

A COMMUNITY-BASED EXPERIENCE IN AMERICAN SAMOA

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Introduction

In American Samoa, land (*fanua*) defines our culture, our people, and our heritage. The place where we live, the land that defines us, is a fragile place. Today, this very land is under constant threat of destruction due to an increasing population, impacts of westernization, and ever-changing times. Our fragile reefs are dying due to excess siltation and poor water quality, our fragile wetlands are being filled in and degraded, our rain forests—the sustaining habitat of our native plants and animals—are disappearing, and the continued existence of some of the most valuable birds and bats is threatened. Even worse, our sacred relationship with the land that has nurtured us for 120 generations—a relationship that defines us as a people—is being debased. This paper is a discussion of how to overcome these hurdles in our way by focusing on experiences of the American Samoa Coastal Management Program (ASCMP) in building partnerships with the community and using village base systems as a vehicle to advocate its mission and mandate.

In addressing these problem areas, ASCMP discovered that a new environmental consciousness needed to be formed, one that could take the strength of the *Fa'a samoa* to solve the resource management problems that would never have been dreamed of by our forefathers. To examine how ASCMP built its partnership with the villages, I have chosen the Community Based Wetlands Management Project as a case study of the participatory planning approach as a means to collaborate with the community in protecting coastal resources.

Background - Plan Development

One of the main concerns ASCMP had to deal with in developing the Wetlands Plan was the conflict between traditional authority and government authority. All wetlands areas within American Samoa exist within villages, and traditionally, these villages have authority over the use and management of the areas. ASCMP was concerned that the government's attempt to establish a management plan for these areas could be misinterpreted by the wetland village communities as an attempt to undermine the traditional authority by moving resource management decisions from the village council to regulatory government agencies.

Traditionally, wetland areas are owned by the villages. Land use decisions regarding the use of wetland areas are made by the *matai* and the village council. Public rights are considered culturally inappropriate in wetland cases. Each village has the perception and conviction that the wetland is theirs and not publicly owned.

Methods Used - Building Partnerships for Wetland Management

Village Meetings - outlining the problems

Following the development of the plan, it again became necessary to seek more community participation for the implementation phase. In designing the strategy for community participation at the implementation stage, two models were used: (1) the conventional public meeting, and (2) a more elaborate traditional model.

The conventional approach required the calling of public meetings. Meeting times, dates, and places were advertised in the local papers, television, and radio with an open invitation for public input on the wetlands management plan. The turnout for the meetings was usually low; at each meeting, no more than 10 people showed up. The second approach, which I refer to as the "traditional" approach, involved integrating the hierarchy of the traditional cultural system to get community participation at several different levels. This was capitalized through the following means: meeting with the village councils; educating the chiefs on the benefits and importance of wetlands; and working with all facets of the community to gain support for wetlands management.

From several years experience in interacting with village residents, ASCMP came to the realization that for effective protection measures, wetland regulations designed to protect the wetland area required a participatory approach. A western-style regulatory and enforcement approach will only have success in the village if supported by the village leaders. If predetermined regulatory approaches are perceived as being imposed upon the village, the village chiefs will simply not participate. The intent of the participatory planning process was to design a management program that would be acceptable to both ASCMP and the villages in which cases regarding wetland disputes can be resolved within the traditional village system. Thus village councils and village leaders became a primary target group in building a partnership with ASCMP.

Site Visits

ASCMP invited each wetland village council to select two representatives who would become part of an American Samoa delegation that would travel to Hawaii to learn about the significance of wetlands in that state. The trip was an attempt to win support of the village leaders by giving them a first hand look at how wetlands are being managed in other places. ASCMP hoped that the educational trip would impress upon the village leaders the significance of wetlands and their importance in the ecosystem of American Samoa.

The village *matais* who were part of the Hawaii trip were mostly *alii* (High Chief) and *tulafale laua* (Paramount High Talking Chiefs); their selection had been based on their perceived influence in village council meetings. Upon their return, the *matais* were instrumental in getting village councils to agree to assist ASCMP in their efforts to protect wetland resources within their respective villages. Once the representatives returned and reported to their respective councils, almost all of the villages agreed to support the wetlands plan.

The second step in gaining support from the village councils involved a second trip abroad, this time to Fiji (selected because of the similarities between Fijian and American Samoa land tenure systems). Village councils were asked to appoint their *pulenu'u* (village mayor) and one village council leader to participate in the wetlands trip. Prior to their departure for Fiji, representatives were asked to work with their village council in designing a plan for assisting ASCMP with wetlands management. The plans were to be revisited upon their return. The Fiji trip resulted in even greater support for the wetlands plan. The participants in the Fiji trip not only assisted in the development

of village plans, but also lectured at their respective elementary schools on the importance of wetlands within their specific villages.

Pulenu'u and Faiifeau Workshops

A third step in gaining community support and building partnerships in wetlands management was through *pulenu'u* (village mayor) and *faiifeau* (church minister) workshops. Village mayors are appointed by village councils and they are usually young and lower ranked *matais*. Their role is to act as liaison for the village with the Office of Samoan Affairs. They are responsible for verifying records of land ownership within the village and disseminating any information handed down from the Office of Samoan Affairs. The *pulenu'us* usually have little political influence within the village council, but as the government contact person within villages, it was necessary to obtain their support in assisting with the development of the wetland village plans.

Ministers and preachers, on the other hand, are very influential in villages. Samoans are very religious and ministers are given a high rank within the traditional system, where they are known as *feagaiga*, literally translated as "covenant." Ministers are treated like high chiefs, but they do not directly participate in village council meetings. Indirectly, however, ministers are influential in guiding the opinions and plans of villages at the *to'onai*, a traditional Sunday brunch or meal at the minister's house attended by chiefs and talking chiefs, where most of the village politics get discussed and suggestions are made for village council meetings.

