

# **TOURISM - A CATALYST FOR ATTITUDINAL CHANGES IN AITUTAKI, COOK ISLANDS**

Wendy E. Cowling

(The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand)

## **Introduction**

The focus of the discussion in this paper is the intensification of feelings of unease and concern among many of the adult population of Aitutaki, an atoll in the Southern Cook Islands, regarding the accelerated expansion of accommodation for tourists on the island. This acceleration is due both to the Cook Island government's desire to increase locally-generated revenue and partly due to the wish of some local and foreign entrepreneurs to become involved in tourism ventures. Concerns include the removal of areas of the island from public access and the anticipated on-going effects of increased tourism on the island environment.

Three linked socio-economic 'worlds' located in the island setting are discussed. Firstly, a number of families and individuals directly provide services to tourists. Secondly, there is the continuum of the everyday social and economic lives of the remainder of the population. Thirdly, there is the rather insulated world of the tourists who choose just how much contact they wish to have with the local population beyond those providing services and goods. The lives of the members of these worlds are linked and mesh or overlap in various social and economic areas of daily life. Meetings between the visitors and most local residents are short and superficial, mainly confined to the occasions when aspects of their lives and culture are put on display for the entertainment of tourists.

A lack of autonomy in regard to Government decision-making about the further development of tourist facilities on Aitutaki, including the projected building of a third luxury hotel, has caused many local people to feel upset. Local concerns relate to the alienation of land and lagoon shore sites from the public domain; despoliation of the lagoon environment; and the rationing of piped water to households due to what they believed to be increased demand caused by tourist enterprises using the government-managed, free water supply. Additionally, the assumed high incomes of the proprietors of tourist accommodation (although most can be classed as 'small' business owners) and other services, has generated some envy and resentment. The purported 'greed' of some members of this group, because of their role in land alienation, particularly on lagoon-

side sites, is the subject of everyday conversation but there are few opportunities for concerns and resentments to be expressed in public forums.

## GLOSSARY

<i>Aro'a</i>	Love
<i>'Ariki</i>	Chiefly title holder
<i>'ariki</i>	Welcome, receive, accommodate (guests;) also "caring", "giving" particularly by lavishly entertaining guests.
<i>'arikianga</i>	Hospitality.
<i>'ei</i>	Floral garland worn on the head or around the neck.
<i>'enua</i>	The land
<i>tere</i>	A local or overseas Cook Islanders' travelling party. The guests are given a feast ( <i>umukai</i> ) of locally produced foods as well as gifts. There is eventual reciprocation.
<i>Mana</i>	Spiritual and social power; feelings of self-esteem. [This is a traditional Polynesian concept, and with tapu, was linked to the role and power of chiefs. The concept has been retained without any conflict with Christian ideas. These days a loss of mana, equated to a loss of social power, may be applied not only to chiefs, but also to communities and to individuals.]

### Note:

The Cook Islands are located between Tahiti and Tonga, about 4,500 km south of Hawaii. The people of the Cook Islands are Polynesian, descendants of groups who gradually settled the islands c1000-800 CE, probably from Tahiti. The language is closely related to New Zealand Maori. (The island of Rarotonga is believed to be source of one major migratory move of Maori to New Zealand in c800 CE). Today, the dominant religion is Christianity, introduced in 1821 by converts from Tahiti, supported by the London Missionary Society, a Protestant group. The worship services and other rituals of the Christian community have their sources in historic Presbyterianism.

## General Background

High level Pacific island bureaucrats who direct tourism policy or manage the entry of foreign investments, members of local elites, foreign entrepreneurs and international

airlines are all engaged in promoting South Pacific island nations such as Fiji, Vanuatu, Tahiti and the Cook Islands as very desirable holiday destinations. The descriptions in the brochures and other advertisements are extravagant and hint at the stereotypical sexual allure of island women: “Quench your desire with the ultimate South Pacific Getaway”; “Move to the rhythmic songs and chants, sway with our dancers and feel your heart pound to the sounds of our Polynesian drums”. (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, 2005).

During the past forty years and in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cook Island Government development plans have given prominence to tourism as the most important income and employment generator, as opposed to agricultural production. The Cook Islands are classed by the United Nations as a Small Islands Developing State (SIDS) and has a total population of 14,000 people. The country has had close links with New Zealand since 1901, when it was annexed by that nation. The Cook Islands became self-governing in 1965, and Cook Islanders have free entry into New Zealand. This has enabled steady out-migration to New Zealand since the late 1940s. Emigration accelerated in 1995, after government restructuring including the reduction by fifty per cent of Public Service employees. Migration has therefore been an important agent of change for Cook Islanders.

A history of boom and bust cropping for export has left a bitter taste in the mouths of many older Cook Island primary producers. Decades ago economic development hopes were focussed on the production and export of oranges, pineapples and bananas. Bitter feelings are still expressed by Cook Islanders about the failure of this trade that they ascribe to the way in which New Zealand importers mismanaged the trade, paying low prices to the producers. Another factor was the irregular nature of shipping between New Zealand and the Cook Islands.

