

# Thinking ‘Outside the Rocks’: Reimagining the Pacific<sup>1</sup>

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Hon. Henry Puna

This obvious play on words is a home-grown attempt to capture the way in which our region faces enormous challenges in trying to find its own way in the world — defining itself while grappling with the constraints associated with remoteness, size, and resources.

A changing world demands changing mindsets, and those demands are pressing for a renewed effort on our part to redefine our thinking in ways that reflect who we are, and what we want to be, on our own terms.

Thinking ‘outside the rocks’ is how we need to reverse a self-imposed limitation of believing we are simply ‘dots on a map’. For too long we’ve allowed a sense of smallness to underscore our outlook and projection to the rest of the world.

On the contrary, our island nations carry enormous significance well beyond tiny volcanic specks and atolls in what is a vast, collective territory of the Pacific Ocean. This is our course for the future — thinking beyond the rocks.

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1 Address to students of the University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, 19 October 2012.

## Reimagining Ourselves

I think the time is right that we take on a more concerted effort, as a region, to define ourselves on our own terms. After all, this global community of ours is continuing to shrink rapidly, thanks to the marching advancement of internet technology and the uptake of mobile devices, which can basically run and organise a business or organisation — on the run!

The conduct of business is evolving in competitive ways that demand new thinking. And the structures of professional fields in media information and dissemination can no longer be called ‘traditional’ — they’re constantly reinventing themselves into challenging spheres of competitive space. Just ask dot com!

For me, as a leader, and us as governments, our collective interests are being pressured and shaped toward a new Pacific order — one that won’t necessarily meet the expectations of others — or the perceptions of outsiders. What is important is that we choose what’s best for us. We have the ability to define what’s good, and we have the right to take commanding ownership of our future.

## Large Ocean Island States

I am, of course, partly alluding to the theme of the Pacific Islands Forum this year — a theme we chose as hosts to help encourage a greater sense of our region as home to large ocean island states.

And as I made a point of mentioning during the forum opening in August, our collective territories are nearly two times the size of Russia, and more than three times the size of the People’s Republic of China. It’s time we refocused our lens on the world and sharpened our strategy toward greater economic growth and sustainability.

Our thinking — our very identity as Pacific Islanders — must project from a more advanced, self-awareness of our presence in the world. And I think we’re off to a good start.

The Pacific Islands Forum is registering higher, more significant levels of engagement with the broader international community. Just last month, I was joined by several Pacific leaders in the first ever joint dialogue with the United Nations Secretary General and his leadership team. This was a very important first step in ensuring the Pacific Islands have a firm fix on inroads to the UN system.

The Pacific bloc of Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) plays a key role in the UN. As members of the Alliance of Small Islands States, we are bound to the processes associated with the ongoing climate change negotiations, and adaptation funding mechanisms.

This ongoing struggle is absolutely crucial to our survival. It's vital that we — as a solid, united front — present our case with an effective voice. And my underlying concern is to ensure that all the SIDS are represented equally, and with conviction, in the UN processes, particularly leading up to and participating in the 2014 global SIDS summit in our region.

The forum is also beginning to ignite groundbreaking steps in the sound management of our oceans and natural resources, and push the boundaries of regional integration to cooperate in new and challenging fields.

For example, international interest in the recent establishment of the biggest Marine Park in the world in the Cook Islands has been tremendous. The principles of sound management and conservation of our ocean are being strengthened across the Pacific as more nations look to strike a careful balance between exploiting natural resources and sustaining their value through conservation measures.

In renewable energy, many Pacific nations are capitalising on available expertise and resources to realise their goals. New priorities for energy security in countries like Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, Vanuatu, and Fiji, have resulted in terrific progress, increasing the share of renewable energy generation, improving levels of energy efficiency, and slicing back the dependency on environmentally-damaging fossil fuels.

