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The support of the Rockefeller Foundation

Dick Baird and I were both scientists, and we worked well together. He was particularly helpful to me in reviewing drafts of the papers I was using to foster the relationship between research and sound management of oceanic resources, including the sharing of highly migratory ones, and the impacts of the changing Law of the Sea. These documents were critical to my fundraising program. I became dependent on his friendship and increasingly appreciative of his advice. However, only a month or so after taking up my position in Noumea, it became obvious that the money Dick said he had obtained from the commission to pay my salary and travel for six months was in fact nowhere near enough for even six months. Plus, I also quickly confirmed what I had feared; six months was not going to be enough time to raise the money we needed. Eighteen months would be a better estimate. I had encountered my first serious crisis.

It was then that Dick suggested I approach the Rockefeller Foundation in New York to support me in continuing my efforts to have the programme funded. The Rockefeller Foundation was in the process of establishing the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) in Honolulu, and they had approached Dick about being involved. Dick told me that in his response, he advised the foundation that he would only take on the job as director if they also appointed me to run the Skipjack Programme as an ICLARM project. My investigation, almost 50 years later, of the files held in the Rockefeller Foundation Archive Center in New York State did not confirm Dick's interpretation of events. To this day, there is still uncertainty in my understanding of the timing of the involvement

of the Rockefeller Foundation in the funding of the Skipjack Programme. I now believe that this was exacerbated at the time because Dick did not tell me, or the Rockefeller Foundation, that he and ICLARM had used some of the money the foundation had given him, through ICLARM, to create the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack, to fund the first few months of my employment in Noumea.

It was not until November 2024 that Paul Judd sent me copies of archived correspondence between the SPC, the Rockefeller Foundation and ICLARM that I first became aware of any communication between the SPC and the Rockefeller Foundation. I was particularly intrigued by the copy of a letter sent from the secretary general, G. F. D. Betham, on April 8, 1975, to Dr John Pinot, of the Rockefeller Foundation, approximately six months before I took up my position as 'skipjack stock assessment programme coordinator' in Noumea. Three paragraphs in that letter are particularly interesting, and I now find them informative.

The first states:

> Proposal for Skipjack Survey and Tagging Programme in the Central and Western Pacific Ocean' has been prepared by Dr R. E. Kearney at the request of FAO in collaboration with the South Pacific Commission.

I have no idea how the secretariat of the SPC developed the idea that I wrote the first version of the programme proposal at the request of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). If they truly believed this, it is not so surprising that Dr Gulland of FAO should lay some claim to the programme after it was funded (as discussed in Chapter 11).

The second states:

> The function of the Project Co-ordinator would be to act as a catalyst in obtaining the necessary funding from supporting countries and organisations and, having done so, begin to set the project up as an operational unit. The cost of the Project Co-ordinator for one year would be approximately US$45,000.

This paragraph makes it clear that it was always envisaged that the programme coordinator would run the programme, at least initially (set it up as an operational unit) should the funding be obtained. It also leaves no doubt that the SPC requested seed funding for my salary for a full year, in the first instance.

The third states:

> I would mention that we have approached Dr. R. E. Kearney, Chief Biologist of the Papua New Guinea Fisheries Service and a leading world authority on skipjack tuna, with an offer of the post should funds become available.

This paragraph, in combination with the preceding second one, leaves little doubt that, should funding become available, the SPC Executive accepted that I would run the programme (see Chapter 11).

Attached to the secretary general's letter was correspondence from ICLARM stating that, '$25,000 [US] tentatively allotted for the program to acquire program coordinator'. This smaller amount was the only one Dick Baird mentioned to me, and there was never any mention that the money did not come from the commission. In all my time at the SPC, I never knew of the existence of this letter by the secretary general. This truly surprises me, for it is obvious, to me at least, from the wording of the letter that Dick Baird at least drafted it. To this day, I am not aware of any response to it. Paul Judd had not been able to find one in the SPC archives.