The total number of visitors to the Cook Islands in 2003 was 78,328, an increase of almost 6000 from the previous year (Cook Islands Tourism Corporation, 2005). In December 2003 the Cook Islands Government reported that:

*The tourism industry has led the growth of the Cook Islands economy for the past 20 years with an average growth in visitor arrivals for the period 1987 to 2000 of 6.3% and contribution to GDP for the same period increasing from 27% to 51%. Tourism revenues have grown in nominal terms from \$20 million in 1997 to over \$81 million in 2000. (Government of the Cook Islands, 2003: 31).*

Aitutaki is the most popular destination for tourists in the Cook Islands after the main island of Rarotonga. The beautiful lagoon, covering a reef-bound area of approximately 90 km, is the main reason for this popularity. A large number of the tourists are day-trippers, flown over from Rarotonga to cruise on the lagoon. The cruise boats briefly visit several of the ten *motu* [islets] and during these voyages the visitors have the opportunity to snorkel over coral heads located at a number of sites in the lagoon.

While tourism has been an important contributor to the Aitutaki economy for some time, the meeting of the needs of the visitors and their activities are managed by a small proportion of the population and do not greatly impinge on the rest of the local community. The people of Aitutaki do not function as a corporation of 'hosts' but are the owners and custodians of the island and the islets in the lagoon. However, specific ownership of pieces of land is assigned in law to members of extended families who can prove historical and genealogical links to them. They see their custodianship being eroded by decisions made off-island.

In 2004 the choice of accommodation for tourists on Aitutaki ranged from what is termed 'mature' accommodation, comprising two five-star hotels and a four-star resort. One of the two hotels had been in existence for over twenty years, while the other had been established for five years. There is a variety, in terms of size and quality, of locally-owned, self-catering accommodation. The prices for the self-catering accommodation in 2004 ranged from NZ\$30-\$200 per night, while the price per night of the eight over-water bungalows of one of the hotels was NZ\$1295. The resort and all but two of the self-catering accommodation complexes are owned and managed by Cook Island people, mostly Aitutakians, but some owners were originally from Rarotonga.

In 2003 and in 2004 approval was given by the Island Council for the construction of a number of new accommodation complexes, variously termed 'lodges', 'villas' or 'resorts'. In 2003 the Island Council (supported by Dr. Robert Woonton, the then Prime Minister and Geoffrey Henry, the then leader of the Opposition) approved plans for another luxury hotel to be built on Aitutaki. These men persuasively argued that large hotels would provide jobs for numerous island residents. It was proposed that most of the accommodation at the new hotel project will be on (and in) a wetland area on the southern end of the island and close to the airport. The original plan was for most of the individual *fare* [bungalows] to be built in the waters of an inlet of the lagoon. The lagoon waters in this area are not suitable for swimming and are part of a currently protected area where fish breed.

The newest accommodation complexes on the island comprise clusters of up to twelve small, detached rectangular buildings, fronted by a veranda. The design has been mostly conceived by the owners and many do not have great aesthetic appeal, in the sense that the units do not make much reference to the South Pacific setting, although this lack is somewhat remedied by the surrounding gardens. Some of the units already in existence have roofing of palm thatch laid over galvanised iron to give a more authentic Pacific look. This style has now gone out of favour as it hampers the collection of rainwater. Most of the newer units have fans and solar water heaters, and the more expensive units have air-conditioning.

The builders of the new complexes have invested large amounts of money because of their belief, encouraged by Government tourist board, that there will be a continuous

increase in the number of tourists visiting Aitutaki. While there are day trips for tourists who are flown over from Rarotonga to cruise and snorkel in the lagoon, there is also a steady flow of visitors who stay for five to seven days. However, this flow is seasonal and there is local speculation that many of the new developments may often be empty. Also, the new units, although fairly highly priced, do not really fit with the often stated wish by Government officials that any new building should be at the 'top end'/'high end' of the tourist market.

During his incumbency Prime Minister Robert Woonton frequently advocated the building of more 'top'/'high' end accommodation. This is not a new idea. Milne (1985: np) summarising Cook Island development strategies in relation to tourism in the mid-1980s, stated that the then Government's emphasis was on:

*... the need to attract higher spending tourists [and] the concomitant requirement for high-class facilities to be built to attract these tourists. These strategies must be reconciled with current Government objective of revenue maximisation and the maximisation of local participation in the industry.*

This view was bolstered by the suggestion made by Woonton, at the opening of the Aitutaki airport runway extension in late 2003, that Boeing 767s would soon be landing there to unload large numbers of tourists travelling direct from the USA and Canada. Although the airport signage states that it is an international airport it only has basic facilities.

The population of the island was virtually halved following the economic restructuring of the public service by the Cook Island Government in 1995. This period is known locally by the term 'transition'. The scheme was to encourage many of the public servants who had been made redundant to become active in the private sector. A few on Aitutaki did become proprietors of small businesses, including the provision of tourist accommodation (Manarangi Tutai Ariki, 2003:2). One began a land transfer and land tour business with two second-hand vans. However, many former Government employees, including skilled workers and their families emigrated to New Zealand and Australia. Apart from loss of population and income, the restructuring has had a further deleterious effect on outer island communities. Important knowledge, for example, of aspects of the history of the construction of key parts of the island infrastructure, and information on the maintenance of mechanical equipment has been lost.

The entrepreneur planning to build the new luxury hotel on Aitutaki has been reported as saying that the building of these hotels might lessen the emigration of Cook Island people overseas, to New Zealand or Australia. This idea, together with the view that there would be a useful increase in employment possibilities, is debatable. In the 2001 Cook Islands Census the Aitutaki population numbered 1,826.<sup>[1]</sup> Almost half of the total population was under 19 years of age. 491 people were aged between 20 and 39. Members of this group could be seen as potentially employable as grounds keepers (both men and women) and

cleaners (women). More skilled workers are likely to be poached from existing businesses. It is likely that chefs, maitre ds and housekeeping supervisors would have to be recruited either from Rarotonga or from overseas. However, the proposed wage level for workers is NZ\$7.00 per hour and not likely to attract people from other countries. Currently the hotels and smaller tourist accommodation suppliers, plus the cruise boat proprietors employ a total (approximate) of 120 people.

