
Environmental Protection in the South Pacific:

The Effectiveness of SPREP and its Conventions

Richard Herr



Introduction

The peoples of the South Pacific region have long been concerned with protecting the varied, fragile, and vulnerable environments that surround their myriad and far-flung islands. Yet the 22 Pacific island countries (PICs) that make up this region are comprised entirely of developing states and territories with all the needs and limitations that third- or fourth-world status implies.¹ Thus a certain tension between environmental protection and sustainable development is both inevitable and pervasive across the South Pacific. This tension began to be felt virtually from the beginning. Independence swept through the region in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing attention on the new microstates' development needs as an immediate priority. Largely as a result of these needs a substantial degree of productive regional co-operation emerged to meet the challenges posed. Indeed, over time the South Pacific region has become replete with international regimes and specialist intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) to assist with meeting its multifaceted developmental needs.² Environmental concerns were slower to make their way onto the regional stage. Nevertheless, a regime to address the region's environmental protection needs has been well supported since these were accepted as significant in the mid-1970s. Today, the core of this regime, the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP), has become an essential element in the area's system of environmental protection as well as a central actor well able to hold its own in regional affairs.

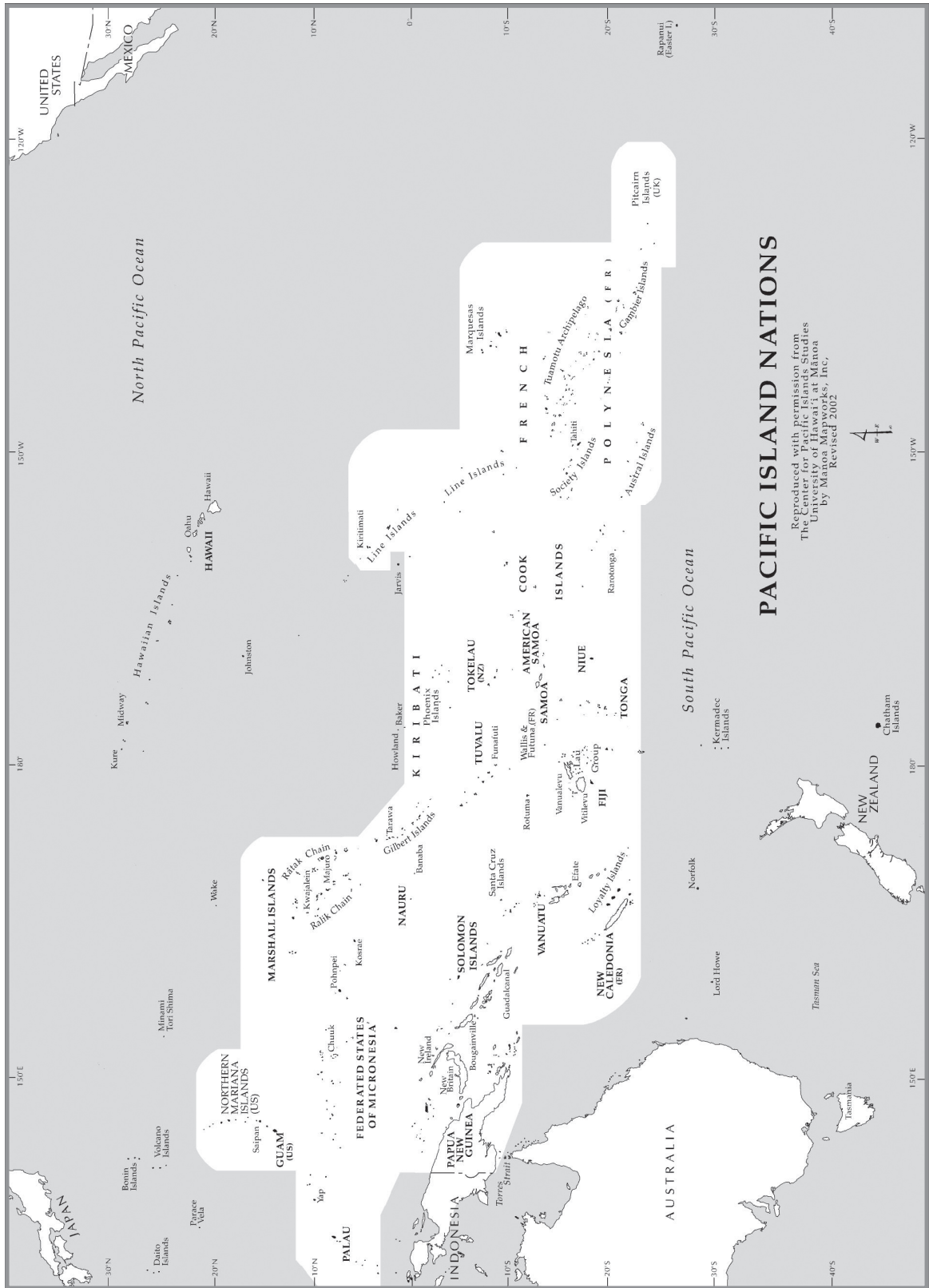
The contemporary SPREP operates as a regional IGO from its headquarters in Apia, Samoa, with a staff of nearly 70 serving the organization's 26 members. SPREP's mandate spans a wide but not comprehensive range of regional environmental concerns. Its mission is defined as 'to promote co-operation in the South Pacific region and to provide assistance in order to protect and improve its environment and ensure sustainable development for present and future generations.'³ As such, the organization's ambit of direct operations is narrower than its membership, being confined to the South Pacific region even though it has members from beyond that region. SPREP's current work programme reflects the timing of its entry into the

