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## **Adapting and reacting to Covid-19: Tourism and resilience in the South Pacific**

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### **Abstract**

As with small islands around the globe, many of the island states of the South Pacific are heavily dependent on tourism revenue. This article examines how tourism development and its disturbance by Covid-19 has influenced socio-cultural and economic changes among Indigenous communities in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Samoa, Cook Islands, and Fiji. In particular, it demonstrates how the cessation of international tourism in established destination communities has created shifts in the way people live and their livelihood approaches which have moved towards a revival of customary practices. This study was led by Massey University researchers through partnerships with research associates (RAs) based in-country: an online survey and on-site interviews by RAs, along with Zoom interviews by the authors, provided primary data. The paper argues that although Covid-19 has had difficult financial consequences, it has also motivated innovative, culturally-based responses that allow people to adapt effectively to the loss in income associated with border closures. Such changes point to valuable lessons that could inform the management of more resilient tourism in the Pacific.

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## Introduction and Background

Tourism has become a source of economic sustenance for many Small Island Developing States (SIDS). It is favoured by many Pacific countries for its foreign investment and employment potential, and more recently, as a tool to further the sustainable development agenda (Movono & Hughes, 2020; Ayres, 2000). Countries that are the focus of this study - Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and the Cook Islands - depend on tourism for thousands of jobs and it contributes between 10 and 70 percent of their GDP; thus tourism is seen as an ideal development option (South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), 2018, p. 12; Movono, Harrison, & Pratt, 2015; Harrison & Prasad, 2013). However, the near-collapse of the global tourism system resulting from Covid-19 has revealed tourism's vulnerability and susceptibility to sudden shocks, especially in SIDS countries of the Pacific region.

Tourism was first introduced to the Pacific in the late 1900s, and catapulted forwards as a result of the economic examples set by Hawaii and Tahiti (Belt, Collins & Associates, 1973). Pacific states' small industrial base and geographical isolation mean that there are limited economic prospects in the agriculture and manufacturing industries (Harrison and Prasad, 2013). Thus, from the 1960s onwards, tourism became sought after, and was encouraged as a means of providing social and economic growth for most newly formed nation-states. Consequently, for most of the larger and more accessible island states such as Fiji, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, and Samoa, tourism is their primary industry (Rao, 2002; Douglas & Douglas, 1996). Tourism has been described as the backbone industry for many countries such as Fiji, where tourism replaced the sugar industry as the largest foreign exchange earner in the 1980s (Harrison & Prasad, 2013). The Cook Islands, New Caledonia, Samoa, and Vanuatu all have fewer than 300,000 residents, but have received in excess of 100,000 visitors per annum since 2017, contributing to high percentages of total employment and GDP (SPTO, 2019). Thus, before Covid-19, tourism provided over \$US 1.5 billion to South Pacific Tourism Organisation member countries, also being an influential employer.

Tourism's prominence in the Pacific was severely disrupted because of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is despite the fact that up until the end of 2021 there had been low numbers, or no cases of coronavirus in many countries of the region due to effective border closures and other measures. While a number of scholars, government organisations and industry groups have examined the impacts of the pandemic on tourism businesses and employment levels around the globe (Abbaspou, Soltani., & Tham, 2020; Baum, & Hai.,2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020), in this research we take a different focus, focusing on the situations of people living in the communities most directly impacted by tourism shut-downs. This includes a range of affected people, for example, former employees of hotels and resorts, taxi drivers and shop owners, along with wider households and neighbours that have also felt the implications of the loss of tourism-related income. Also crucial to this paper is understanding what resources islanders are turning to, and the various livelihood strategies that they are adopting without income from tourism. Understanding Pacific Island people's adaptive responses to sudden perturbations is vital, with far-reaching

implications for resilience in the face of inevitable future shocks and uncertainties, including those associated with climate change. This paper will provide insights into how people of the South Pacific react and adapt to life without tourism under the pandemic cloud, revealing findings that could inform improved tourism management for the future.

We begin by surveying the newly emerging literature on Covid-19's impacts on tourism around the world, and options going forward, focusing especially on small island states. We then examine some of the resilience literature, and consider its implications for the management of regenerative and sustainable tourism. The paper will outline the research methods employed, and present the study's findings and conclusions. Central to our findings is that Pacific people's coping strategies are inward-looking, depending on traditional knowledge systems, practices and customary land. In turn, they are spurring deep reflections, complex and adaptive responses, which are reducing people's vulnerabilities and building resilience.

## Literature Review

### *Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Tourism and Ways Forward*

It is now evident that Covid-19 has caused massive economic shocks around the world, particularly to the tourism industry and those countries which rely most heavily upon it. As one writer comments, "the [tourism] sector has arguably been one of the hardest hit by the crisis to date" (Barkas et al., 2020, p.3). The ILO estimates that in 2020 there was a worldwide loss of US \$3.5 trillion from labour income, which is the equivalent of 495 million full time equivalent jobs (Walsh & Gammarano, 2020). Travel restrictions have limited tourism due to lack of tourist mobility, and lockdowns – plus social distancing protocols – have decreased tourist activities, even within the domestic sphere (Barkas et al., 2020). Small, medium and micro sized enterprises are the most vulnerable to the economic shocks that Covid-19 has caused (OECD, 2020). The OECD (2020) has released a report into economic recovery for tourism, and they find that, although there will be an overall 80 percent decrease in the industry for 2020, where domestic tourism is on the rise this will help recovery in the short term (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Baum & Hai, 2020). While this is good news for larger, wealthier countries, most SIDS have limited domestic tourism potential (Prasad, 2014), thus this market does not provide much of a buffer in this unprecedented time of a global decline in international travel.

