

# Chapter 1

## The Ocean to Pacific Island People

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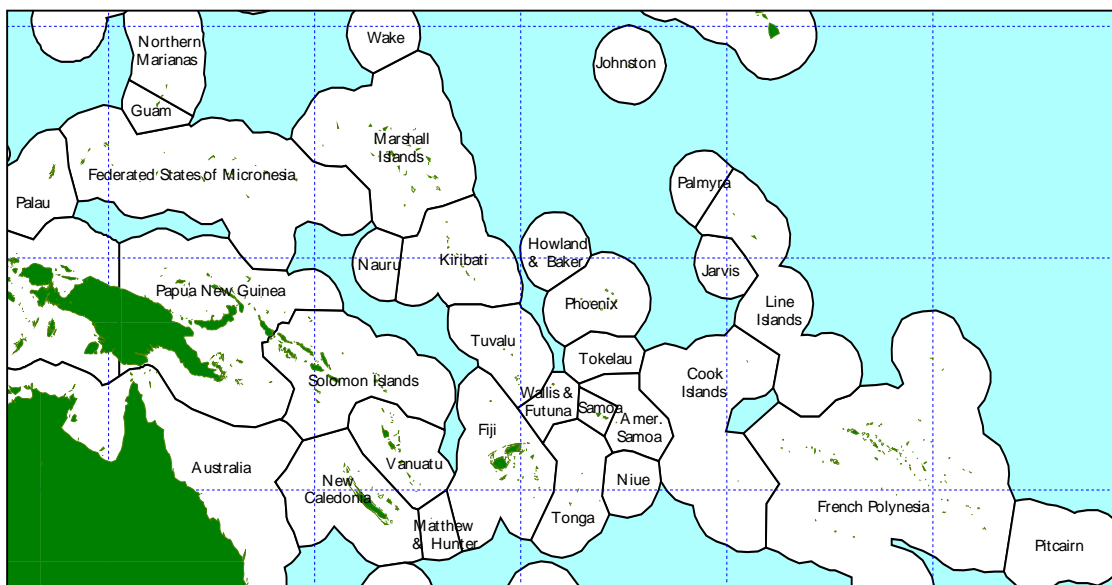
The Pacific Ocean occupies 180 million square kilometers—half of the earth’s sea surface and more than a third of the Earth’s surface. Scattered in the western half of this immense area are 200 high islands and 2,500 low islands or atolls, which make up the 22 countries and territories of the Pacific Islands (figure 1).

The region’s unique geographical characteristics have helped shape the cultural traits of its people. Arriving first to the region, Melanesian ancestors settled in the high islands of the Western Pacific. Faced with abundant resources and a complex topography, Melanesian communities developed largely isolated from one another, leading to a multiplicity of languages and cultural traits. In contrast, the resource-poor islands of Polynesia and Micronesia provided the impetus for sea travels and expansion into the outer edges of the Pacific Ocean.

In this “sea of islands”<sup>1</sup>—where the ocean exceeds land masses by an average factor of 300 to 1 (table1)—the people of the Pacific have developed a unique relation with the ocean that has shaped their sense of place, their economies, and their culture. For them, the ocean is both a shared resource and a source of isolation. It helps define the ways communities communicate and are governed, and it continues to be a source of cultural significance and inspiration.

The relation that Pacific Island people have with the ocean is dualistic. The vast offshore areas—the deep ocean—represent the frontier, a region of underexploited resources of high economic and strategic value. Yet for most Pacific Islanders, it is the coastal areas surrounding their islands that provide the food, income, culture, and recreation that are so important to the Pacific way of life.

**Figure 1. The Exclusive Economic Zones of Pacific Islands**



Source: Courtesy of Secretariat of the Pacific Community

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<sup>1</sup> Hau’ofa 1993.

## A. The Nature of the Challenges

### Threatened Coastal Areas

Coastal areas in the Pacific are increasingly threatened. Overfishing, pollution, mining, and poor coastal planning are leading to the depletion of fisheries and to coastal degradation, undermining the livelihood of coastal communities. The decline of mangroves and coral reefs is increasing the islands' exposure to cyclones and storm surges (see Volume IV to this report).