regional system and the evolution of the South Pacific's environmental agenda. The former consideration has been a constraining factor from its beginning, as SPREP has had to find its way within a pre-existing regional system where initially it played only a subordinate role. The latter is influenced not only by internal developments but also by the global state of play, so that world priorities must be included in SPREP planning.

Perhaps significantly, as the first step towards becoming an IGO, SPREP moved to a separate headquarters in 1992, the same year that the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development met in Rio de Janeiro. Thus, as the global community prepares to meet in Johannesburg in late August 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to assess its progress over the last decade, the South Pacific will have occasion to reflect on the effectiveness of its own regional regime. An increasingly vital part of the SPREP regime has been its institutionalization over the decade—an influence that is likely to be evident in Johannesburg. SPREP was unable to play a large part in preparing PIC participants in Rio due to its status in the early 1990s, but it is playing a central role in the lead up to 'Rio+10'. The weight the region will carry at the World Summit may depend, in real measure, on how well its own environmental protection regime has performed over these years. The effectiveness of the SPREP within its region, however, hangs on how capably it has carried out its mission within the constraints imposed on it by the nature of the region it serves. This has been a difficult balancing act and one that is still very much in evolution. Yet the past decade of experience and the years before, during its formation, suggest the SPREP regime has substantially advanced the cause of environmental protection in the South Pacific.

The Problem of Regional Environmental Protection in the South Pacific

The challenge of environmental protection in the South Pacific is as varied and complex as the tens of thousands of islands, islets, atolls, motu, reefs, rocks, skerries, and sandbanks that make up the terrestrial portion of this vast



region. Its landforms range from Papua New Guinea's 'continental' geography, with ice-capped mountains, through coral atolls, to jack-in-the-box volcanic cinder cones in Tonga that routinely rise and fall below sea level.⁴ Its aquatic areas are vast in scope but also diverse. They include the world's deepest ocean trenches and the largest expanses of marine waters enclosed as lagoons. Given the small size of the land masses, rivers and lakes are a rarity in the region outside the larger islands of Melanesia, but then, outside this sub-region, fresh water itself can be a rarity. The human dimension is no less complex. The region's population of nearly six million is divided among 22 island polities, ranging in size from Papua New Guinea (more than 4.5 million) to Pitcairn (fewer than 50).⁵ Their political status varies from the nine fully independent states,⁶ through five self-governing states in free association with a larger state,⁷ to eight territories in a range of dependent relationships.⁸ These physical and political factors have ensured that, like other issues in the South Pacific, the task of problem solving offers no economies of scale but rather the reverse—confronting serious and intractable diseconomies of scale.

The severity of the environmental protection problem is dependent, in large part, on the impositions made both on the region's environment and on the resources available to meet these demands. Here the South Pacific is caught in the same bind that besets the developing world elsewhere. Economic development is a high priority across the region. Among the independent Pacific island countries, the per capita domestic product ranges from a low of AUD\$756 for Kiribati to a high of AUD\$3118 for Fiji.⁹ Thus the development pressure on the environment is immense both at sea and ashore. To name but a few of the locally generated environmental problems facing the region: beaches are mined for concrete sand; forests are felled for timber and firewood; vital water lens are polluted or compromised by over-use or sea-water intrusion; microhabitats are destroyed by population pressures; lagoons and reefs are degraded by improper waste disposal; and fishery resources are stretched beyond breaking point by a swelling population. These problems would be bad enough, but the South Pacific's environment is also a victim of significant problems sourced from outside the region.

