

July 1-3, 2009

Republic of Palau

The Pacific Island Archaeology in the 21st Century: Relevance and Engagement Conference held in the Republic of Palau from July 1-3 aimed to a) examine the value and contribution of the preservation, study, and management of the Pacific's natural and cultural heritage to resolving the contemporary socioeconomic, health, and environmental challenges confronting island nations, and b) to provide the tools for avenues of sustainable development that promote and conserve the Pacific's natural and cultural resources. To this end, the conference focused on the role, status, successes, and problems of community engagement in heritage preservation and management.

In a period of rapid economic development, globalization, and climate change, it is necessary to use a holistic approach to adequately address the threats and impacts brought to Pacific Island heritage. This approach not only reinforces the necessary union of natural and cultural resource conservation and management but ensures the voice of the local community stakeholders are joined with those of the academics, scientists, and heritage resource professionals. The conference was held to regain and reinforce this balance while emphasizing the need the continuation of this multi-perspective, encompassing approach throughout the coming century

The conference was organized around a series of concurrent symposia and panel discussions, public lectures, and a day devoted to heritage ecotours. The three panel discussion sessions, five symposiums, and the two sessions that combined both presentation methods examined multiple aspects of the intertwining of heritage, community, and contemporary society. Twenty-seven scholars, heritage professionals, and community members served as panellists on the discussion boards while 43 gave roughly 20-minute long presentations on topics relevant to the conference themes

Project Impact

Over 300 people attended the conference: 90 off-island delegates and the remainder from the local community. Represented were academic institutions, government agencies, heritage resource consultants, environmental groups, tourism associations, educators, chiefly councils, museums, NGO's, and construction and tour businesses. Delegates arrived from 18 nations including Sweden, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Rapanui, the U.S, Samoa, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Guam, the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, French Polynesia, and the Philippines.

Delegates responded that the conference benefited their own work through exposing them to new and innovative strategies for natural and cultural heritage management, informing them about how cultural heritage studies can contribute to the solution of environmental challenges, providing an opportunity for a "... sustained longer-term exchange of ideas", and allowing them to gauge where their offices and organizations stood in relation to other represented institutions. Also helpful was the sessions listing concrete examples of potential funding sources and suggestions for how to enter into the World Heritage nomination process. To one delegate the two main benefits resulting from the intellectual exchanges with other participants was:

(1) assist with upgrading of the contents of courses I teach in this area, i.e. natural and social heritage, archaeological updates and knowledge; and (2) enable me to update relevant government bodies of which I am a member, concerning latest findings and trends on heritage issues and archaeological research in general.

Another delegate commented that:

It was a refreshing change to the normal content of archaeological conferences which focus more on technical aspects of excavations rather than cultural heritage management and community engagement more generally.

Follow-up and Long-Term Plans

The Pacific Island delegates stated that they will be briefing their staff on the information learned at the conference as well as sharing the new contact names and organizations. They plan to disseminate the new information to their communities by conducting community awareness talks and workshops on specific conference sessions, incorporating it into their class lesson plans, and relaying it on as members of government advisory boards on heritage, environmental and archaeological issues. Dr. Mauricio, Director of the FSM National Historic Preservation Office (HPO), plans to ask the HPO representatives from Kosrae, Yap, and Pohnpei to conduct radio programs in their states to discuss conference themes, detail the recommendations made, and provide a future direction for archaeology and cultural resources management in the FSM.

In order that the experience, discussion, and ideas shared at the conference are not lost, they will be circulated to a wider audience in three formats: a series of videos, an internet publication, and a scholarly refereed volume. The sessions along with complimentary interviews and other media are being distilled down into four educational videos each dedicated to the specific conference topics of Pacific community engagement, heritage management, environment and culture, and heritage tourism. Many of the individual presentations will be placed on a website dedicated to the conference proceedings. Between 14 to 18 of the remaining presentations will be published by the Australian National University in its Terra Australis EPress series. The videos and all papers in the volume will be freely available for download on the web with hardcopies of the volume available for purchase.

Following the example presented by the Guampedia Foundation, several Pacific nations are exploring the possibility of creating internet sites dedicated to their heritage. In a peer-reviewed dictionary format, these sites will make the often difficult to access or locate data and research pertaining to their culture and traditions easily available to students, those islanders living outside of the Pacific, and other interested parties.

The overwhelmingly positive response to the conference was such that the Guam Preservation Trust plans to host the second Pacific Island Archaeology Conference in 2011. They wish to follow Palau's example of uniting community stakeholders, scholars, and cultural and natural resource managers for more productive discussions and understanding of the complex issues

involved in Pacific heritage protection, conservation, and management.

Conclusions

The overwhelming public participation in the conference not only through its attendance but its involvement in the sessions by asking questions and sharing ideas was the highlight of the event. This community engagement was commented on by all off-island delegates and will be emulated in future Pacific heritage conferences.

We believe that much was shared, absorbed, and learned during the conference about the evolving relationship between archaeology, heritage, and islanders in the Pacific. The conference highlighted the variety of challenges lying ahead as well as potential solutions and strategies to problems caused by factors such as rapid economic development and shortfalls in heritage infrastructure and capacity.