Pacific Island governments can no longer afford a policy of inaction. The degradation of coastal areas is imposing significant economic and social costs, leaving coastal communities in need of urgent assistance. Managing the use of coastal areas is a major challenge for Pacific Island countries at current times.

Neither governments nor communities can manage coastal areas on their own. The distances involved and the existence of customary marine tenure in many islands make it virtually impossible for government-only efforts to succeed. At the same time, communities need help in accessing the technical advice they may require to manage their coastal areas, and in addressing problems—such as pollution and dredging—that cannot be handled at the local level. The challenge will be to use well the comparative strengths of communities, governments, and other stakeholders (such as NGOs), and to develop a common goal for the management of coastal areas that uses each partner to its best advantage.

**Table 1. Pacific Islands Land and Ocean Areas**

<i>Country or territory<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>Land area (square kilometers)</i>	<i>EEZ<sup>b</sup> (square kilometers)</i>	<i>Ratio of Ocean to Land Area</i>
Samoa	2.934	120.000	41
Solomon Islands	29,785	1,340,000	45
Vanuatu	12.189	680.000	56
Fiji	18.376	1,290.000	70
New Caledonia	19.103	1,740.000	91
Guam	549	218.000	397
Tonga	696	700.000	1.006
Palau	500	629.000	1.258
French Polynesia	3.521	5,030.000	1.429
Niue	258	390.000	1.512
American Samoa	197	390.000	1.980
Wallis and Futuna	124	300.000	2.419
Marshall Islands	720	2,131.000	2.960
Northern Marianas	475	1,823.000	3.838
Fed. States of Micronesia	702	2,978.000	4.242
Kiribati	726	3,550.000	4.890
Cook Islands	180	1,830.000	10.167
Nauru	21	320.000	15.238
Tokelau	12	290.000	24.167
Tuvalu	26	900.000	34.615
Pitcairn	5	800.000	160.000
<b>Total</b>	<b>91,099</b>	<b>27,449,000</b>	<b>301</b>

a. Papua New Guinea is not shown as its large land mass is atypical of other Pacific Islands.

b. The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is the 200-mile limit sea area surrounding coastal states. Within this area, the Pacific Islands have exclusive rights to exploit their natural resources. Where states have not declared EEZs, or where the main fisheries area did not correspond exactly to the EEZ, data were modified or estimated as appropriate.

Sources: SPC (1999) and GPA (1996).

### Tuna Fisheries: Critical Decisions

The deep ocean presents challenges and opportunities of a different kind. Chief among them is the management of tuna fisheries in the Central and Western Pacific, the most important tuna fishing ground in the world.

Because tuna are highly migratory, their management requires close regional collaboration. Pacific Island countries and distant water fishing nations have just concluded negotiations on a new regional convention to manage the tuna resources of the Western and Central Pacific. In contrast with past arrangements, distant water fishing nations would be full members of the commission.

This is likely to influence the outcome of critical decisions—such as the allocation of total allowable catch—which could affect the benefits that Pacific Island derive from tuna fisheries for years to come. The need for the coastal states to carefully review the available options and strengthen their collaboration cannot be over-emphasized.

### **Seabed Mining: the Future?**

Another emerging challenge in the offshore areas of the Pacific is seabed mining. After a long period of hiatus, there has been a recent resurgence in investors' interest in seabed minerals. Several applications for exploratory licenses have been made and are presently being considered. Given the potential scale of these operations, it is urgent that Pacific Island countries adopt appropriate offshore mineral policies.

Under the Law of the Sea Convention, some Pacific Island countries may only have until 2004 to extend maritime claims beyond the 200-mile EEZ, by delineating their continental margin. It is urgent that that they complete the surveys that are needed for submitting these claims.

The three key challenges mentioned above — management of coastal areas, regional collaboration on tuna management, and regulation of seabed mining — are the most urgent issues currently faced by Pacific Island countries in ocean management. Many other challenges and opportunities could emerge in the future. The Pacific Ocean has long been an area of strategic importance for national, regional, and external interests, and they are expected to continue to be a major shaping force in the future.