The workshops were well attended by the clergy and the *pulenu'us*. Because of the presence of the ministers, many talking chiefs from different denominations also attended to assist the ministers. The workshops again discussed the importance of wetlands in the ecosystem, with emphasis on theological discussions on man's role as caretaker of the earth.

Community Wetlands Task Force

The logic behind the creation of the Community Wetlands Task Force was to have a group that would act as a liaison between the community and the government on ongoing issues concerning wetlands management. Specifically, the task force would serve as the advisory board to ASCMP in designing and implementing individual village plans consistent with the recommendations stipulated in the Wetland Management Plan for the islands of Tuluila, Aunu'u, and Manu'a that was completed in 1992. Members of the task force were selected by village councils and the ASCMP.

Wetlands Village Liaisons and Facilitators

To further the partnership at the village level, the task force recommended that ASCMP hire village liaisons and facilitators for the two largest wetland villages, Leone and Nu'uuli.

The first wetlands village plan was developed and implemented at the village of Nu'uuli. Liaisons and facilitators were to arrange for village council meetings in which various wetland issues could be raised and a wetland protection resolution with accompanying ordinances could be developed. In order to gain full acceptance of this program in the village, the village council was encouraged to select a village liaison from within their village. This candidate selection was at the sole discretion of the village council. A facilitator was hand-picked by ASCMP to assist the village

without interfering in the village council meetings. ASCMP's participatory planning procedures ensure that the people affected by the management of wetland resources have an avenue through which to voice their feelings about the program within the villages.

Following the development of the wetland resolution and ordinances for Nu'uuli, the delineation and survey effort was undertaken as a multiple government department task. The Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources participated with two staff who also had ACE Delineation Manual training with the ASCMP staff. Various ASCMP liaison services also staked areas where village residents disagreed on the boundary lines.

Since the development of the Nu'uuli resolution and ordinances, several other villages have joined the wetlands management program. The village councils of Nu'uuli, Leone, Ofu, Malaeloa, Aunu'u, and Masefau have submitted wetland resolutions and ordinances that were developed through the village settings.

Cultural Relevancy in Plan Design and Implementation

Traditional Protocols

ASCMP's participatory planning process is based on the use of appropriate cultural protocols within the traditional system. As mentioned earlier, "regulation" and "enforcement" in the village setting fall within the domain of the traditional leaders or chiefs. Solutions to specific problems are achieved through a consensus-building process within the village. Those who deviate from the agreed upon response or plan are subject to severe social pressure and sanctions imposed by the village leaders. This process is alien and non-conforming to the more conventional ways of planning in which the more convenient democratic processes, such as voting and majority rule, are followed.

In trying to integrate the plan into the village council meetings, the village liaison and facilitators guided the discussions during the meetings. The success of these key players depended heavily on their knowledge of traditional ways and customs. Not only must they be capable of handling technical questions, but they must also possess a wealth of knowledge on the traditional Samoan system, which includes the art of oration. If presenters showed an adequate level of understanding for the traditional systems, then they are more likely to survive debates during the village council meetings. If they do not have the skills to argue their position during the meetings, then they will most likely be unsuccessful.

Discussion

The success of ASCMP's Wetlands Program was due to the strategy of involving the community. Under the participatory planning approach, public input was sought during the development, approval, and implementation of the plan. This enabled ASCMP to build an alliance or partnership with the villages to achieve its goal in the protection of wetlands. Once the agreement was reached, ASCMP, other American Samoa government agencies, and residents, actively participated in carrying out aspects of the plan.

People involved in the process were working in tandem with ASCMP to further refine and implement village-level enforcement, education, and permitting aspects of the plan, but what makes

ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

this process unique is its recognition and utilization of the hierarchical structure of the traditional Samoan system.

While general public meetings may be the conventional way to get community participation and build partnerships with the community in other places, American Samoa's unique environment does not conform to this process for making community decisions. Decisions are made at the village council level, and community input is passed on from family members to their *matai* or chief, who then presents their position at the village council meetings. Without village council support, governmental efforts are wasted in the villages.

Village councils and traditional village organizational structures can be used more effectively if the government recognizes them through the appropriate protocols. The villages already have what can be considered a mini-government: a village council responsible for making village decisions, an *aumaga* and *aualuma*, the young men's and unmarried women's organizations which enforce and implement village council decisions, and other smaller organizations, each with a role to play in supporting village decisions and village life.

While there are many positive aspects to involving communities at this level, it seems more appropriate to deal with the village council level because their decision making powers are more relevant to how plans are actually developed and implemented. It is important to remember that what is important in Samoan community is not the individual, but the group identity. Village councils are more representative of that group identity than single individuals attending public meetings to voice their single opinion, which may or may not be shared by others.

Conclusion

The participatory planning method to building village community partnerships has shown to be the only way to gain support for the wetlands programs for ASCMP. Presenting the village leaders and residents with knowledge about wetlands assists wetland preservation goals. However, it is still a challenge to not only to inform the public about wetland functions and values, but also to help them appreciate that these functions and values far outweigh most individual development gains.

The participatory planning approach designed to include the village leaders in the decision making process also educated them in wetland resources, thereby helping to ensure that their decisions are based on technical information as well as cultural values. The process has proven to be time-consuming due to the number of residents and differing opinions within the village regarding wetland protection.

Finally, I would like to recommend the use of ASCMP's community participation model for areas that have similar land tenure systems as that of Samoa. Every island situation is different, and therefore the strategy should be different as well. Conventional public meetings do not work in traditional island communities. The call for participation has to be formal and must observe the proper protocol in order for island communities to participate.

Fa'afetai tele lava and Soifua.