## The local economy

Agriculture is an important contributor to the local economy, but crop growing is small-scale, mainly for family subsistence. Small quantities of surplus production are sold in the Orongo market in Aratunga, the administrative centre of Aitutaki, or sent to Rarotonga, but are more commonly shared locally with relatives and friends. Much to the disappointment of those tourists who had hoped to buy fruits and vegetables, such as *papaya/pawpaw*, bananas, starfruit [*carambola*], avocados, capsicums and salad vegetables, the quantity of produce offered for sale each day in the Orongo market, located in the old fruit packing shed near the wharf at Aratunga, is very small.

Male smallholders tend to cultivate small areas of land (usually termed 'plantations'), which are part of a fragmented family holding. For example, a farmer may have the use of quarter of an acre located in one district and half-an-acre in another, plus a piece of swampland for growing wet *taro*. Smallholders are also likely to have an area on which only coconut trees are grown. The areas used for growing dry *taro*, *kumara* [sweet potato], *nono* [*Morinda citrifolia*], *maniota* [cassava], watermelons and vegetables such as tomatoes, are often flanked by uncultivated areas of land covered with tall grasses, weeds and African acacia trees. Most of these uncultivated areas are owned by families, with the majority of the members currently living in New Zealand, Australia or in the USA. Many of these family landowners do occasionally visit the island for a holiday and some hope eventually to return. Long-abandoned coffee and orange plantations can also be seen. Some farmers on Aitutaki are growing and sending *nono* fruit to Rarotonga for processing into juice for local sales and for export.<sup>[2]</sup>

Little or no crop cultivation is done on Aitutaki from November to March as this is the cyclone season. This lack of cultivation has a significant effect on the overall appearance of the island in terms of attractiveness to visitors, although the Environment Officer does employ men to regularly mow and trim the roadside verges. Plantations and family farm lots are overgrown, quantities of felled trees and tree loppings are left to dry out where they lie in what are ultimately to become plantation areas. Some of this wood is eventually taken away and used to fire the large oven in the local bakery, while a considerable quantity is left to be burned – a relic of the earlier practice of slash and burn cultivation..

The end of the five month non-farming period is celebrated on the first Sunday in April by women in village church interchanges known as *tere*. By late March some of the farm

land as well as household yards near the major island roads begin to have a neater appearance as people prepare for the grounds for cropping and the house lots for the annual inspections by health department officials.<sup>[3]</sup> Men celebrate a successful planting and continuance of the growing season in a similar fashion to the women in June of each year.

The informal sector on Aitutaki is small but important in terms of household economies and for women. There are no roadside stalls selling fruit and vegetables or handicrafts. There is a small informal rental market (see note on Appendix 1). There is a locally managed but irregular trade (in terms of availability of supply) of *rito* (finely-woven bleached young coconut frond) hats. One or two women make 'ei [floral garlands] each day for sale (NZ\$2 each) to the hotels for the staff to give to their incoming guests. The flowers are gathered from the women's own gardens as well as those of neighbours. Flowers such as *tipani* [frangipani] *bougainvillea* and the indigenous *tiare Maori* [gardenia] are used to make the 'ei. The latter flower is so important in the local culture that women aim to grow as many of these shrubs as possible in their home gardens so that the flowers are available for members of dance group to make floral head garlands.

An area within the informal sector that is not linked to supplying tourists with goods and services is the sale of cooked food by several women to primary and high school pupils at 10 a.m. and at 12 noon each school day. These foods include round doughnuts (some cream-filled), slabs of chocolate cake and hot dogs (sausages encased in batter and sold on a stick) sold at 10 a.m. and slices of pizza and lasagna which are sold at 12 noon. Some women also sell plates of cooked food at the market on Saturday mornings. Another economic activity that is also not offered to tourists are the 'Housie' [Bingo] games, which are an important cash earner for several village committees. Money is won and lost, mainly by women, in these games that operate four nights a week, each night in a different village hall. The profits are banked and used to improve the facilities in village halls and to buy equipment such as motor mowers and weed cutters that can be hired by villagers.

### Parallel lives in 'Paradise'

The needs of the tourists and their activities are met by a small proportion of the population. The total adult population of the people of Aitutaki do not function as a corporation of 'hosts' although they are the owners and custodians of the island and the islets in the lagoon. Specific ownership of pieces of land is assigned in law to members of extended families who can prove historical and genealogical links to them. They see their custodianship being eroded by decisions made off-island.

