



Book Reviews

Niue Island: Geographical Perspectives on the Rock of Polynesia, eds James P Terry & Warwick E Murray, INSULA (International Scientific Council for Island Development, c/- UNESCO), Paris, 2004. 300pp., maps, figs, tables, b & w photographs, bibliographic references, appendix. ISBN 92-990023-0-4.

The same day as I picked up *Niue Island: Geographical Perspectives on the Rock of Polynesia* I received an Oceania Flash press release announcing the discovery, by an Australian mining company, of uranium on Niue. It estimated that the deposit is more important than that in South Australia, itself the world's largest, and prospecting would start in the coming weeks. Obviously if it does lead to a major mining venture in the not too distant future (and with the present world oil crisis the incentive is obviously there), then Niue will be transformed, as it was transformed by tropical cyclone Heta in January 2004. Devastated is, perhaps, a more appropriate word . . .

Both events, one experienced and the other potential, are vivid demonstrations of the fact that it is by no means easy to predict the future of even the smallest of Pacific Island nations. In order to be better equipped both to plan their future and to deal with the unexpected, the citizens of such countries need to know their land and themselves. The events are stark proof of the importance of the invitation from the former Vice-Chancellor, Esekia Solofa, to the Geography Department at the University of the South Pacific to undertake research on the smaller islands of the Region. It is to the credit of the former Head of Geography, Patrick Nunn, that the challenge was accepted, and to his successor, James Terry, together with his then colleague Warwick Murray, that the exercise was brought to completion.

The USP Geography Department has an excellent research tradition and, by virtue of the nature of the discipline, it possesses a broad range of expertise that spans both natural and human realms. It is well placed to conduct such country studies and I sincerely hope that *Niue Island* will be the first in a series. This much said, collective endeavours of this kind

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are not in any sense easy tasks and the book illustrates both the strengths and pitfalls of this kind of exercise.

Niue Island opens with a general statement on Niue's Place in the Pacific, this introduction also explaining the background to the book. According to the contents listing (although sections are not signalled in the text) the substantive part is divided into Physical and Human Perspectives. The former cover geology, geomorphology, soils, climatic hazards and biogeography while the latter address demographic issues, land use and degradation, food imports and agricultural exports. The chapters are well researched and based on a good mix of documentary review and field investigation. As to be expected, Patrick Nunn and James Britton's treatment of the geological history of Niue is extremely thorough, with particular attention being given to the reef and the succession of terrace formations, plus what the authors describe as 'low-level evidence' for emergence: caves, notches, shore platforms, etc. James Terry follows on, in his overview of landforms and weathering, with a review of the fascinating karst formations that can be found on the island. In so doing he makes passing reference to prehistoric settlement. John Soulsby continues with a thorough description and classification of the soils, remarking that many of them 'show an enhanced level of radioactivity and this has given rise to anxiety in the local population who fear this may lead to health problems' (111). Interesting! James Terry returns to discuss climatic hazards, his attention being logically centred on the El Niño phenomenon (ENSO), drought and tropical cyclones. Both phenomena are likely to increase in frequency, by virtue of global warming. The physical section concludes with an extremely detailed, comprehensive and, above all, lengthy study of the island's biodiversity, conducted by Randy Thaman and his four Niuean assistants. (The appendix to the book is actually a set of 38 appended lists for this chapter, although this relationship does not appear to be flagged.)

The Human Perspectives section opens with a fascinating paper by Lionel Gibson. While his review of the implications of demographic decline is straightforward and predictable (and, of course, very important), it is his discussion of the emergence of a transnational Niuean community supported by Computer-Mediated Communication (Internet to the more common of mortals) that is fascinating. While he does not refer



to the substantial emerging literature on transnational communities (as distinct from diasporas), it came as a revelation to me to learn that 'Niue is the only country in the world to give its residents free access to the Internet' and that its telephone density is one of the highest in the Pacific (213). The implications of both for collective survival and, more important, the long-term viability of a people now principally rooted in New Zealand is of considerable importance. There follows a series of papers focusing on the rural economy: Matt McIntyre and John Soulsby on land use and degradation, Imam Ali on food import dependency and, finally, Warwick Murray on the country's 'boom-bust' agro-export sector. There is no conclusion, or *dénouement*, to the collection as such, which is a pity given Niue's overall vulnerability. On the other hand there is the lengthy appendix detailing the country's biodiversity.

The reader obviously learns a great deal from this book about the island country. The contributors are experts in their respective fields and they write with authority. At the same time *Niue Island* is a very uneven publication. In a strictly quantitative sense, 236 of the 300 pages that comprise the book are devoted to Physical Perspectives, while within the Physical part, 120 pages are devoted to Niue's biodiversity. In other words, 79% of *Niue Island* is devoted to the environment and some 40% exclusively to the flora and fauna of the country. This might not have been a serious problem had the book been comprehensive in its approach. However, it suffers from some surprising gaps. Very little attention is given the people of Niue, to their society, to political issues, to household economies even, and to individual economic strategies. Certainly Imam Ali, Lionel Gibson and Warwick Murray touch on the latter, but overall the reader does not get a feel for Niuean lives. This is surely quite dramatic in a context in which over 90% of ethnic Niueans now reside in New Zealand and less than 10% in the home country? Inevitably this extremely unbalanced geographical fracture poses the question as to 'What is Niue?' or, indeed, 'Where is Niue?'. Is it a single place, or a network? What is its resource base? How is it organised? Should one speak of an Island country or rather of a (fragmented) population? It is characterised by what kind of movement and flow? Even in a classical geographical sense, considerable attention surely needs to be given to transport and communications? Lionel Gibson lifts the veil on the more innovative aspects of these, but in a more

conventional sense, a detailed review of air and sea transport is required in order to understand the constraints under which Niue, the country and Niueans, the people, operate. Imam Ali alludes to them, but it is not enough. Niue has now entered a period in its history where the question is categorically posed as to whether the Island nation will survive, and we are not speaking about long-term ecological survival here, but short-term demographic and economic survival.

I am convinced that books like *Niue Island* are extremely important exercises and more of them need to be written. They have so much more depth and maturity than the conventional studies by 'foreign experts', whose agendas are dictated by the urgent but essentially ephemeral priorities of international agencies. Yet before embarking on them the editors and authors need to ask themselves, and agree among themselves, as to exactly whom they are writing for, and with what purpose in mind. In this volume, Randy Thaman has written a report with recommendations (terminating with 'Ten Commandments for the Protection of Life on Niue'), Patrick Nunn and James Britton have produced a detailed scholarly article, Lionel Gibson has prepared a text full of provocative ideas, and so on. In other words, it is a mixed bag serving several potential masters (or readerships). And the bag has one or two major holes in it. Exercises of this kind require that the Geography Department be at the helm, but next time there should be clear agreement at the outset as to the exact nature and objectives of the exercise, while the resources of the departmental research team should be complemented with skills drawn from elsewhere at the University of the South Pacific. *Niue Island* is a good start but the learning curve is necessarily a steep one, particularly in the context of a rapidly changing Oceanian world.

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