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Life at the South Pacific Commission

On arrival in Noumea in September 1975, Hope and I were met by Dick Baird and his wife, Ina. We were immediately made to feel most welcome. We had visited Dick and Ina before and had developed a sound friendship. Hope and I were both very much looking forward to living in New Caledonia. The Bairds showed us to the house we had been allocated and made us generally feel comfortable. Dick and I had a brief discussion of what was in store. I felt very confident about developing an excellent working relationship with him.

I took up my appointment at the SPC with the title 'Pacific skipjack stock assessment project co-ordinator'.

It did not take long for the true feelings of at least some of the SPC Executives to surface. On the second or third day of my tenure in Noumea, I received a phone call from the secretary general's (SG's) secretary asking me to come to the SG's office to take my oath of allegiance to the commission. Something I had not heard about, but had no problem with.

At the SG's office, I was greeted by the director of the commission's Health Program, who introduced himself as the acting SG. I remember his words from then almost verbatim:

> Dr Kearney, the secretary general is away on duty travel, but he has instructed me, as acting secretary general, to take your oath of allegiance. I would rather not have to do so, but as I have been instructed to, I will. But first, I wish to advise you that the Commission does not need people like you. We already have too

> many fisheries projects, and all your big project will do is take vital money away from health and other social programmes that are of far more importance to South Pacific Island countries. But now that you know where we stand, I will take your oath.

My formal relationship with the SPC was off to an exciting start! Clearly, allegiance was not a two-way street. Fortunately, Dick Baird was there to provide encouragement. The fact that the skipjack fishery, which the Skipjack Programme was designed to nurture and protect, represented one of the best opportunities for small island states to generate foreign exchange to enable them to pay for health and other social services was not in the acting SG's thinking.

Of course, I quickly sought Dick's counsel on what I had found to be an amazing and perplexing official 'welcome' to the commission. Dick admitted he was aware that the attitude of the executive to fisheries projects was less than enthusiastic, but he had not expected it to go as far as the extremely unprofessional behaviour to which I had been subjected. He confirmed that he had had some difficulty convincing the executive to commit to providing housing and other support for me as Skipjack Programme coordinator. I assume that was why he had needed the extra time before he could offer me the job. I had been quickly made aware that the executive was not prepared to support me in my efforts to have the Skipjack Programme funded.

Dick and I agreed that I would have to approach the fundraising for the Skipjack Programme mindful that I could not expect official help. I realised that I would have to go a little further and try to minimise the damage that the executive might deliberately encourage.

Right from the moment of my arrival at the SPC, I was aware that the institution was in dire financial trouble. The SPC was the first major regional organisation of significance created in the Pacific. It was formed in 1947 by the six metropolitan powers of the period, namely Australia, France, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, all of whom had administrative and colonial responsibility over one or more island territories or states. The mandate of SPC was to promote the 'economic and social welfare and advancement of the peoples of the non-self-governing territories in the South Pacific Region administered by them'. It had met this mandate reasonably for almost 30 years. However, by 1975, the SPC had major budgetary problems, and donor support was waning, as evidenced by the General Review presented to the Fifteenth SPC Conference by the SG, in which he stated:

> As you are all well aware, the Commission in 1975 has been plagued with budgetary problems caused by inflation and currency fluctuations. Other organisations, and indeed Governments, have suffered from similar problems, but this does not decrease their repercussions on the Commission and its Work Programme. Although the expenditure made in 1975 and that proposed for 1976 are in excess of sums spent in previous years, the Commission's actual activities have not appreciably increased. In December last year, the Programme Directors and I made a thorough examination of the approved 1975 Work Programme and Budget; in an attempt to meet the budgetary deficit, which was already looming clearly on the horizon, we 'froze' a long list of items in the administrative section of the Budget, the regular Work Programme, and the Special Projects. Despite our efforts to prune expenditure, inflationary trends and devaluation have given rise to still further demands on our Budget, and we are faced with a deficit for 1975 of some seventy-five thousand dollars. The outlook for 1976 is still more depressing … On present indications, it is perfectly possible that the expenditure proposed in the draft Work Programme and Budget for 1976 will exceed available income to an alarming extent.

Dick Baird and I were well aware that raising big sums of money was going to be extremely difficult. Given that the budget I would be seeking funding for was approximately a million dollars a year, equivalent to about 33 per cent of the total SPC budget, at a time when funding for international initiatives was extremely tight, my task could well be impossible. Many people, including most of my scientific colleagues, thought it would be. Not all because they thought it impossible to raise the amount of money that would be necessary to fund the experiment; some had grave doubts about whether tagging could be successfully used as the primary measure of the size of the skipjack population. Nobody had been able to do it for any population of skipjack before. Global finances were being impacted by uncertainty following 'the oil crisis', and closer to home, the SPC itself had admitted to budgetary difficulties 'to an alarming extent' and a lack of interest by the current donors in helping (as confirmed by the SG's presentation to the South Pacific Conference, quoted earlier).