The construction of the Pacific Resort on an area adjacent to the lagoon at Rapae, in 1998, generated some local resentment because the company was able to lease Cook Islands' Government land. This area was fronted by a favourite picnic and swimming area. Since the hotel was built, access to the beach has been denied to locals unless they

are paying customers of the hotel.<sup>[4]</sup> The recent acceleration of building in Aitutaki, particularly of the small clusters of stand-alone units, has revived the feelings of resentment about the taking over of land (particularly of a *motu*) and generated a number of concerns.<sup>[5]</sup>

These concerns permeate the three parallel socio-economic worlds/situations on Aitutaki. There are those whose livelihood is directly derived from their everyday contact with tourists, the local employees of the two hotels and resorts, and the small business owner-managers and their employees (mainly women). As local residents some members of this group (mainly the employees) participate in the social life of the wider community

All but two of the twenty Cook Island-born owner/operators were returned migrants. The first of the self-catering establishments began operation in 1990, having previously been a family home used when the New Zealand based family returned to Aitutaki for holidays. The returnees had lived and worked overseas for a considerable number of years, either in New Zealand or in Australia. The returned emigrants had invested their overseas savings in their business, but in most cases had also taken out bank loans to expand or improve their properties. Their previous work experiences tended to be in the manufacturing and service sector. Only two couples had experienced paying for accommodation overseas. When these people had travelled within Australia, New Zealand or in the USA, it was for the purpose of visiting relatives, rather than as sightseers.

The second group, the majority of the population, make a living as small-scale farmers or fishermen, or as previously outlined earn money in the informal economic sector. Some have an indirect connection with tourists, by supplying goods and services (including entertainment, see below) to the tourist enterprises, but their social energies are directed within and to the local community. A small group of individuals are employed in various central government offices and agencies and by the local island council. There are also local people who have little interest in or reason to make a connection with tourists. Finally, there are the tourists, the *manu'iri*, the 'foreign birds', who briefly visit the island.

Entertainment provided for tourists is a source of casual earnings for some men, women, teenagers and children. Six local dance groups, supported by a large group of drummers and singers, perform at the two luxury hotels and two bars, following a buffet evening meal. These dance groups take it in turns to perform at the two hotels and at three bars. The women, who comprise the chorus and help with costume changes, are mostly housewives, but the men are likely to be wage earners. In 2004 the dance groups earned NZ\$150 a night (P. and T. Mose pc) These payments are banked by the organisers of the groups and then shared among the drummers and dancers, after costs for transport etc. is deducted. An individual dancer is likely to receive cNZ\$150 at the end of the year. The dance presentations are seen as an important aspect of cultural maintenance and are therefore taken very seriously. The emphasis among the participants was not so much on

the earnings, but on the pride and pleasure in performing an aspect of their culture to the best of their abilities.

The hotels also use the services of four string bands (three or four male ukelele and guitar players) and of three other music groups (which usually comprise a guitarist and an electronic keyboard player) several nights a week. The string bands and music groups earn NZ\$70 to NZ\$150 per night depending on the venue (P. Mose Jr., *pers. comm.*). The string bands usually only play for an hour or so while guests at the hotel restaurants are eating dinner. Music groups play for longer. Most of the younger members of the string bands and the members of the music groups have day jobs. A 'bush beer' drinking club, once only patronised by local men, is now one of the places visited during a Friday night bar crawl organised by one of the local transport providers. The tourists pay a fee to become temporary club members.

The people of Aitutaki maintain their interpretation of the classic Polynesian-style daily gifting and exchange of foods and labour services between kin and between friends who operate as quasi-kin. This exchange process, linked to the traditional values of *aro'a* [love, loving kindness, and generosity expressed in a number of ways] and *mana*. *Mana* encapsulates concepts of cultural identity, self-respect and social prestige. The floral neck garlands (*ei*) with which Cook Islanders greet and farewell visiting friends, relatives and groups, such as members of church groups from other islands and from abroad, are a prime symbol and expression of *aro'a* as well of local identity.<sup>[6]</sup> *Aro'a* and *mana* are particularly exemplified in the hosting of feasts for *tere* [travelling party] groups, whether in church-generated village interchanges or the hosting and feeding of church and family groups temporarily visiting from overseas for say a conference, wedding or funeral, but also in the inter-village visitations of migrants and locals during the Christmas holiday period.

An important form of Cook Island internal tourism is the hospitality is frequently extended to Cook Island visitors, either from other islands or expatriate families home for a visit. In recent years there has been a notable increase in visitors from the other southern Cook Islands to Aitutaki for special occasions such as the Easter volleyball tournaments. In 2004 sixty teams of volley ball players visited Aitutaki for tournament. These visits were facilitated by Air Rarotonga which advertises special fares for the Easter inter-island visits. Most of the visitors were hosted by local families. Church youth groups regularly visit the different southern islands and well fed and cared for.

The Cook Island Christian Church (CICC), with pastors resident in each of the villages, are another important focus of people's interest, providing spiritual nurture and social activities as well as requiring financial and labour contributions.<sup>[7]</sup> The CICC, in particular, has a strong emphasis on Sabbath keeping. This emphasis has caused some conflict in the past between locals and tour providers such as Air Rarotonga who wished to offer flights and tours seven days a week. The churches are also an important generator of funds for the local economy through the solicitation of money for building

improvement projects from Cook Island migrants in countries such as New Zealand and Australia.

The community of people living on Aitutaki, as with people living on other islands in the nations of the South Pacific, take pride in their ethnic identity, history and surviving traditions. However, they are also global citizens, particularly attuned to life in New Zealand and, more recently, in Australia. Most households have relatives living in New Zealand or Australia or, to a lesser extent, in the United States of America, mainly in Hawaii. Many families have holidayed in New Zealand or have gone there for special family occasions. Their air travel is funded from their local earnings sometimes supplemented by bank loans, but their living expenses are covered by their host families. The visiting family groups and members of church, dance and sporting groups usually take presents of local foods<sup>[8]</sup> and artefacts with them as gifts to their hosts. At the end of these visits people return with household goods, including domestic and electronic appliances, with CDs and DVDs, and, particularly in the case of young people, new clothing. These trips are not seen as tourism as the people do not specifically go to New Zealand or Australia to view scenery or built attractions.

