

# New educational centre for the Pacific

**THE NEED** for the University of the South Pacific to develop a more focused and collaborative approach to environmental education, research, consultancy and capacity building became very obvious during an extensive consultative process conducted recently. This consultative process was undertaken by the University, both internally and within its twelve member countries, as part of the preparation of a strategic plan.

This observed need had a lot to do with the realization that the economic development models that have been adhered to over the past fifty years or so have so stretched the tolerance margins of nature. These models are seen to be depleting scarce resources, especially in ecologically-fragile and relatively resource-poor island environments, and undermine the very development that they have been designed to promote. There is, thus, a need for a new paradigm of development that is protective of the environment, that is, both the natural and human environment.



*Kanayathu Koshy describes the agenda for the newly-established Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development.*

To address such a situation, the United Nations Global Conference on Environment and Development, the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, highlighted the need to address trends of irreversible environmental degradation. These trends were seen to include global climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the linkages of such environmental change with the problems of increasing population, increasing poverty, over-consumption and pollution.

Agenda 21, the action plan for addressing these issues and promoting environmentally sustainable development in the 21st century, arose out of the deliberations of the Earth

Summit, as did the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, to which most of the University of the South Pacific's member countries are signatories.

The serious implications of global environmental change for small island states were clearly recognized and stressed at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Small Island Developing States held in Barbados in 1994 at which the "Barbados Program of Action" was adopted.

Of particular concern were global climate change scenarios and associated increases in sea level that threaten to submerge low-lying islands and atolls, inundate the coastal zones in other islands and usher in extreme events, such as cyclones, tidal waves, tsunamis, flood, droughts and disease infestations, of unprecedented severity and frequency in the tropical belt. The resulting ecological and economic vulnerability is recognized to be one

of the major development challenges for the small island nations of the Pacific as we start the new millennium.

Realizing this development dilemma, Pacific Island states, with the assistance of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, have taken a leading role in discussions relating to global environmental change and sustainable development. Such discussions began with the signing of the South Pacific Declaration on Natural Resources and the Environment at the Rarotonga Conference on Human Environment in the Pacific Islands in 1983.

The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, and high-level representations from the Pacific Islands, together with other non-Pacific Island nations, under the umbrella of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), have strongly represented the region in international lobbying at fora such as the Earth Summit and the Barbados Conference where important environmental policies have been negotiated and ratified.

The region and the individual Pacific Island nations have made a strong commitment to international efforts to prevent further irreversible environmental change and to

promote sustainable development by becoming party to other important environmental conventions and treaties.

These commitments, both at the national and regional levels, mean that the Pacific Island countries must consider seriously what actions need to be taken, and what capacity building will be necessary, to address the major environmental and social constraints to sustainable development.

To achieve this, it is necessary for:

- improved levels of environmental education at all levels, including the strengthening of human resources through improved tertiary education;
- strengthening of the technical capacity within the region; and,
- increased awareness among both policy makers and the general public of the nature of the environmental issues and current development activities that serve as threats to environmentally- and culturally-sustainable development in the Pacific Islands.

Although a number of University of the South Pacific sections, staff and senior students, and the increasing pool of its graduates, have been active in many critical areas related to environmental science and in the practical

application of environmental science to the promotion of sustainable development in the Pacific Islands, the University has not had the required organizational structure to coordinate such activities. As a result, the internal

*The University of the South Pacific is the premiere provider of tertiary education in the Pacific region. Established in 1968, it has twelve Member Countries: Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The University also has agreements with more than a dozen international universities and will establish a major presence in neighbouring New Zealand in 2002.*

*A strong distance education programme supported by the University's sophisticated satellite communications network delivers academic courses to almost half of the total student body, supported by University Centres. Other students study face to face full- or part-time at the University's three major campuses at Fiji, Vanuatu and Samoa.*

coordination and optimization of environmental activities have often been difficult. It has been not been easy, for example, to achieve economies of scale and to optimize cooperation with other national, regional, international organizations and agencies involved in environment and sustainable development-related activities.

Accordingly, and given the urgency with which Pacific Island states need to address the issues of global and local environmental degradation and to promote more environmentally sustainable development, the Strategic Plan of the University of the South Pacific recognized the need for the strengthening and better coordination of activities in the area of environmental management and sustainable development. It was agreed that this would be one of the five key academic areas for focused development during the next decade.

The Strategic Plan states that:

*Within its mandate, University of the South Pacific will develop a coordinated response to the needs of the region in the areas of sustainable development and environmental management. Priorities will be developing appropriate programs and courses to meet*



*needs in the areas, and establishing an appropriate organizational structure. Further, given that these declarations reflect a fundamental shift in development thinking, the University will ensure that its teaching, research and consultancies take full account of this significant change.*

The Pacific Centre for Environment and Sustainable Development (PACE-SD) was subsequently established with a Director having assumed duties as of August 2001. Rather than creating a department dedicated solely for the environment, the strategy here is to integrate an environmental perspective into the teaching and