The likely donors for the Skipjack Programme were largely the same ones as those who funded the SPC core budget, and as was evident from the SG's presentation, they were clearly reluctant to give the SPC any more money, let alone the 33 per cent increase I was seeking.

There was also open expression by emerging Pacific Island nations that the SPC was more 'colonial' in its operation than they now wished. More colonial territories were gaining independence almost every year in the 1970s. There was a groundswell of belief that any major new regional undertakings should be under the auspices of organisations over which island states had greater authority, such as the emerging South Pacific Forum. It is also important to note that at that time, the SPC was stating that it still did not have a single extra-budgetary project on its books – all activities were paid for out of consolidated revenue, known as core funding. Extra-budgetary projects had been talked about, and apparently actively sought. However, in the 1970s, the SPC was publicly stating that it had not been able to obtain funding for a single one, not even for a few thousand dollars. If funding was to be obtained for a multimillion-dollar project, costing more than a third of the commission's total budget, a totally new approach was necessary. Optimism was essential.

Dick Baird and I quickly determined that the most appropriate division of labour would be for Dick to ensure that the fisheries departments of all commission countries and territories were kept up to date with developments with the Skipjack Programme and were supportive of it. This would best be done through the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack and the Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries: Dick was, after all, the commission's fisheries officer; it was his job to run both activities. My job would be to develop a new approach to attracting extra-budgetary funding for a major new initiative and then, of course, to convince the targeted sources to provide the money. As the Rockefeller Foundation was to point out to me (see Chapter 5), the design of the Skipjack Programme could be accepted as the job of a fisheries scientist, but the job of raising the money to fund it was one for a high-powered salesman, not necessarily a scientist.

We already had expressions of the strongest possible support from the Expert Committee and the regional fisheries officers, plus endorsement from the Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission and the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council. While they were not going to come up with any money, I was hopeful that the fisheries officers might be able to influence potential donors.

My enquiries of the commission's finance officer, Ivan Boyd, revealed that the commission had a list of 22 proposals for which it was presumably seeking extra-budgetary funding. These were ranked by the SPC Executive in order of their priority for funding, with number one being the highest.

I asked for the Skipjack Programme to be put on the list, thinking that, as it was the only one with high regional support and international support from outside the commission members, it would receive a high ranking. I was subsequently advised that the commission's secretariat gave it a ranking of number 21. They clearly did not want the programme to be funded. I immediately asked, successfully, for it to be withdrawn from this listing: I could not afford to have this Programme considered an extremely low priority project. The fisheries officers of the region certainly did not consider it as such.

I was surprised that I was repeatedly told that the SPC had never had a single extra-budgetary project. But the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack had been funded by the Rockefeller Foundation? Was the commission so strongly against fisheries projects that it did not wish to admit that its one success with extra-budgetary funding had been a fisheries project? Or did the commission simply not keep good records of what projects it had? I suspected that both were probably true, but decided that this was an issue I would simply let lie.

While I was less than impressed with the commission's attitude towards the Skipjack Programme, I never wavered in my pursuit of having the programme based at the SPC. The commission's broad membership was essential for the type of research on highly mobile tuna species I was proposing. The programme had to have a home. The SPC was the logical one.

The purpose of the programme was to tag sufficient skipjack to enable an accurate estimation of total skipjack population size and the dynamics of the population that would provide managers with the tools to sustainably manage the fisheries that would exploit these resources in the waters of each country and territory. That such management was going to be essential was being constantly reaffirmed by the rapid development of policies for extending the oceanic jurisdiction of all island states under a new Law of the Sea. Most of the area of the SPC was ocean (Figure 4), and this was about to be carved up (Figure 5). Scientific assessment of what this would mean and how the resources of the whole region could best be managed was both critical and urgent. For many of our island states, particularly some of the smaller ones, tuna fisheries represented their one chance for some economic independence and positive foreign exchange.

Dick Baird and I firmly believed that if the commission seized the moment and provided the research on what was quickly becoming one of the world's biggest tuna fisheries, the commission's vital importance to Pacific Island countries and territories would be ensured for at least several decades. We anticipated that the precedent it would create would make it easier to attract funding for other extra-budgetary projects, or even research experiments, based on similar principles to those proposed for the Skipjack Programme. The members of the current SPC Executive clearly did not share our vision for the commission's future.

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