As in all countries that foster a tourist industry, the visitors are members of a distinct class or set whose lives briefly intersect with some local residents. Numerous contributors to the academic literature on tourism have emphasised and deplored an assumed greater impact on people's social lives in small-scale communities than on those of say, city-dwellers in New Zealand or Australia. However, because of their experience of colonisation and of emigration, the presence of *papa'a* (European) tourists is not novel or strange.

The limited amount of interaction between most locals and tourists was also noted by Tracey Berno during her field research in the Cook Islands in the early 1990s. She has stated:

*Inexpensive holiday packages have primarily attracted tourists whose main interests have been "sun, sand, and surf". Many do not seek intimate contact with Cook Islanders, nor do they need to venture from the more popular tourist locales. (1996: 96):*

From time to time there is a regular and significant meshing and overlap of the three categories or groups of people on Aitutaki. However, on the whole, for the majority of local residents, the contact with tourists is restricted to a friendly smile as they pass visitors on the main road, each riding mopeds. They are inadvertent and otherwise passive 'hosts', part of the local colour, on display because the island is their place of residence. The tourists are short-term visitors whose presence, eccentricities and gushing praise of the island's beauty are noted and accepted but not likely to be emulated.

One occasion during which locals and small groups of tourists briefly and superficially interact is during the Sunday morning service of the Cook Islands Christian Church in

Arutanga, the administrative centre of Aitutaki. Since the congregation had a new hall erected in 2002 (the costs of which were mostly met by Aituaki people living in New Zealand and Australia) they have made tourists welcome to their morning service each Sunday. Groups of women from different villages on the island take it in turns to serve a lavish morning tea following the service. The language used in the church service is predominantly Cook Island Maori, but the visitors who have been collected from hotels and other accommodation are welcomed in English.

The church elders who take it in turns to read the church notices to the congregation, offer the welcome, usually explain the meaning of the local greeting, *Kia Orana*, as 'May you have long life'. The visitors are then encouraged to 'enjoy their stay on Aitutaki' and they are encouraged to publicise Aitutaki: 'When you go home please tell other people about Aitutaki'. In spite of the fact that no copies of the church hymnal or an order of service are made available to enable the visitors to participate, most stay in the church for the duration of the service. Services usually take an average of an hour and a half and the visitors particularly comment on their enjoyment of the congregation's singing of Cook Island composed hymns known as *imene tuki*. (This style of part-singing, with sopranos shrilly dominating, accompanied by the basso singing of men plus bangs or thumps (*tuki*) or grunts made by the men, is unique to the Cook Islands). The food items served at morning tea are those valued as special by local people. These include home-baked scones [known as 'biscuits' in the USA], pancakes, and banana and chocolate cakes. Platters of local fruit are usually provided. While the visitors are eating and drinking tea, coffee or bottled fruit cordial, some aspects of Aitutaki missionary history may be explained to them. Some of the more sophisticated members of the congregation may chat to the tourists, but generally any conversations are initiated by a visitor rather than by a local.

### Changes in attitudes to tourism

The recent increase in the number of accommodation units and projected plans for future construction, have had a noticeable effect on local opinions on the value and usefulness of tourism. There had been no public meeting of Aitutaki people in 2003 to enable them to discuss the implications of the accelerated building program or the possibility of at least one more luxury hotel being constructed in the future. A meeting was finally held with a New Zealand-based tourism consultant in late May 2004. This meeting was one in the series of consultations held on ten islands. The conclusion that emerged from these consultations was that "... there is no clear vision for the future of tourism [in the Cook Islands]" (Burnford 2004:1).

The consultant recommended a differentiation of the Cook Islands from other Pacific islands tourist destinations. He suggested a new marketing approach could emphasise and encourage 'geo-tourism' (a combination of 'ethnic' tourism and eco-tourism). While this is an estimable concept the questions have to be asked: 'What distinctive aspects of *traditional* culture can be readily observed, apart from the wearing of garlands ('*ei*'); and

‘What distinctive aspects of the local environment are in their natural state (apart from the lagoon and some of the islets in the lagoon)’. As with most other contemporary Pacific island communities, what is on display is a way of life in which many familiar aspects of modernity such as styles of clothing worn by the local people, the forms of transport, the house and public building designs are evident, but in a modified tropical landscape.

Much of the traditional artefact production by men has disappeared due to a lack of transmission of skills by members of previous generations. This has been replaced by the work of some local artists and carvers who produce works of variable authenticity and quality. In addition, during 19<sup>th</sup> century when Cook Islanders converted to Christianity, many artefacts, such as statues of divinities, were collected by the missionaries. Many of these were destroyed but some were sent to London and sold to museums in Great Britain. The Museum in Rarotonga, managed by the Ministry of Culture and Development, has displays of reproductions of some of these artefacts.

Feelings of dissent and discontent about development plans for Aitutaki tended to be expressed in conversations among like-minded people. Another significant outlet has been ‘Letters to the Editor’ published in the three newspapers produced in Rarotonga and circulated throughout the islands. The concerns expressed were not about the social and cultural impacts of tourism. The numbers of tourists who visit Aitutaki for one or more days are not great, compared to say the numbers who visit Rarotonga. The behaviour of tourists or the styles of clothing worn by tourists were also not seen as being of great interest or concern or as likely influences on local youth. The concerns of many people on Aitutaki are more personal. Individuals express a range of feelings from peevishness to helplessness, and even feelings of betrayal on the part of some members of the community.