Undoubtedly the gravest 'imported' problem is sea-level rise due to global warming. The region has contributed very little to the greenhouse gases causing the problem, but its consequences could be catastrophic for the South Pacific. With the exception of the inhabitants of the Melanesian islands, the region's people are all coastal dwellers. They are obliged to be. There is no hinterland in Polynesia or Micronesia. Indeed, the vast majority of the

islands in these two ethno-geographic areas are low-lying atolls with only a few metres' clearance above sea level. Any sea-level rise will have profound effects for the entire region, but for the atoll states, such as Kiribati and Tuvalu, even a modest rise could be a nation-ending event. The likelihood of such consequences has been closely monitored in the region since the mid-1980s. SPREP researchers have recently challenged the predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change with their findings of sea-level rise more than ten times that expected. Rises of up to 25 cm per year may be in train.¹⁰ Although they are disputed by other data, were these extremes to be realized over a single generation, the most vulnerable PICs would become non-viable for human habitation if not disappear altogether.

As disastrous as global warming may prove to be, it is not the only 'foreign' environmental misery confronting the region. The South Pacific's remoteness, relatively small populations, and, until recently, dependent status made it a desirable nuclear-testing ground. France ended its testing programme as late as 1996. The region has inherited the toxic legacy of these activities. Moreover, the vast and deep expanses of the Pacific Ocean appealed to the nuclear powers as a tempting and accessible dumping ground for their home-grown wastes. And what was possible for nuclear wastes might be practical for other toxic wastes, especially in the high-seas areas beyond national jurisdictions. From the 1970s, extensive but under-exploited stocks of tuna attracted distant-water fishing nations to the region and so gave rise to another externally imposed environmental protection problem. Small but valuable stands of tropical hardwoods in Melanesia similarly drew extra-regional interests into the South Pacific in the 1980s and 1990s, with environmentally damaging consequences.

Whether local in origin or externally generated, all of these concerns have fallen largely on policy makers from a small number of developing microstates with limited capacity to meet the burgeoning challenges confronting their countries. In a very real sense, the problem of environmental protection in the South Pacific was not so much that it was a necessary and increasingly salient issue for the PIC policy makers. Rather, it was how any solution could be afforded within the constraints facing these developing polities. Providentially, as the awareness of the extent of the environmental problems facing the newly independent states has grown, so too has the international support system for addressing such issues multilaterally within the region. This is not to suggest the two have been evenly matched. It would be impossible to manage all the diverse types of environmental problems in the Pacific islands collectively even if the political will existed to pursue this course of action. Nevertheless, a regional response

to some of the environmental protection issues has added real capacity to the over-extended PICs.

The Origins of the South Pacific's Environmental Protection Regime

SPREP was the first line of the international response to the issue of protecting the South Pacific environment. However, it has developed, evolved, and reacted to the changing international conditions. It is helpful, therefore, to put the objectives and scope of SPREP into some historical context in order to assess how well it is addressing the environmental problems of the South Pacific. SPREP itself traces its origins back to a regional symposium in 1969 that recommended the appointment of an ecological adviser to the South Pacific Commission (SPC), which at the time was the only IGO in the region.¹¹ In a more formal sense, however, the creation in the mid-1970s of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and its Regional Seas project gave a focus to a broader regional environmental protection programme. In 1976 a Convention on Conservation of Nature in the South Pacific (the Apia Convention) committed a limited number of SPC members to wildlife and habitat protection in the South Pacific.¹² When a more substantive developmental commitment was wanted, however, institutional demarcation reared its head. The rivalry that characterized relations between the SPC and the politically active South Pacific Forum¹³ ensured that the idea could not be captured wholly by either body. Instead, what came to be called the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme proceeded as a shared activity from its establishment in 1980. It was lodged in Noumea with the SPC, which also provided secretariat services, while the forum's economic arm, the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation (SPEC) provided the chair for the annual co-ordinating meeting of the four agencies involved in the programme—the SPC, SPEC, and two United Nations agencies. From 1982, when its first Action Plan for Managing the Natural Resources of the South Pacific Region was drafted, SPREP enjoyed increased autonomy within the SPC framework.¹⁴ This Action Plan, which has been revised four times in the years since, has provided the basic direction for SPREP and its work programme.

Increasing enthusiasm for the potential of a regional approach to environmental protection led in 1986 to the drafting of the Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region (the SPREP Convention).¹⁵ The Convention was intended to commit its parties to protecting the natural land and marine resources of the South Pacific, particularly through its protocols on waste dumping and pollution emergencies. Again, the effect of formulating an instru-

