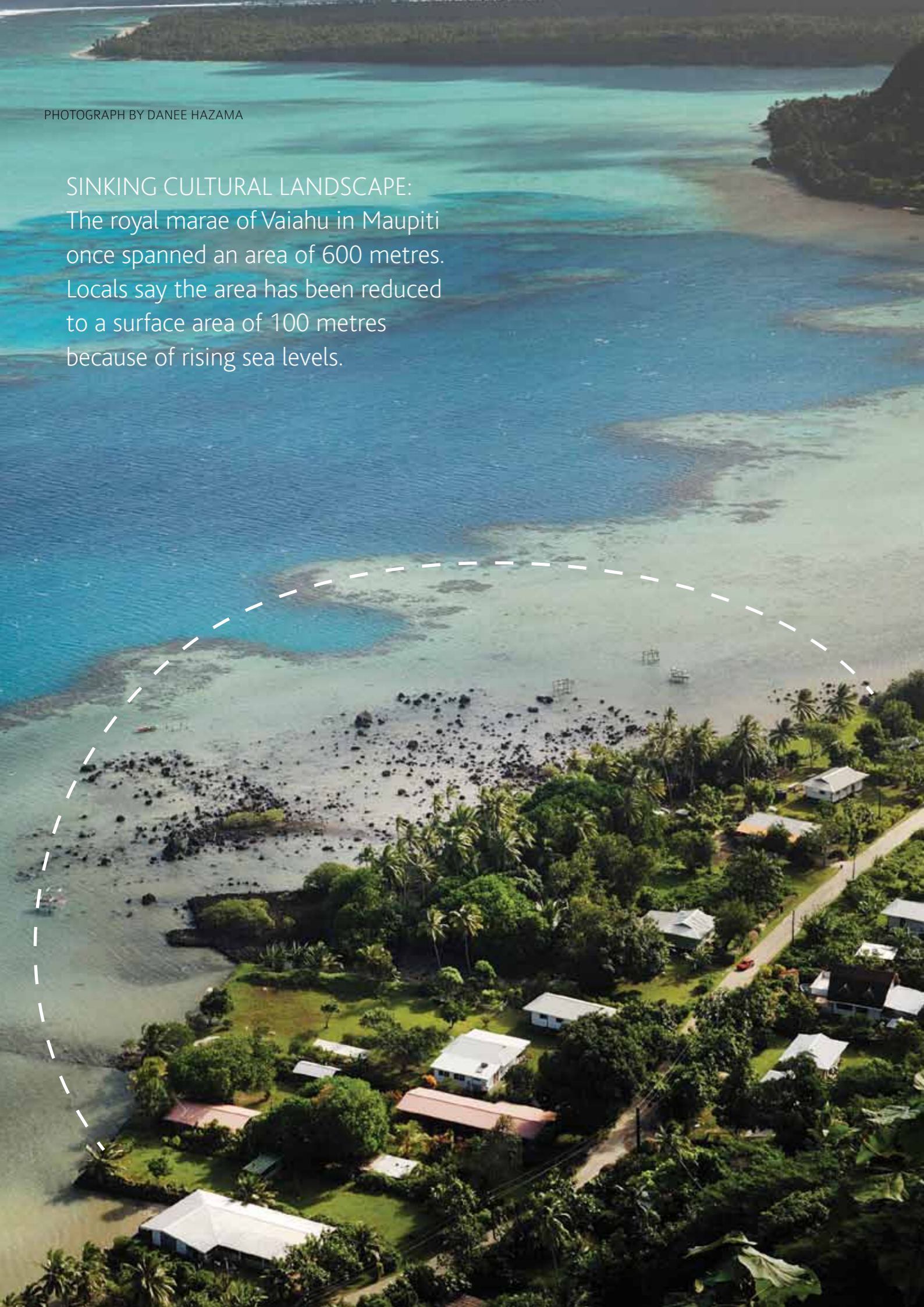
But while the Pacific region occupies a third of the global landscape, it's still an area of which little is known by the outside world. Senator Richard Ari-i-hau Tuheiava, who was a driving force behind efforts to hold the UNESCO workshop in Maupiti,



PHOTOGRAPH BY DANEE HAZAMA

SINKING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE:

The royal marae of Vaiahu in Maupiti once spanned an area of 600 metres. Locals say the area has been reduced to a surface area of 100 metres because of rising sea levels.



says that reaffirming Pacific people's cultural uniqueness will help to achieve global recognition as well as benefit tourism and other economic activities.

"What we can do as indigenous peoples is to offer our traditional knowledge of the oceans and the land that is not really applied today. We need to increase and build our capacities on a local level while keeping our indigeneity alive and consistent," says Tuheiava.

The Senator, who is a member of Oscar Te Maru's pro-Tahiti independence party, is currently working within his government to promote economic development initiatives that also safeguard knowledge, spirituality, traditional practices and relationships with land and sea. He says that there is a big push within his party to harmonise trade policies with the environmental and cultural aspirations of Pacific peoples. This includes taking a lead in developing transnational values to guide native trade opportunities in the Pacific.

"It's about finding a way to harness the uniqueness and cultural components of the Pacific to help to build new economic opportunities in the future. One thing for sure is that our Pacific

cultures are in danger so this is really something that needs to be done."

Reforging the ancient trade routes of the Pacific triangle is one idea that was well received by a number of delegates. With genealogical links and spiritual traditions centered around common archaeological landscapes such as Taputapuātea in Raiatea that connects to sites in Hawaii, Rapanui, Rarotonga and Aotearoa, it seems the foundations to bring culture and commerce together were set long ago.

According to Tuheiava, a similar vision of unity was set in Maupiti some 200 years ago, when nine Ariki from Samoa, Rarotonga, Rapanui and Tahiti came together to be coronated in a ceremony aimed at conferring the future of Maupiti as a centre to revive the ancient traditions of Hawaiiki. With UNESCO's involvement, the Senator hopes this message will spread to the rest of the global community.

"We are people of the ocean. We learn how to move on the ocean. We learn to face the ocean and be unique with the ocean and nature. We have a spiritual connection with the land and all landscapes. This is something that the Pacific can help the rest of the world to understand and remember."

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