The continuing imposition on Aitutaki of central government ideas linked to the view that tourism-led economic development as being good for the whole nation is strongly resented by many on Aitutaki. The Government and the members of the Island Council, who have a duty of care for the island and its people, are seen as not having fulfilled their responsibilities for the communal good. There was a concern that local rights of ‘ownership’ of the land and the island environment are being eroded. There were also concerns about the ability of the infrastructure of the island to cope with extra people, and particularly the on-going supply of adequate quantities of piped water to households.

There were also concerns about the likely deleterious effects on the lagoon environment if the planned hotel was constructed; of the possibility of the limitation of access of local people to popular beaches and picnic spots; and the possible inflationary effects on land values. The quality and aesthetic appeal of the new resort constructions is varied. Additionally, as in Rarotonga, ribbon development is beginning to block public access to beaches and generally offer an unappealing vista from the lagoon waters. The piecemeal

development of accommodation seemed to be occurring with little reference to environmental issues and the protection of the coastal landscape.

There is also cynicism about the likely profitability of any new or future accommodation. Additionally, most of the proprietors of existing businesses who were interviewed expressed concern about the competition when few were experiencing high occupancy rates. There was concern about how leaseholds were being purchased and sometimes sold on to investors, both Cook Island and foreign. Officially and traditionally, land cannot be sold. Pieces of land, ranging in size from half-an-acre to several acres can be leased to a family or non-family member for sixty years, provided a majority of the members of an extended family [*kainga*] who live on the island agree. The acceleration of building has caused a concomitant acceleration in land registrations by Aitutaki residents. The registration process begins with a meeting of extended family members. This meeting is conducted under the supervision of the local Registrar of Land.

Prior to the meeting the Registrar checks the public records of the Cook Islands Land Court, to confirm that the names of the leaseholders had been recorded.. The Registrar is responsible for keeping succession claims up to date. That is, as families increase in size, the parents register the children as potential landholders. A person fostered by a family (known as a 'feeding child') may also lodge an application for a lease, although the leasing of land to non-cognatic kin is not a practice approved by everyone. The Registrar keeps minutes of the landholders' meeting and will accept the vote of the majority to transfer the land. However, if some members strongly dissent from this the case will go to be judged in sittings of the Cook Island Land Court in Aitutaki.

The would-be lessee has to state whether the intended use of the land is for building a family home or for agricultural or commercial purposes. The former is the most common form of land transfer. The lease can be reviewed within five or fifteen years. Originally, the payment by a resident of Aitutaki for such a lease was NZ\$1.00 per annum, but it customarily understood that outsiders would pay more. It is very difficult to find out the truth about just how much money has changed hands for some pieces of land or whether payment has been in cash and in kind – eg a car or motor bicycle. There is a great deal of local speculation and gossip regarding payments that have been made for leases by non-resident Cook Islanders and foreigners. For example, it has been publicly suggested that one lessee obtained half-acre for NZ\$20,000; another obtained a half-acre for NZ\$40,000. The lease may then be sold on for a higher amount.

Whether the business people involved in the new tourism ventures have built on family land or have obtained land by lease or through *sub rosa* purchases, they are seen as causing changes to the island environment for their personal benefit. There is also cynicism about the likely profitability of any new or future accommodation. Additionally, most of the proprietors of existing businesses who were interviewed expressed concern about the competition when few were experiencing high occupancy rates.

A recent disturbing development is the writing of new legislation titled the Unit Titles Bill, which is shortly to be heard by the Cook Islands Parliament. The Bill would permit the entrepreneur who wishes to build the third hotel on Aitutaki (and to rebuild a defunct hotel on Rarotonga) to sell each accommodation unit or bungalow in each of the hotels to individuals or to groups of overseas investors. Technically, the owners of the units would not own the piece of land (or the piece of water) on which their unit would stand but the air space above the land. The traditional landowner would be compensated for the lease of the land. The unit owners would be sub-lessees. However, it is unlikely that the traditional landowner would be eventually able to regain the piece of leased land after the period of sixty years because of the capital improvements on it that would be owned by the investor. This proposed legislation elicited a spate of angry letters from people living overseas as well as in the Cook Islands. The entrepreneur seems to be confident that the legislation will go through.

The local feelings of resentment about Government plans for the island's development are not new. In 1995 a large section of the island population expressed their hostility to central government plans to permit flights in and out of Aitutaki on Sundays. The airstrip was occupied by large numbers of individuals and vehicles for days. During the demonstration threats were made to dig up the strip. Ironically, during their school years many of the demonstrators would have been involved in maintaining the airstrip when they had participated in fortnightly sessions to remove weeds from it.

Whether the local business people involved in the new tourism ventures have built on family land or have obtained land by lease or through *sub rosa* sales for the new complexes, they are seen as causing changes to the island environment for their personal benefit. They have attracted feelings of jealousy [*vare'ae*] because of their personal prosperity. This jealousy stems in part from a levelling tendency in Cook Island society. Sometimes the success of some of the entrepreneurs is attributed to the fact that they have had European forebears and therefore have less sentimental concerns about any changes to the island.