ment for co-operation tended to stimulate a desire for greater institutional autonomy. The Convention did not, however, create SPREP as an IGO. This did not occur until the early 1990s. The programme's supporters were especially active among the members of the South Pacific Forum (now the Pacific Islands Forum) because the political aspects of environmental protection were becoming increasingly significant globally. They wished to participate in these debates with the assistance of SPREP as well as to get out from under the SPC charter's ban on political activities.¹⁶ By 1990, this sentiment was sufficiently solidified to lead this group within SPREP to seek full legal autonomy. A ministerial-level meeting of SPREP participants in 1991 formally proposed IGO status for SPREP and accepted Samoa's offer to host the headquarters. While the programme moved to Apia in 1992, the Agreement Establishing the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (the Agreement Establishing SPREP) was not opened for signature until the following year.¹⁷ It entered into force on 31 August 1995, when Niue became the tenth country to ratify the agreement. Its origins in the SPC continued to be a significant influence on the new IGO, however. SPREP's membership remained nearly identical to that of the SPC rather than mirroring the politically more restrictive membership of the South Pacific Forum.¹⁸

The breadth of membership has been a mixed blessing for SPREP. It has allowed retention of the geographic comprehensiveness of the SPC but at the cost of some of the political authority of the forum. Also, at times SPREP is compelled by its funding arrangements to distinguish between those activities open to all its PIC members and those available only to the forum's PIC members, as some donors exclude dependencies from using their assistance. The balance between cost and benefit in SPREP's compromise over its membership might be debated, but it does seem to have worked surprisingly well in practice. Even those PICs lacking the international legal personality to sign the SPREP agreement have been able to become members in their own right and participate generally in the organization's activities. However, at times SPREP is unable to transcend an advisory role to act on behalf of its membership. It is scarcely as politically constrained as is the SPC, but the political diversity of its membership imposes practical limitations on how far it can go with an issue and how fully it can count on the support of its members. Nevertheless, SPREP has become a robust and active agency for environmental protection well supported by its members. The extent of this support may be seen both in SPREP's growth as an institution and in its expanding work programme.

SPREP's first annual report records a staff of 53 and a global budget of \$US7,327,289, but with only \$US563,245 (8 per cent) coming from members for what were described

as ‘primary functions’.¹⁹ Its last published report gives figures of 71 staff and \$US7,768,633, with core funding from members largely unchanged.²⁰ While the growth may appear modest, the absolute sums raised are substantial in their own right and provide a significant base for the South Pacific’s co-operation in environmental protection. Secondly, it is noteworthy that these come largely from outside the region from sources that would not be able to contribute to a regional environmental programme without a vehicle such as SPREP.²¹ It should be recalled that, whatever growth has occurred, it has taken place in an era of general contraction of support for the regional IGOs.²² In addition, this growth included a substantial commitment in the form of a new headquarters opened in 2000 just outside Apia, near the former home of Robert Louis Stevenson at Vailima. The work programme of SPREP has grown over the past six years as well. AusAID, the Australian aid agency, reviewed SPREP in 2000 and found that the organization had provided annually between 120 and 150 acts of assistance or projects to its PIC members in recent years.²³ These activities ranged over five major programme areas under the 1997–2000 Action Plan:

1. biodiversity and natural resource conservation;
2. climate change and integrated coastal management;
3. waste management, pollution prevention, and emergencies;
4. environmental management, planning, and institutional strengthening; and
5. environmental education, information, and training.²⁴

Projects under each of these areas were divided between ‘international/regional activities’ and ‘in-country activities’, with SPREP taking the lead in the former. ‘In-country activities’ have tended to be in the form of assistance to individual members in meeting their identified environmental needs.

This thematic approach has been maintained in the 2001–2004 Action Plan, which has regrouped the 1997–2000 Action Plan programme areas under four headings or ‘key result areas’:

1. nature conservation;
2. pollution prevention;
3. climate change and variability; and
4. economic development.²⁵

The first three of these areas continued many of the programmes and projects of the earlier Action Plan, but the fourth—economic development—has made a bold play for a role long dominated by other regional agencies. ‘Nature conservation’ as a rubric covers such activities as the con-

servation area approach to promoting biodiversity; extended training in ecosystems management; and the promotion of public awareness of biosafety. Although ‘pollution prevention’ has displayed many elements of continuity from the earlier plan, it seeks to develop new projects in the areas of hazardous-waste pollution control; marine pollution; and waste minimization. The area of ‘climate change’ clearly addresses the Pacific islands’ long-standing anxieties with regard to sea-level rise. However, the projects listed under this heading demonstrate the constraints on the PICs in responding constructively. Projects here focus on promoting understanding the issue and enhancing the regional monitoring capacity as well as offering policy advice on responding to the issue.

