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The donors suggest a novel way to fund the programme

With the gathering of delegates for the 1976 South Pacific Conference, the potential donor governments took the opportunity to have a meeting to see if they could agree on governance procedures for the programme, in the event that agreement could be reached to fund it. I was invited to attend. High on the priority list was how best to deliver the financial support for the programme. They were adamant that they would not put any more money into the SPC. They were openly not happy with the way the SPC was handling its finances, and they took the SPC Executive's insistence that funding for the programme had to be totally independent of the SPC's core budget as confirmation that the SPC Executive did not want the programme to be a core part of the commission's work programme anyway.

I had no problem with this in principle, but I was not quite ready for how they proposed to keep the funding and decision-making for the programme independent of the SPC Executive. The donors had collectively concluded that the best solution was to give the money and the responsibility for its management to me personally.

I was not immediately at all happy with this arrangement. The science side of the programme was what I felt confident with, and I was not an accountant. I reminded them of this. They responded that they would ask the SPC to act as the non-executive accountant. The only authority that accountant would have would be to advise the donors if I was proposing to do something totally untoward with their money. I found this division of responsibility somewhat shallow. After all, the account was to be under my name and signature, so if I decided to move the money to some offshore

haven, the SPC accountant would not find out about it until after the event. Of much more interest to me was that the donors assured me that my responsibility would be to oversee the accounting and make all significant decisions on expenditure, not actually do it all myself.

After some discussion and admission that I did not have a better solution, I agreed to this arrangement. They then asked me to open a bank account in the name of the Skipjack Programme, with me as the sole signatory. They suggested that the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank might be an appropriate medium.

They also reached an in-principle agreement that in the event of the Programme commencing, the donors would create the Skipjack Programme Administrative and Finance Committee. The membership of this committee would be solely the donors to the programme. Of course, I would be expected to attend and participate in all discussions. An accountant from the SPC would be invited to attend but would be expected not to speak unless specifically invited to do so by either a member of the committee or me as the programme coordinator.

Confirmation of this unique series of events is given by Paul Judd in his article on the history of the Skipjack Programme. He revisited the available historical documentation at the SPC and summarised the donors' arrangements for the management of the programme (Judd 2016):

> Dr Kearney personally conducted all of the negotiations with the potential donor governments, with no official help from the SPC hierarchy. This unusual situation coupled with the extremely strong support from the island nations for the project, and subsequently its obvious success, contributed significantly to the high degree of donor solidarity displayed once the project was up and running, towards both the project and Dr Kearney himself as Programme Co-ordinator.
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> As the search for funding gained momentum the likely donors agreed that in order to meet the requirement of independence from the SPC core budget that it was not just the budget that needed to be independent from the SPC; the expenditure and accounting processes for the project would best be established as an entity that was totally separate to the rest of SPC's accounts. They committed to the principle that the project would be set up with Dr Kearney as the sole signatory and single authority to commit expenditure. As history shows, the donors maintained their commitment to this principle

> for the whole of first the Skipjack Programme and subsequently the Tuna and Billfish Programme. Both remained totally separate from SPC's accounts until the end of 1986.

I left the Programme in September 1984, up to which time I had enjoyed full authority for both programmes.

> The independence of this management arrangement also made it easier for Japan to contribute as an equal. In addition there was considerable support among both the potential donors and the island nations for maintaining independence for the project in the event that it would be beneficial to move it to a 'Regional Fisheries Organisation'; the creation of which was beginning to be formally discussed at the time under the umbrella of the Law of The Sea negotiations.
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> (Judd 2016)

A few weeks after this seminal meeting, I was in Tokyo for some preliminary discussions with the Japan Fisheries Agency on the possibilities for a vessel that I could charter, when I had enough money. I was keen to get a reliable estimate of what a suitable vessel might cost. I took the opportunity of being in Tokyo to pay a visit to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, as suggested by the donor governments, should the money be made available.

I simply walked into their bank headquarters off the street and asked the nearest teller, in English, if I could speak to one of their financial planners about opening an account with about a million dollars a year in perhaps as many as four different currencies. He quizzed me for several minutes and then said he would go and ask one of their senior people to come and talk to me. I waited, only about five minutes, and he came back with a very distinguished-looking gentleman, who introduced himself as the managing director of the bank. The more junior staff member had certainly delivered on his promise to get 'somebody senior'. The director asked me just a few simple questions and then invited me to accompany him to his office.

We began a rather formal discussion about what I wanted to do. He kept asking me for details about the Skipjack Programme. I soon realised that he was extremely interested in it – apparently more so than my banking requirements. He found the magnitude of the Programme almost incredible: 30 million square kilometres of ocean, 23 countries and territories involved, six donors from around the world with a variety of currencies, including some of the world's strongest, seed funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, changing rules under the new Law of the Sea, and really it was all about

science for small developing countries. Our discussion became increasingly less formal. I felt that he would have talked about the programme for much longer, but at my request, we finally began to discuss the banking issues.