### *Aro'a and mana*

In her writing (1995, 1996) on tourism in four Cook Islands, including Aitutaki, based on an extensive collection of local opinions, Tracy Berno emphasised the fact that tourism had not, at the time of her field studies, noticeably impacted on the maintenance of Cook Island, post-Christian, modified 'traditional' values. As previously noted two of the most important social values when Berno did her fieldwork, and today, are those of *aro'a* and *mana*. Berno (1995, 1996) examined the importance of these values and their expression in the management by locals of their relationships with tourists. She reported that tourism was viewed as an area where the traditional values relating to hospitality to visitors could be demonstrated.

However, it is clear that in the decade since Berno did her fieldwork the way these values are acted upon has, in the thoughts and actions of the general population of Aitutaki, little application to the hosting of tourists. The shock of the restructuring of the Cook Islands' Government public service in the mid-1990s still resonates. Many families who felt secure in their reliance on a regular salary from the Government (which may have been supplemented by some subsistence farming), have had to re-assess their way of living. They were not among those who had sufficient capital from savings or redundancy payouts to start up a business nor did they or could they choose to emigrate. Several of the men who still have public service jobs supplement their wages with part-time work as entertainers. There are a considerable number of female-headed households with women of marriageable age who have two or more children. *Aro'a* becomes even more important as a family- and friendship-sustaining and survival value for those households. None of the long-term proprietors of accommodation for tourists responded to prompts regarding these values, but like business people elsewhere, emphasised they tried to provide a good service that might mean their business would be recommended to others.

Some of the local owners of the small-scale accommodation complexes are less concerned, about the possible construction of a new hotel, than about the increase in their competition. The quality and aesthetic appeal of these new resort constructions, mostly by local entrepreneurs, is varied. Additionally, as in Rarotonga, ribbon development is beginning to block public access to beaches and generally offer an unappealing vista from the lagoon waters. The piecemeal development of accommodation seems to be occurring with little reference to environmental issues and the protection of the coastal landscape.

Two of the four *Ariki* (hereditary chiefs) of Aitutaki are quite vehement in their opposition to the building of the new hotel. One of these *Ariki* <sup>19)</sup> has written a useful evaluation of a report on the current state of tourism on the island (see Manarangi Tutai Ariki, 2003). She is the owner/manager of a small tourist complex and of accommodation on one of the *motu* in the lagoon. She is not only concerned about the building of more accommodation, but also about the despoliation of the island environment. She with another, more recently elevated *Ariki* (male), has voiced her opposition to the members of the Island Council. The inputs of these two people have been heard but ignored. The highest status and therefore *mana* is assigned to the *Ariki* whose lineages are linked to notable events in the history of an island, including the early period of missionisation. While the position of *Ariki* is hereditary it is also an elected one, and the election of any new *Ariki* has to be approved by the whole House of *Ariki*, which meets in Rarotonga. It is possible for disaffected members of an *Ariki's* lineage to challenge the assignment of a title via the legal system. A titleholder may also be deposed by the fiat of other members of the extended family if that person does not seem to be fulfilling their responsibilities. The *mana* (spiritual and social power) of *Ariki* was diminished during the period of New Zealand's colonial rule and perhaps is less acknowledged these days when the incumbent was simply a member of the community, working as a teacher or as a general store manager. The general community's *mana* has

been diminished by the imposition of development plans, whether by the members of the Aitutaki Island Council or by the central government.

Strangely, few people seemed to consider that their chance to change matters might be through the ballot box. A much postponed Parliamentary election was delayed until late in 2004. Two of the Aitutaki candidates were members of the Island Council and had initially approved the plans to build the third luxury hotel. One, already a member of Parliament and a much-respected local business man, was planning to stand as an independent, due to disagreement with the policies of his party. The second candidate who was also an Island Council member was also the Mayor. Both these men were also partners in tourism cruise businesses. The third candidate operates a tourist accommodation complex.

## Conclusion

*“Ko te ngaru kara ona akau, ka tino te ‘enua”*  
“The wave that meets no reef will damage the land” (Jonassen, 2002:197).

This Cook Island proverb can be interpreted as: ‘If there is no control of our resources (human and natural) our culture will be diminished’. It might be concluded from this discussion that the majority of the people of Aitutaki are not forward-thinking and are simply indulging in envious thoughts about other, more successful people. That is not the case. They have already witnessed and have accepted the erosion of Cook Island identity and culture due to the effects of colonisation and emigration. As the Douglas’s have noted:

*Tourism does not occur within a vacuum. Its effects upon a community must be considered within a complex web of political, economic, environmental and historical factors, many of which have been agents of change ... Christianity, colonisation, education, urbanisation and the ... adoption of cash economies have been affecting Pacific communities ... for some 200 years.* (Douglas and Douglas, 1996: 49).

Those individuals who discussed the present situation strongly felt the loss of local social power. They felt that their views were not respected. Nevertheless, rather than engaging in social activism most of the people of Aitutaki are focussed on surviving economically while maintaining a facsimile of what they see as the Cook Island way of life. There has been a consolidation of local people’s commitment to maintain and demonstrate *aro’a* and *ariki* in their extended families and community as well as to visitors from other islands. There has a concomitant withdrawal of a commitment to extend *aro’a* to non-Cook Islanders and to non-Aitutakians.

More employment opportunities would be welcome to enable younger people to remain on the island instead of emigrating to Rarotonga or overseas. Whether this would cause

the community to accept the changes that have occurred and will continue to occur is unknown.