It would be unfair to suggest that the area of ‘economic development’ has been added specifically to claim priority within the Pacific islands for SPREP at Johannesburg on sustainable development. Nevertheless, it has reinforced the role SPREP will play at the WSSD. The projects that SPREP will pursue in this issue area do not seek to challenge the development activities of other regional agencies so as to claim a leading role in interpreting and advising on the economic consequences of environmental protection. This applies particularly to projects aimed at improving the linkages between national planning and environmental strategies; assessing the environmental impact of tourism; and considering aspects of urbanization. Just how well SPREP will manage this entrepreneurial role within the regional system will depend on how aggressively it is pursued and how the other agencies react to this ‘economic’ elaboration of the SPREP mandate over the next few years.

The International Response to the Region’s Environmental Protection Needs

The process of institutionalizing SPREP as a regional IGO contributed both to the form and to the content of the current environmental protection regime in the South Pacific. And these origins demonstrated most powerfully the international dimension to environmental protection in the region. International co-operation necessarily stands at the centre of the SPREP regime, but it appears in many guises. Naturally, the routine operation of SPREP’s governance mechanisms (annual officials’ meetings, regular workshops, occasional ministerial meetings, and four-yearly regional conservation conferences) serves as a key mechanism in promoting international co-operation. Its annual officials’ meeting brings together 26 countries to consider the region’s environmental protection needs and to devise programmes and projects to address those needs. Its institutionality brings together resources from members and donors to pay for these activities. SPREP’s work programme and the opportunity to use its organizational

strengths to advance the environmental objectives of other nations and agencies in the South Pacific has added substantially to its international impact. Indeed, as noted above in the discussion of the sources of the SPREP budget, one of the more significant contributions that SPREP makes to environmental protection in the South Pacific is that its existence makes available an institutional vehicle for raising and distributing large amounts of extra-regional aid for use in the region.

The development of an institutional platform greatly assisted the quality of international co-operation, but it was not the sum of international co-operation in support of an environmental protection regime in the South Pacific during the 1980s and 1990s. The very process of giving SPREP legal corporeality proved to be a significant factor in its own right. Some of the more important international conventions promoting environmental protection in the South Pacific were drafted through, or associated with, SPREP before it became an IGO. The more important developments within the SPREP process included conventions to bind members of the regime to new areas of co-operation or to prevent extra-regional activity from threatening regional environmental values. The first of these was the 1986 Convention for the Protection of the Natural Resources and Environment of the South Pacific Region (SPREP Convention).²⁶ This Convention added in the same year a specific Protocol for the Prevention of Pollution of the South Pacific Region by Dumping.²⁷ Even the treaty that established SPREP as an autonomous IGO did more than address the needs of institutionality. Its ambit of operations set out specific obligations for promoting environmental protection that went well beyond the 1986 SPREP Convention and entrenched fundamental elements of its Action Plans, such as monitoring the environment, promoting public awareness, and transferring knowledge through training.

As important as the SPREP-related treaties are, parallel actions outside the regime itself have added real value to environmental protection in the South Pacific. The most symbolically important of these was the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty (SPNFZ), given the impact that nuclear testing has had on the course of regionalism in the South Pacific.²⁸ This 1985 treaty was negotiated under the auspices of the South Pacific Forum, and it is unlikely, even had it enjoyed institutional autonomy at the time, that SPREP could have been the lead agency for it. French and American membership in SPREP would have proved an impossible obstacle. This capacity by the region to pursue its environmental objectives through various channels has proved a benefit rather than a sign of weakness in the SPREP regime itself. Indeed, the forum has proved especially productive in politically contentious areas. The Convention to Ban the Importation into Forum Island Coun-

tries of Hazardous and Radioactive Wastes and to Control the Transboundary Movement and Management of Hazardous Wastes within the South Pacific Region (the Waigani Convention) is just such a measure. SPREP may not have been able to provide leadership for this treaty but the forum could.²⁹ This agreement, which adds a regional dimension to the 1989 Basel Convention, helps to reinforce the pollution-control measures introduced through the 1986 SPREP Convention and its subsequent protocol on ocean dumping. SPREP was nominated to provide secretariat services for the Waigani Convention, however. The central position that SPREP has come to occupy within the region in assisting its members with major multilateral environmental treaties has not come without a price. According to an Australian aid agency review, SPREP may be neglecting the Apia and SPREP conventions—its basic charter obligations—while promoting the aims of other treaties.³⁰

While SPREP has inherited a great deal from its origins within the SPC and historical ties to the South Pacific Forum, the broader regime has enjoyed support from other regional organizations in the South Pacific. The most celebrated of these legal instruments is the 1989 Convention for the Prohibition of Fishing with Long Driftnets in the South Pacific (the Wellington Driftnet Convention).³¹ This environmental measure to curtail both wasteful fishing and destructive by-catch methods was sponsored by the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). While it did not directly involve SPREP, the Wellington Driftnet Convention was influenced by data on fishing collected and maintained by the SPC, which then housed SPREP, and where interaction among programmes was common. SPREP's marine living resources interests continue to keep it involved with the SPC and the FFA—a relationship that has been cemented through a recent Global Environment Facility (GEF) project. The Strategic Action Programme for International Waters of the Pacific Small Island Developing States is an ambitious five-year project to assist participating countries in developing management and conservation arrangements for their oceanic fisheries resources. An integrated coastal watershed component of this activity will focus, *inter alia*, on freshwater supplies, marine protected areas, and sustainable coastal fisheries. Climate change research similarly has developed closer relations with another regional agency—the South Pacific Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC).