I explained that I did not yet have the money, but I was very confident that signed commitments would be made within the next couple of months. I wanted to get an account opened so that deposits could be made. He then stated that the amount of money I was likely to have was important, but it was not a huge amount for a bank such as his. However, it was a highly unusual and fascinating opportunity for a banker. And the project behind it was captivating. He asked me if he could think about it overnight. I said, of course and asked if I should come back at this time tomorrow. His reply really did surprise me: 'Would you be available to come to my home tomorrow for lunch, and we can discuss it then?' He gave me a card with his home address, which he assured me was easy for taxi drivers to find.

His house was beautiful. It even had trees in the yard, which is not common for houses in Tokyo. The lunch was simple but wonderful. He confirmed my perception that he was captivated by the concept of the Skipjack Programme and the complexity of the effort to get it up and running. He would love to be the banker for it and see it progress. However, to his regret, he felt obliged to tell me that, for a suite of rather complex reasons that he did not wish to detail, his bank was not the best option for me. He then proceeded to give me some advice that history has proven to be most valuable.

He stressed that the volatility in exchange rates occurring at that time was a serious threat to a pool of money that was in several different currencies. He told me that I should ask all donors to make their contributions in the currency in which the money would be spent: 'If you must spend the money in a currency other than the one in which it was contributed, do the conversion as soon as possible after receipt of the money'. He strongly advised not to get caught up in the search for profits from changes in exchange rates. As he said, if you make money on exchange rates, the donors will say you were lucky, but if you lose money, that was likely your fault; you should not gamble away their money. You should have had your money in the currency you were going to spend it in. You could still make or lose money on changes in exchange rates, but this way you will be more likely to be able to meet commitments and defend the actions you had taken. You could not be expected to do more. He then told me that overnight, he had done some research on my options and concluded that the central branch of the Commonwealth Bank in Sydney was likely the best bet for me.

I found the whole of the discussions over two days not only enjoyable but hugely beneficial. I was not a banker, but banking was quickly becoming part of my duty statement. The donors had effectively made me a banker, whether I wanted to be one or not. I was now a salesman and a banker: perhaps one day soon, I would get to do some fisheries science?

On my way back to Noumea, I stopped in Sydney to go and see the Commonwealth Bank. My reception from the teller when I asked to speak to a senior currency exchange expert to discuss my possible deposit of a million dollars in three or four currencies was in stark contrast to the positive response I had had with the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank in Tokyo. He immediately said that they did not have any experts free and would not for at least two hours. I walked out, found a public phone and rang my brother, John, who somewhat fortuitously worked in that branch of the Commonwealth Bank at that time. I told him of what I thought had been rather shabby treatment. He asked me to ring him back in about an hour. This I did, to be advised that I should come straight up to the floor the executive branch was on and that somebody would look after me.

Upon my arrival, and to my amazement, there was the managing director with two of his senior staff, one of whom was the head of the currency exchange division. After an apology for my treatment downstairs, and over a cup of tea from the silver service, we discussed my situation. I was told that $1 million a year in multiple currencies over three years at least was definitely of interest to the currency division. I made arrangements to open an account in the name of the Skipjack Programme with me as the account holder, but with one or perhaps two other signatories to be added by me. I said that the account would be active in about two months, when contributions would start to be deposited. My optimism was concealed; there is nothing like confidence when you are talking to bankers. The boss of the currency exchange section then gave me his card with a direct phone number and told me to call him as soon as the first deposit was to be made.

Despite the strong expressions of support for the programme, should it eventuate, and confidence in me to run all aspects of it, by the time Hope and I returned to Noumea at the end of November with our baby daughter, my skills at raising money for my own salary were being severely tested. Trying to raise $1 million a year for a programme that would be of great benefit to more than 20 small Pacific Island countries and territories was one thing; trying to convince donors to give me enough money to support myself and my family, while I waited for the donors to sign a commitment,

was another. The latter was not fun. There was no moral high ground to retire to when you are asking for money for yourself. Phil Helfrich and the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) were fantastically helpful, but ICLARM itself was a new nongovernmental organisation that was trying to raise support for its own existence. Phil was not finding it that easy.

Back in New Caledonia towards the end of 1976, I had several periods of a week or more when I simply did not have money to pay myself. The SPC insisted on me having contracts, and some were as short as a week. I was fairly confident nobody in the SPC actually knew when I was on contract and when I wasn't. There were periods when I simply did not have a contract. The Australian and New Zealand consuls general in Noumea each had very small discretionary funds for emergencies, and each of them came to my aid on at least one occasion. The regional UNDP office also made a small, but extremely welcome, contribution in one of my emergencies. ICLARM continued to provide what could best be called occasional support. I was reasonably confident that some of my 'excess' travel money from the Rockefeller Foundation grant got 'transformed' into salary support, but it was not my business to worry about how ICLARM managed its accounts. I did not need to know. And by this stage in the fundraising, I was not doing a lot of travelling.

But definitive commitments from donors continued to be elusive. Each representative I talked to made most of the right noises, but I still did not have a single signature. And I was tired of begging for money to keep me going.