So, when I wrote to the Rockefeller Foundation in 1975 seeking seed money, I thought I was asking them to support a totally new concept. I was to form the strong impression that so did they. They replied to my letter incredibly quickly with a suggested date of November 14, 1975, for a meeting in New York with Dr John Pinot, the director of agricultural sciences for the foundation. The letter contained an air ticket for me to get to New York and back.

I took advantage of my trip to New York to meet with Bill Ripley of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on November 10 and 11, 1975. This meeting produced lots of platitudes from UNDP, but no commitment of support. In contrast, my meeting with Dr Pinot, together with the foundation's program committee on November 14, was one of the highlights of my professional life.

I was well aware of the importance of the meeting to converting my dream of getting the Skipjack Programme up and running into reality. The few months I had already spent chasing funding were enough to convince me of the difficulty of the task. But the research I had done during this time on the likely impact of the emerging Law of the Sea on Pacific Island countries and territories had made me more convinced than ever of the magnitude

of the benefits that would come from the programme, if it ever materialised. The meeting with UNDP just a couple of days earlier was a stark reminder of how difficult it could be to get even funding agencies, whose job it was to help developing countries, to provide seed funding.

I had done a lot of homework in preparation for this meeting with the Rockefeller Foundation, concentrating on five issues:

1. The importance of having the best possible science to underpin resource assessments – science that small Pacific Island countries currently had virtually no capability to provide.
2. The magnitude of the resource in question and its tremendous importance to the people of Pacific Island states, particularly some of the smaller ones.
3. The impending changes in the Law of the Sea and what they would mean to the future of the peoples of the Pacific.
4. How the programme would provide the perfect platform for the creation of the regional fisheries agency discussed in the papers I was to prepare for the South Pacific Forum (see Chapter 8).
5. A totally administrative matter; the need for a sizable travel budget to support fundraising.

I was particularly sensitive to this last point as, in Australia, travel by public servants in 1975 was regarded as a 'lurk' and not a responsibility. It was extremely difficult for scientists to get approval for overseas travel. It required the personal signature of the relevant minister of government. I was asking for $3,500 for travel, a huge amount by comparison with the travel budget of even a very senior Australian scientist. I spent a lot of time preparing my defence of this amount. I knew I would need to travel quite a bit.

I could not bear to think of what I would do if the Rockefeller Foundation said no. I anticipated problems in convincing people that I needed so much for travel. I could fly around the world three times for $3,500. But I knew if I was going to raise $4 million, I would have to travel – probably a lot.

It was with some trepidation that I walked through the doors of the Rockefeller Building, one of the tallest in the mighty city of New York, at 9.57 am on the assigned day. It was easy to be overawed.

The reception desk was obvious. As I approached the desk, an impeccably dressed woman walked up to me and said, 'Good morning, Sir. How may I be of assistance?' I replied, 'I have a 10 am meeting with Dr John Pinot'. Without a moment's hesitation or reference to notes (and there were no computer screens in those days), and before I had a chance to introduce myself, she stated, 'Welcome to the Rockefeller Foundation, Dr Kearney. May I take you to Dr Pinot's office?'

We then went at least five times higher in an elevator than I had ever been before; Dr Pinot's office was on the top floor. As the door to the elevator opened, Dr Pinot's secretary, a charming middle-aged lady, greeted us and guided me to a comfortable chair.

After giving me a cup of coffee and explaining that Dr Pinot would be with me in about five minutes, my newest friend then took me to the huge picture window to proudly show off the fantastic view of New York City. She took pride in pointing out the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, which dominated the skyline in that direction.

Dr Pinot emerged from the committee room and, after introducing himself, explained how the process would unfold. He would introduce me to the committee, who have copies of the programme proposal and the covering letter I had sent him. I would then be asked to give a brief, 5–10-minute introduction to the key aspects of my request, to be followed by questions from the committee for perhaps half an hour. I would then be asked to leave the room while they considered their response. This could also take up to half an hour, after which I would be called back into the room and given the result of their deliberations. I would know that day if they were going to support me and, if so, how much money or other support they would be committing. I would be allowed to make a brief response to their decision(s). Clearly, I would have to be at my best.