National Implementation

There are several important aspects to the influence of the SPREP regime on the national implementation of environmental protection. First and perhaps foremost has been the consciousness-raising role the regime has played across

the region. When the SPREP regime began in the mid-1970s, very few Pacific island countries had governmental divisions or departments dealing with the environment, while today virtually all do.³² Secondly, the regime has played a capacity augmentation role for individual PIC members by offering outside assistance in cases where these small island states would be unable to address matters solely from their own resources. Generally this tends to be viewed from the perspective of aid or expertise, but the value of information sharing about broader issues and diplomatic support to enable national positions in international fora should not be underestimated. Many of SPREP's PIC members could not meet the demands made of them by the international community or be able to participate in relevant international conventions if their national efforts were not augmented by SPREP resources. Thirdly, through the agency of the SPREP organization, direct aid transfers and programmes are offered to assist members to meet their own internal national environmental objectives.

From early in the 1990s, SPREP has assisted its Pacific islands membership with the development of National Environment Management Strategies (NEMS). These assessments of national environmental protection needs have served subsequently as benchmarks for progress not only by SPREP's developing members but also for SPREP itself.³³ Because the NEMS were located very firmly in the development role of SPREP, it is scarcely surprising that nearly half (49 per cent) of the NEMS priorities revolved around meeting the constraints on underdeveloped countries facing environmental challenges. The needs identified in the NEMS focused on capacity building, training assistance, institutional strengthening, and the like.³⁴ Indeed, the AusAID review of SPREP found that about 86 per cent of one set of NEMS proposals were for 'preparatory and supportive activities rather than for actual implementation of resource management action'.³⁵ While this review was relatively accepting of SPREP's efforts to meet the needs recorded in the NEMS, it expressed concern at the failure of member PICs to follow up on their obligations and to allocate resources for national implementation.³⁶ The report does not specify the grounds for this finding, although SPREP's director, Tamari'i Tutangata, indicated recently that SPREP's PIC members were unable to implement fully its programmes due to 'funding and equipment problems'.³⁷ However much such an explanation might be expected in a developing nations context, if valid, it does suggest a continuing imbalance between SPREP's programme goals and its members' capacity.

Just how highly national implementation should be ranked in evaluating SPREP may be a moot point. As noted above, SPREP's mandate is defined in terms of promoting co-operation in the South Pacific region and pro-

viding assistance to the region's developing members to achieve its environmental goals. Clearly its primary role is to assist its members to co-operate in meeting their international objectives and to aid them in protecting their national environmental assets. It is not a prescriptive regime that seeks national compliance with independently established regime standards. Thus SPREP has not been heavily or directly engaged with the irresponsible logging practices in Melanesia or with land-sourced marine pollution from mining. Both of these might be addressed under conventions that fall within the broader SPREP regime, but the remedies have generally been left to bilateral mechanisms or more political avenues within the regional system. The SPREP contribution to national implementation of environmental protection in the South Pacific has tended to be limited to capacity building, consciousness raising, and technical aid transfers.

Impact of the SPREP Regime

There can be little doubt that the SPREP regime has had a significant and positive impact on the problem of environmental protection in the South Pacific. This may be seen in the two levels at which the regime operates. Internationally, SPREP is both a product of international cooperation and a vehicle for promoting multilateral cooperation. The access that its PIC members have had to international environmental issues is striking, as is their capacity to articulate a common regional perspective on important international issues. SPREP has also had a profound effect at the domestic level, particularly through aid transfers and capacity building. A substantial factor in the regime's impact is the organization at the heart of the regime. Without SPREP, it is doubtful that so many small and impoverished countries could have acted in concert across so many issues or have achieved such an international impact. This impression of success is not just one from the perspective of the PICs.