By the beginning of February 1977, I had reached the point where I thought it was not fair to my family for me to go on doing not much more than waiting: I had a wife and a three-month-old baby and a job that was not paying me. I did not have another job to go back to, and my optimism about getting the Skipjack Programme up and running was being seriously strained. Verbal assurances from different government representatives, such as 'Yes, we think the programme is a great idea, and we are very likely to fund it – please just be patient', were wearing a bit thin. They all said that if I could get the other donors to contribute, they would do likewise. But I was caught in what could perhaps best be described as a 'donor stand-off'.

I had always thought that the New Zealanders were the most enthusiastic in their support and therefore the most likely to 'take the plunge' and sign a commitment. So, in the middle of February, I decided to have one last try. After arranging a couple of meetings with the appropriate officials, I went to Wellington; this really did stretch the budget. I recall that I paid for one airfare out of my personal bank account, and I think this was the one. The airfare from Noumea to Wellington was about the cheapest of any travel I did.

I needed to start my discussions with somebody whom I was confident would lift my spirits, so my first meeting was with Duncan Waugh, the director of fisheries research. Just talking to somebody as supportive as Duncan did wonders for my outlook on life. And it was about to improve even more. When I told him of my concern over my complete lack of job security, his response was wonderfully reassuring. He said:

> [T]hat is one thing I can do something about, and immediately. I promise you that if you fail to get the funding for the Skipjack Programme, I will give you a job. I cannot promise it will be at the level you and I would both like it to be, but it will be a job as a scientist on my staff. I have a position vacant at the moment, and I will keep it open for you for the next six months. By then you should know if you will need it or not. But in the interim, I really want you to keep trying to get the Skipjack Programme funded. We, and the whole region, need you to succeed.

With a rejuvenated sense of optimism and something positive to tell my wife about my future, I had discussions with the relevant New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) and foreign affairs people. The outcomes were not quite as definitive as those from Duncan, but they were still very positive. They were more important for the future of the Skipjack Programme than had been the issue of my job security. The NZAID people said that a tentative agreement to fund the programme had been reached between NZAID and the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the paperwork was now being finalised. It would then need the approval of the relevant minister, but they would be most surprised if that was a problem. However, the process would take a little time: about two months, most likely. If it were to be finalised within two months, I would be delighted. The New Zealanders had been extremely supportive so far, so I had every reason to be confident. I had waited 16 months up to this time, so what was the problem with two more?

The next two months were not very memorable. I kept 'chipping away' at each of my potential donors. My wife, Hope, continued to be unshakably supportive: 'It is now three years since you conceived the idea of this broad-scale tagging project and committed yourself to it. You have come so far; you cannot give in now'. She kept up her fantastic feats of entertaining the representatives of the five SPC member governments who came to Noumea for meetings, particularly the aid agency representatives. The lunches and dinners she put on for them at our house were special. She really did commit to 'mastering the art of French cooking' (Child, Bertholle and Beck 1966). Her Blanquette de Veau in particular was spectacular. She became famous for her desserts; not a huge range, but they were extremely good. As we had a rotating audience, the restricted range was not a problem.

An unusual but important event did occur in this otherwise rather slow time. One morning, about a week after my trip to New Zealand, I had a knock on my door. As usual, it was open, and I looked up to see two young men I had never seen before smiling at me. 'Yes gentlemen, what can I do for you?' One of them stepped forward and said, 'My name is Bob Gillett. I am here to ask you for a job. And this is my friend Wardy, who's travelling with me from California'. When I explained that I did not have any jobs, Bob replied instantly, 'But I understand from Dr James Joseph that you soon will have'. I replied with a request for him to thank Dr Joseph for his confidence, but I was simply not in a position to offer anybody a job. I did not, as yet, even have a secretary or an assistant of any sort. In fact, I did not even have a secure job myself.

I invited them to sit down, at which point Wardy took his leave to let Bob and me have a personal discussion. Gillett then proceeded to tell me what he knew of the Skipjack Programme that made it the most exciting job possibility he had ever heard of. When I asked him what had brought him to New Caledonia, he replied, 'I came to see you'. 'What if I was not here?' I said. Bob replied, 'Dr Joseph thought you would be, and I was prepared to take that chance'. I continued, 'What about your friend, Wardy?' Bob said, 'When I told him I was going to New Caledonia, he just said he had never been there, and that it sounds interesting – do you mind if I come?' (I found out later that 'Wardy' was a part of the Ward component of Montgomery Ward, the famous American department store chain, so cost would not have been a limiting issue for him.)

Bob then proceeded to tell me that he would take any job in the programme, doing anything just to get to be a part of the action. His goal was ultimately to tag skipjack and travel around the central and western Pacific, but in the interim, he would take on any task I prescribed – office work or out on the ocean; anything just to be part of this adventure. His enthusiasm was infectious. It lifted my spirits. Two weeks later, I received a letter from him, just making sure I had his contact details. His letterhead was a hand-painted skipjack. This guy's enthusiasm was infectious. I loved it.

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