There were eight members of the committee, and from their brief introductions by Dr Pinot, I gathered that at least several of them had significant scientific credentials. The others had more corporate or legal backgrounds. There was no doubt the committee collectively represented great experience with assessing applications for grants, as would be expected of the world's leading granting authority.

I made a point of keeping my introduction to the five-minute guideline. I stressed the importance of quality science to the programme, particularly with the big changes that were coming with the Law of the Sea and the almost

complete lack of appropriate fisheries science capability among the 23 countries and territories in question. The committee's questions were excellent. Many wondered what gave me confidence that I could raise the $4 million, which, they kept reminding me, was a huge amount of money for a research project that I acknowledged had considerable risk. As I left the room, I felt that I had done as well as I could. I did not feel caught out at any stage.

After I was called back in, Dr Pinot began. Almost verbatim, it was so important I remember it chapter and verse 50 years later: 'Dr Kearney, I think you will be pleased with what I am about to tell you'. This alone made me pleased and excited. He continued:

> Your presentation on the need for the Skipjack Programme was excellent. Before your talk, this Committee was divided on whether to support your proposal. But you have convinced us. This is a hugely exciting research proposal, and the project is exactly what the small South Pacific countries need. You have acknowledged that the project is research and possibly even relatively high risk; tagging has never been successfully used to determine the size of a tuna population anywhere in the world, let alone in the middle of the world's biggest ocean. You have acknowledged the high risk, but risk does not worry us. We are in the business of providing seed money to pursue concepts. Risk in research is a factor that must be identified and managed, not feared.

Then he said, 'But wonderful though your research project is, it is not what you have asked the Rockefeller Foundation to support'. My heart sank. 'What you have asked us to support is you, and your ability to persuade six or seven of the world's biggest democracies to give you $4 million'. I immediately realised that he was right; I had erred in the direction I had taken. But he continued:

> Fortunately for all of us, in convincing this Committee of the quality of the project and the need for it, you have given us the perfect opportunity to assess not just your abilities as a developer of a major science program but also as a salesman for the project you have designed.
>
> We have assessed your abilities as a fundraiser to be more than considerable. We are convinced that if you deliver the same message you have given us, in the same way, to appropriate donor governments and/or institutions, they will be similarly impressed. But we stress that this will require you doing it in person and not

> by phone or written correspondence. Accordingly, we have agreed to fund all of what you have requested for your salary and associated expenses. As far as travel is concerned, our response is not similarly straightforward.

I thought I had done adequate preparation for what was to follow, but I was wrong:

> You have asked us for $3,500 for travel. We are going to give you $15,000. With that extra funding comes our expectation that you take our advice and do at least the bulk of your fundraising in person. Your attempts to raise the money must not be constrained by a lack of finance to enable you to speak to the right people in person.

As for the travel advice, I was to spend eight of the next 12 months away from home, and no trip was longer than 10 days.

Dr Pinot's final comment was to state that they had not yet decided how they would make the money payable to me, but it would likely be through ICLARM. In any case, the Rockefeller Foundation wanted me to work closely with ICLARM in Hawaii. Little did either of us imagine that in 20 years, I would be the chairman of the ICLARM Board.

I could do little more than give a profound thank you to Dr Pinot and his committee. I was overwhelmed with gratitude. Not only had they given me a great deal more money than I had requested so that I was now not only in a position to get to donors in person anywhere in the world, as often as necessary, but I would also be able to tell them that my project proposal had been reviewed by no lesser authority than the Rockefeller Foundation and their response had been to give me much more money than I had asked for. My chances of raising the $4 million had just gone up enormously. I was on a high that would persist for at least a week and would greatly impact the next 10 years of my life. The experience remains one of the greatest of my professional career.

I was to celebrate that night by going to see *West Side Story* on Broadway. Hang the expense; I had to celebrate appropriately. My only regret was that my wife, Hope, was not with me.

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