According to the AusAID review, SPREP has been an effective organization, albeit not without some difficulties. It raised nearly \$US30 million in the five years from 1995 to 2000 for environmental projects, represented the region and its PIC members well in international environmental fora, and amassed a substantial database on the region's environment.³⁸ However, an assessment of a sample of 16 SPREP projects led the review team to conclude that, although its projects were reasonably effective, more could be done to improve their long-term impact. It found that too many projects were 'good' or 'best practice' in reaching their planned outcomes but were less successful in contributing to SPREP's longer-range goals. The review noted that the funding structure of the organization placed too much emphasis on individual projects rather than on pur-

suings an integrated programme of activities. This appeared an inevitable consequence not just because the aid execution aspect of SPREP's work programme tends to compel a project orientation, but also as a practical effect of accountability in meeting the requirements of individual project donors.

The major elements of the international impact of SPREP as an effective regional agent for environmental protection have been canvassed above. However, there can be little better illustration of the growing value of this impact than in the role that SPREP has played in preparing the region and its members for the Johannesburg World Summit. SPREP's secretariat has co-chaired the regional working group established within the South Pacific's inter-agency co-ordination mechanism—the Council of Regional Organizations in the Pacific (CROP). SPREP researchers and officials have contributed both to the process of regional consultation and to major elements of the regional submission, including participation in the Asia-Pacific preparatory meeting (November 2001) and the Small Island Developing States preparatory meeting (January 2002). There has been a profound change from the situation that existed before the 1992 Earth Summit.

Barriers to Progress

Several outstanding issues suggest that, as successful as the SPREP regime has been over the past decade, there are legitimate grounds for some doubt about the future. The potential impediments range from the scale of the challenges facing the region, through the difficulties of holding its diverse membership together, to the organizational issues confronting SPREP. Naturally, there is a mismatch between the PICs and planetary problems such as global warming, but this asymmetry exists virtually across the board for all issues, especially for the 20 SPREP members smaller than Fiji. As noted above, despite the importance of the South Pacific Forum members in securing the autonomy of SPREP, the organization's formal membership is larger and more politically diverse. As the demands of effective environmental protection escalate, the difficulties in maintaining consensus also increase. Not surprisingly, this obstacle looms largest where the greatest national interests are involved. The most public of these areas of internal conflict is Australia's position on the Kyoto Protocol. Climate change is simply too serious a threat for the low-lying islands at risk to take lightly.³⁹ While this dispute does not undermine the other work of SPREP, it does demonstrate the constraints imposed on the organization with the diversity of membership it maintains.

Over the past decade, the SPREP regime has come to revolve more tightly around its organizational core, and thus SPREP's institutional health must figure very promi-

nently in any speculation about its future. The critical issue for SPREP as an IGO is the evolving international system. It is significant that, when SPREP was moved from its ambiguous programme status under the SPC, its name was not changed. This was a deliberate ploy by supporters of the change in the organization's status. The timing of the change in status was somewhat unfortunate as SPREP was established as an IGO amid the collapse of the Cold War. Although there were already straws in the wind indicating that post-Cold War support for regional organizations in the South Pacific was declining,⁴⁰ members of the South Pacific Forum, especially New Zealand, wanted to give SPREP's activities a higher level of institutional support than appeared to be available through the SPC. Hence they resolved to secure an autonomous existence for SPREP. The forum members, nevertheless, were aware that highlighting the IGO status of SPREP would attract questions about the additional cost-sharing burden that its institutionalization would require. These issues had to be addressed to complete the process, but, by dealing with them after the decision was made to establish SPREP as an autonomous body, the first decision to pursue autonomy was less fraught. An important legacy of this process was an uncertain subscription formula for members that treats the annual assessments as 'voluntary'.

The difficulty of this historical baggage for SPREP as it faces the challenges of the twenty-first century arises from the impact of diminishing institutional support from external donors in the region. The PIC members of SPREP have only limited capacity to pay for the costs of the operation of the organization. Indeed, donors pay for at least 90 per cent of SPREP's activities. Moreover, the four non-PIC members pay the bulk of the remaining 10 per cent that comes from members and that goes to paying for the organization's core costs.⁴¹ This makes for a number of institutional difficulties that loom large on the horizon. The members' contributions have not increased, thus widening the gap between the organization's administrative budget and its donor-funded activities budget. Perhaps the most serious consequence of this is the greater leverage given to donors over the work programme of SPREP. Certainly it has contributed significantly to the problem of integrating its projects and activities more cogently into a disciplined regional programme. It also raises issues of 'ownership' of these activities and imposes more burdens on SPREP's governance processes. These organizational challenges are intractable, but they must be managed if the regime is to become more robust and effective. Perhaps the most encouraging sign for the future is the evidence that the problems are being recognized and addressed. And, in contrast with other areas of regionalism in the South Pacific, SPREP's experience does show real signs of coping with these difficulties in large measure because

it has earned the strong support of its members. If the SPREP regime is to remain vital in the twenty-first century, such support will need to increase commensurate with the diversifying environmental challenges.