**Table 1: AITUTAKI – ENTERPRISES UTILISED BY TOURISTS [a]**

<b>ACCOMMODATION</b>		
Hotels	2	
Motel-style	20	[b]
Cottages	2	
House Rentals	4 (est.)	[c]
<b>RESTAURANTS</b>	4	[d]
<b>SNACK BARS/FAST FOODS</b>	3	
<b>TOUR OPERATORS</b>		
Sea	8	
Land	2	[e]
<b>FISHING TRIPS</b>	5	
<b>SCUBA DIVING</b>	1	
<b>LAND TRANSPORT</b>	2	
<b>CAR RENTALS</b>	1	
<b>MOPED RENTALS</b>	6	
<b>PETROL STATIONS</b>	2	
<b>SOUVENIR SHOPS</b>	2	
<b>APPAREL (eg Pareu), CLOTHING, MANCHESTER</b>	4	
<b>GROCERY STORES</b>	4	[f]
<b>MIXED BUSINESS</b>	1	[g]
<b>E-MAIL PROVIDERS</b>	2	

**OTHER SERVICES USED BY TOURISTS**

Aitutaki International Airport  
Air Rarotonga office  
Post Office  
Produce Market (managed by a woman for the Island Council)

**Notes:**

[a]. The figures given were correct in April, the final month during which data was collected.

[b]. All the motel-style accommodation was self-catering.

[c]. The number of houses available for rent to tourists varies is dependent on whether families have moved overseas for a time and relatives are caring for their property and have permission to use it in this way. There are at least 12 to 20 empty houses on Aitutaki at any one time.

[d]. Excluding those at the hotels. Two of the four also trade as bars.

[e]. One of these, a family-owned business, does transfers of tourists to functions and to Sunday church services.

[f.] Two are in villages some distance from Aratunga and therefore less patronised by tourists than the other two.

[g]. Although this shop is close to the Post Office and other services in the centre of Aratunga township, its operation supplying hamburgers, stationery and some clothing, is not obvious or well advertised.

## Endnotes

[1] In 2004 the local perception was that there had been a decrease in the subsequent three years to c.1400 people.

[2] *Nono* (*Morinda citrifolia*), known elsewhere in the South Pacific as *noni* or *nonu*, is a quick-growing tree which produces a bitter-tasting soft fruit about the size of an apple. The tree originated in India, but was probably one of the plants taken by the ancestors of the Polynesian people to the Pacific islands for it appears to have been part of the traditional *pharmacopoeia* of Polynesia since the first settlements. The history of the expansion of the production of this crop in the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the South Pacific (eg Tahiti, Samoa and Tonga) may also be a boom and bust experience for the growers. Many dramatic claims have been made by locals regarding the healing properties of the fermented and clarified juice and by retailers abroad. Currently quite a lot of *nono* juice is bottled in Rarotonga and sold at the market and in stores on that island. One company in Rarotonga has developed a lucrative export trade in the unbottled juice to Japan where a litre can retail for as much as US\$70.

[3] The purpose of the inspection, a relic of the colonial period, is to check whether the house lots are well kept, with all rubbish removed and grassed areas mown, so that there is little opportunity for mosquitoes to breed.

[4] Locals, provided they can pay, are accepted as customers at the hotels. End of year celebrations by women's groups may involve them taking a lagoon cruise or having a lunch at one of the hotels. The women pay a discounted 'local price'. From time to time visiting migrants also go on one of the cruises, eat at one of the hotels or drink at the bars.

[5] My interest in Aitutaki began in New Zealand, when former residents of the island, shared their concerns about what they felt were the radical changes which were likely to occur with the increase in tourism on the island. Their concerns included fears of exclusion from decision-making about the leasing of lands owned by members of their extended families; an assumption that when visiting the island they would be denied access to areas formerly available to all for picnics, swimming and camping; and the possible corruption of local morals by tourists.

[6] This custom is also part of the welcome which is extended to tourists on their arrival by staff of the hotels and some resorts and by families hosting visiting *papa'a* [European] friends. Floral garlands that are worn on the head as well as neck garlands are also given to church ministers and to members of visiting church groups on special festive occasions. A head garland is worn by many women and some men every day.

[7] Christianity in the Cook Islands was adopted and adapted. During the 19th century some aspects of cultural life were suppressed but emerged in modified form. Christian doctrines and related concepts, such as ideas about moral behaviours, are embedded in the people's social and cultural life. Some aspects of morality (eg in relation to sex before marriage) sit more lightly than others on many of the population.

In addition to the CICC other Christian denominations which have a place of worship on Aitutaki, include the Free Congregational Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and an independent Pentecostal group. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon), and the Jehovah's Witnesses also have churches on the island. The latter group does not permit their members to take part in 'worldly activities' such as sporting contests or dance performances.

[8] Aitutakian visitors to New Zealand and Australia are likely to take fresh taro, frozen chestnuts [*i'i*], and cooked, frozen *pipi* [small clams] as gifts for relatives and friends nostalgic for a taste of 'home'. These foods can be carried into New Zealand and Australia if a certificate is obtained from the Agriculture Department. In contrast, island food tastes are very influenced by migration experiences and visits to New Zealand and Australia. Most of the local grocery shops stock goods predominantly linked to local tastes and needs. One particularly caters for the tastes of tourists, stocking imported fruit and vegetables, and breakfast cereals.

[9] Until their elevation most Cook Island *Ariki* are not particularly distinguishable in status from other members of the population. Manarangi Tutai Ariki o Vaipaepae-o-Pau, together with her English husband, managed a trade store for many years and now owns and operates a small tourist complex. Another Aitutaki *Ariki* (male) worked in New Zealand for many years as an unskilled labourer.

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