The Cook Islands has joined this trend in setting ambitious targets and we are poised to commence solar energy projects in our isolated Northern Group Islands. Niue too, recently signed on for major development in renewable energy projects, assisted by the Japan-supported Pacific Environment Community Fund.

The forum's strategic engagement with its external partners is being rewarded. Close working relationships and beneficial outcomes are largely due to the effectiveness of our cooperative frameworks like the Forum Compact, and Pacific Plan.

## Pacific Plan Optimism

And as you may already be aware, the Pacific Plan will be the subject of major review in the coming months. My presence here in Suva is to help promote and speak to the significance of the plan and what it means to the island countries of the Pacific, and their aspirations for the future.

Yesterday, at the Forum Secretariat Headquarters, I utilised the honour of the annual public lecture to highlight my perspectives on an emerging sense of new optimism in the Pacific — and that this positive theme should be harnessed to instil more dynamism into the Pacific Plan.

Are we thus looking at a new period of renaissance in the Pacific? Perhaps. There may be value in arguing that point although it will be problematic to isolate a particular point in time that this new optimism arose.

Leaders before me have spoken of a Pacific reawakening, a rebirth of sorts, particularly as evidenced in the way we celebrate our heritage, culture and traditions in the region — through performing arts and crafts festivals, language preservation, and voyaging.

## Voyaging as Reimagining

Voyaging and the celebration of migratory peoples across this vast ocean of ours, is close to the heart of Cook Islanders, and to many of you also. In fact, this centuries-old navigation of the seas has been the subject of its own debate in past years for the way it has been revitalised and thrust to the forefront of our cultural consciousness.

Sailing by traditional means is firmly part of our identity — an identity that is transported across the Pacific, east to west, north to south. I, for one, was very proud to be a part of the welcoming reception of a flotilla of seven *vaka* that arrived in the United States last year — a remarkable voyaging accomplishment, which brought many of our nations together as one.

Traditional voyaging is also firmly entrenched in the way the Pacific region has been reimagining itself over many years of dominant ideals and tropes that originated from a Eurocentric view of the world. Europeans have imagined and constructed the Pacific and its peoples in ways that have endured for centuries.

But we're not denying that this is part of who we are. This is part of our history. In fact, we would be among those to uphold one of the greatest European voyagers of the Pacific: Captain James Cook.

This Yorkshire-born navigator of the seas is still making headlines today — and not just because our country was renamed in his honour. Cook's charts and maps of the Pacific are everlasting, coexisting today in a world where Pacific Islands' voyagers need only the stars to cross the Pacific.

These ironies live on, throughout our region today. The very categorisation of our islands into convenient blocs by French voyager Dumont d'Urville, for instance, has long been accepted, reappropriated with robust political purpose.

Today, those European constructs of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia instil pride within us all, and evoke a dignity associated with diverse, natural beauty and strength. We simply took ownership, and made it ours.

## Tourism

And what's interesting about this twist, is the way that Small Island Developing States, which are experiencing economic growth in industries like tourism, are essentially delivering a product that was imagined by European Romanticists in the 18th century.

The very notion of an idyllic paradise of sensual beauty and charm is exactly how we tend to portray the serenity of our attractive islands and their people to the tourist markets overseas today.

The desire for the Pacific that emerged centuries ago to lure outsiders to these shores, is now allowing us the means with which to secure economic strength. For the Cook Islands, tourism is the backbone of our national economy, and the leader and driver of our potential and growth.

But in the true nature of Pacific paradoxes, tourism is both our strength, and weakness. Our unspoilt islands remain vulnerable, fragile to climate change, the incessant drive of development in modern infrastructure, and the debilitating trend of population drift, which impacts upon our ability to sustain resources.

The narrowness of our existence in the Pacific requires broadening — a widening of both opportunity and the way in which we must take on these tasks.

For these reasons I ask for encouragement to accept this responsibility to think beyond the constraints — rise above, explore 'outside the rocks', and progress with a boldness founded on who we can be, as large ocean island states.

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