Notes and References

The author gratefully acknowledges the comments of Robert Hall, Richard Kenchington, Eve Richards, and Olav Schram Stokke on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. The South Pacific region stretches from Palau to Pitcairn and from the Northern Marianas to New Caledonia.
2. For an overview of the region's system of IGOs, see Richard A. Herr (1998), 'Restructuring Foreign and Defence Policy: the Pacific Islands', in Anthony McGrew and Christopher Brook (eds.), *Asia-Pacific in the New World Order* (London: Routledge/Open University).
3. Found at website, <<http://www.sprep.org.ws/>>.
4. For a general treatment of this diversity, see Christopher S. Lobban and Maria Scheffer (1997), *Tropical Pacific Island Environments* (Mangilao: University of Guam Press).
5. Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2000), *Pocket Statistical Summary 2000* (Noumea: Pacific Community).
6. Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu.
7. Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Niue, and Palau.
8. American Samoa, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Northern Marianas, Pitcairn, Tokelau, and Wallis and Futuna.
9. Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2000), *Pocket Statistical Summary 2000*. Nauru's figures are not available, but this once wealthy microstate is in the throes of a serious economic readjustment in the wake of the depletion of its phosphate.
10. Anon. (1999), 'Smaller all the Time', *Environment*, 41: 10, 9.
11. SPREP (South Pacific Regional Environment Programme) (1995/6), *Annual Report*, Apia, 9. The SPC still uses this acronym but was renamed in 1998 as the Pacific Community.
12. *Australian Treaty Series* (1990), no. 41.
13. The South Pacific Forum has a political mandate and is comprised of the 14 independent and self-governing PICs plus Australia and New Zealand.
14. SPREP (1995/6), *Annual Report*, Apia, 9.
15. *Australian Treaty Series* (1990), no. 31.
16. The South Pacific Forum owed its creation in large part to this limitation. Being forced to keep its activities 'non-political', the PIC members of the SPC had been unable to use this arena to attack French nuclear testing in the region. In 1971, the independent and self-governing countries invited Australia and New Zealand to join them in a new arrangement that would have political competency—a heads-of-government meeting called the South Pacific Forum.
17. *Australian Treaty Series* (1995), no. 24.
18. It includes all the 22 PICs that are members of the SPC as well as four of the five 'metropolitan' states of the SPC—Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States. Only one SPC member—the United Kingdom—has remained outside SPREP.
19. SPREP (1995/6), *Annual Report*, 35–6 and 40.
20. SPREP (2000), *Annual Report*, i. It should be noted that membership subscriptions have not increased in the years since 1995 and that these fees are 'non-compulsory' (personal communication).
21. The largest share of SPREP's work programme is paid for from 'extra-budgetary' funds (funding that is not derived from members' assessed subscriptions). While the percentage varies from year to year, SPREP *Annual Reports* suggest that the four non-PIC members—Australia, France, New Zealand, and the USA—contribute only about 40 per cent of these extra-budgetary funds. Thus other sources, such as various UN agencies and non-member countries, contribute the majority of the funding for SPREP activities.
22. 'Regional Programmes in Danger' (1998), *Pacific Islands Monthly* (December), 28.
23. AusAID (2000), *SPREP 2000: Review of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme – Summary Report*, 12.
24. SPREP (1997), *Action Plan for Managing the Environment of the South Pacific Region: 1997–2000*, Apia.
25. SPREP (2000), *Action Plan for Managing the Environment of the Pacific Islands Region: 2001–2004*, Apia.
26. *Australian Treaty Series* (1990), no. 31. This treaty is also sometimes known as the Noumea Convention, perhaps to help distinguish it better from the SPREP Agreement that established SPREP as an IGO.
27. Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (1986), *Select Documents on International Affairs*, no. 34: 6, 176.
28. *Australian Treaty Series* (1986), no. 32.
29. This convention is not yet in force, but its details are available through the Australian Treaties Library website, <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/>>.
30. AusAID (2000), *SPREP 2000: Review of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme – Summary Report*, 5.
31. *Australian Treaty Series* (1992), no. 30.
32. SPREP (2000), *Annual Report*, Apia, ii.
33. AusAID (2000), *SPREP 2000: Review of the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme – Summary Report*, 4.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Tamari'i Tutangata (2002), 'SPREP's Year Ahead', *Pacific Islands Monthly* (February), 48.
38. *Ibid.*, 11–12.
39. Jemima Garrett (1998), 'Climate Debacle', *Pacific Islands Monthly* (January), 55.
40. 'Fisheries Aid: Patterns and Sources' (1990), in Richard A. Herr (ed.), *The Forum Fisheries Agency* (Suva: University of the South Pacific), 188.
41. SPREP (1995/6), *Annual Report*, Apia, 4.

