

The Status of Conservation in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands

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Conservation was practiced in Micronesia thousands of years before the advent of European and Oriental contact. The native people by necessity lived close to nature and knew the plants and animals of their environment exceedingly well. Their knowledge of life histories, mating seasons, habitat requirements, and other basic knowledge of the plants and animals enabled them to regulate their harvest and use of wild plants and animals on a sustained yield basis. Chiefly decrees, clan and island taboos and other means of control were apparently effective. The taking of turtles, turtle eggs, incubator bird eggs, sea bird eggs, and dugongs were so regulated. The necessity to have island sanctuaries for certain birds and turtles were also recognized and such sanctuaries did exist. Some of the old conservation practices of long ago still persist in parts of the Trust Territory, but the impact of cultural changes is gradually breaking down the old chief and clan systems and the conservation practices which were a part of the old system.

During the Spanish (1600-1898) and German (1898-1914) administrations in Micronesia very little was done to change the traditional picture and for the most part conservation problems did not exist or were at least not recognized as such. An exception to this statement is the situation that existed in the Mariana Islands where the Spanish administered those islands for over three hundred years and exploited the land, particularly on the island of Guam, to its great detriment. Another exception that should be mentioned is the clearing of land and planting of coconut palms on most of the atolls which began during the Spanish administration but was greatly accelerated during the German administration.

During the Japanese administration (1914-1945) great changes were brought about in Micronesia including systematic harvesting and exploitation of the resources of both the land and the sea. Japan's need for raw materials in the homeland and room for expanding population were responsible for this greatly increased use of the natural resources of Micronesia. Their exploitation of the sea was apparently not detrimental for the period of time that Japan held the islands, though the increasing pace of exploitation would no doubt have created serious marine conservation problems if the pace had been continued. The Japanese government recognized these possibilities and sponsored considerable marine biology and fisheries science work in the Trust Territory. On the basis of this work some marine con-

ervation laws were put into effect and were very likely well enforced. Large areas of land were converted from forests and other native vegetation to agricultural enterprises with little thought apparently given to soil or terrestrial conservation. Some Japanese botanists and other biological scientists did valuable scientific work during the Japanese administration but were apparently unsuccessful in promoting terrestrial conservation.

World War II was, of course, very destructive to many parts of Micronesia both because of the construction of military facilities and because of the direct destruction by the war itself. Whole islands were reduced to rubble, and biological resources of many of them have not recovered to this day.

Early in the United States administration of Micronesia, which began in 1945, the administering authority, which was then the U.S. Navy, recognized the need for both a conservation program and scientific biological studies of the islands. In 1948 the Pacific Science Board of the U.S. National Research Council held meetings in Honolulu and Washington D.C. for the purpose of formulating a conservation policy for the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. These meetings were attended by American biological scientists who were particularly knowledgeable of biological conditions on Pacific Islands. As a result of those meetings certain conservation laws were written into the Code of the Trust Territory by the Navy administrators and a conservation officer was hired to work in the government of the Trust Territory. This officer worked for only about one year and then left the islands for personal reasons. In 1951 the administration of the Trust Territory was transferred to the U.S. Dept. of the Interior. At that time the overall responsibility for conservation was vested in the Director of Agriculture though no conservation officer or officers were hired by the Trust Territory. For the next fifteen years very little direct action on conservation was taken by the government though the conservation laws in the Code of the Trust Territory were variously observed or enforced in the different parts of the Trust Territory and some individual districts initiated and passed conservation legislation or decrees with reference to special problems in their areas. It was during this time that the Seventy Islands marine and terrestrial sanctuary was set up in the Palau Islands.

In 1965 the position of Forestry-Conservation Officer was set up within the Department of Agriculture, and a man was recruited to fill this position which involved both forestry and conservation. This officer accomplished a great deal in setting up basic guidelines in both forestry and conservation and made a beginning at new legislation concerning conservation. In 1967 he left the Trust Territory for other employment and the position of Forestry-Conservation Officer was later abolished. A new position of Forestry Officer has been established but not filled. Conservation has been assigned to the Staff Entomologist as a co-equal duty with his entomological responsibilities. Interested persons within and without the Trust Territory are pushing for the establishment of a full fledged Conservation Officer position for the Trust Territory and it is hoped that this will be realized soon. In the meantime, the long residence in Micronesia (19 years) of the Staff Entomologist

and acting Conservation officer for the Trust Territory and his wide knowledge of both the marine and terrestrial biology of Micronesia assures that conservation will be as adequately handled as possible under the circumstances.

Long standing and current conservation problems in the Trust Territory are numerous. The use of explosives and poisons for the taking of fish is widespread in Micronesia with resulting damage to the whole marine environment involved. Turtle conservation laws are for the most part ignored and not enforced throughout most of the Trust Territory. Attempts at enforcing land burning laws are being made but the lack of a specific conservation enforcement service makes this a very difficult task. A particular effort in this regard, begun by the former Forestry-Conservation Officer, and being carried on now by the Staff Entomologist and Palau District Forestry Officer appears to be improving the land burning situation in the Palau Islands. The Palau Legislature two years ago passed a law giving complete protection to the dugong which is found in Micronesia only in Palau and which is close to extinction there. For the most part this law is probably being observed and the dugong may be saved. The Palau Legislature has also recently passed legislation giving complete protection to most of the indigenous and migratory birds of the Palau Islands.

The Fisheries Management Biologist of the Trust Territory has been making a particular effort during the past two years to promote and enforce marine conservation in the Palau Islands. He has secured law enforcement training for several of his employees and at least one capable man serves full time as a marine conservation officer. The Fisheries Management Biologist is also initiating a similar program in Truk District where the use of explosives and poisons for taking fish is a particularly serious problem greatly aggravated by human overpopulation.

Legislation was drafted by the former Forestry-Conservation Officer, for consideration by the Congress of Micronesia, which would give the High Commissioner the authority to set aside national parks, watershed areas, wildlife sanctuaries, and other conservation areas. This legislation has not yet been passed and approved by the High Commissioner. It has been rewritten and otherwise adjusted in an effort to secure its passage. Once passed, this will be a major tool in promoting conservation in the Trust Territory. If this legislation cannot be gotten through the Congress of Micronesia then efforts will be made to get similar legislation through each of the six district legislature. A natural divisiveness between the districts and the great attachment the Micronesians have for their land incline them to refuse any outside authority allocating their land for purposes they may not understand or may not wish.

This situation is not as immediately serious as it may seem from a conservation point of view. Practically all the land which would be considered for setting aside for conservation purposes is already legally owned by the government of the Trust Territory and theoretically can be allocated for any purpose the government deems fit. However, from the standpoint of popular support for the conservation

principle, it would be much better to have conservation legislation passed with the full approval of the inhabitants of the districts involved.

Marine and underwater conservation areas will be the subject of other legislation.

No appreciable start has yet been made to incorporate conservation as an integral part of the curriculum of the elementary and secondary schools of the Trust Territory. This is something which must be done, and a determined effort to accomplish this is going to be made.

Isolation has protected the islands of the Trust Territory from most of the destruction and exploitation that has come to other parts of the world. This isolation is rapidly disappearing and the government of the Trust Territory must actively engage in a conservation program in order to adequately live up to the United Nations trusteeship agreement under which the United States administers the islands of Micronesia.