SIDS with heavy rates of dependence on tourism were seen to be those most affected by coronavirus' impacts on international travel (Filho et al., 2020). For example, countries such as Fiji and the Cook Islands depend heavily on tourism for over 40% of foreign exchange earnings and as a main source of employment (Prasad, 2014). The pandemic has affected some SIDS directly, compromising the health of those like French Polynesia, whose borders remained open for much of 2020 when tourism helped to spread the pandemic through air and sea travel (Hoarau, 2020). Others faced direct impacts through business closures; massive rates of job loss have been

a reality across most tourism-dependent islands (Dinarto et al., 2020; Steenbergen et al., 2020). Tourism reliant islands have seen a range of other impacts too, such as food insecurity due to heavy reliance on imported foods (Hickey & Unwin, 2020). In others, public health measures regarding restricted mobility have prevented the distribution of imported and locally-grown foods. This has been the case in Vanuatu, inadvertently putting pressure on traditional food and fishing grounds which have become a source of sustenance to many more people than usual (Steenbergen et al., 2020).

The tourism industry now has the opportunity to transform and change the way it operates into the future (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2020; Brouder, 2020). As Baum & Hain (2020) note, “existing tourism planning manuals and textbooks will need to be torn up and thrown away” (Baum & Hain, 2020, p.204). One group of scholars has taken a critical stance, urging the need for de-growth of the industry in order to recentre tourism in a way which benefits local communities and commits to social and ecological justice (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Everingham & Chassange, 2020). Tourism has, it is argued, for too long been allowed to impact negatively on host communities and cause ecological destruction, such as through mass cruise tourism (Everingham & Chassange, 2020; Renaud, 2020). Crossley (2020) believes that the stories shown of ecological healing during lockdown, such as the clean canals in Venice, offer inspiration. We are told that this is a time to renew and use more regenerative practices to let the planet heal (Ateljevic, 2020), while also challenging the oppressive capitalist and neoliberal systems which have dominated tourism for so long (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020; Benjamin et al., 2020; Renaud, 2020).

Other scholars have identified new opportunities for innovation in the tourism industry, and are hopeful for reforms. Everything from e-tourism (Gretzel et al., 2020; Fletcher et al., 2020), through to adventure tourism (Nepal, 2020) and medical tourism (Abbaspour et al., 2020) has been promoted in response to the pandemic, and these have provided ideas for economic recovery. Some are reorientating the experience of tourism towards host communities, completely reimagining the tourism experience in a destination (Lapointe, 2020; Cheer, 2020; Haywood, 2020). Indigenous peoples and those from the Global South have been some of the most impacted by the Covid-19 crisis; thus, it is argued, they deserve to be at the forefront of the recovery (Carr, 2020; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020). More people are talking about adopting restorative forms of tourism through wellness (Esfandiari & Choobchian, 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2020). With regard to the latter, it is suggested that if we centre tourism recovery on Indigenous peoples, their perspectives could help planners to reimagine more sustainable and just ways forward for the industry (Carr, 2020; Hutchison et al., 2021). For example, the Indigenous framework of Buen Vivir is seen as a way to regenerate our planet and shift away from exploitative and intensive tourism practices of the past (Everingham & Chassange, 2020).

In the context of SIDS, some scholars believe that change needs to occur in order for islands to deal better with shocks in the future. Hoarau (2020) echoes the calls by a number of commentators for greater economic diversification in order to counter vulnerability associated with an overreliance on tourism. Meanwhile, Sheller (2020), discussing the Caribbean, purports that we

need to have more development that is directed by community-based organisations, and that is centred on ideas such as food sovereignty and regenerative economies, which could help to support people in the face of future disasters as well as sustaining the tourism industry. Others agree that enhancing local food production systems would build resilience of island peoples to future shocks (Hickey & Unwin, 2020).

Overall, then, there is coherence in the above literature in terms of themes of diversification, regeneration, and community-directed pathways towards resilience-building. In order to understand how resilience could help to protect those involved in the tourism industry from further shocks (Prayag, 2020; Honeck & Kappel 2020; Flew & Kirkwood, 2020), particularly in the context of SIDS, we turn to literature on socio-ecological systems and resilience.

### *Social-Ecological Systems and Resilience*

With its theoretical foundations rooted in ecology and the natural sciences, the term resilience is described as “a measure of the persistence of systems and their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations and state variables” (Holling, 1973, p. 14). The term has since evolved to include community resilience, which considers the different elements of a system and their capacities, resources, and willingness to adjust to obtain an acceptable level of functioning and structure (Bec et al., 2016; Brondizio et al., 2009). Research on resilience is required within a tourism-based community context, to expand the concept of community resilience to include rapid forces of change, such as natural disasters and the pandemic.

Movono et al. (2017) established that Pacific island communities, especially in Fiji, are social and ecological systems having multiple and embedded elements that do not have one fixed point of equilibrium. Communities of the Pacific have a zone of stability entrenched within their cultural practices, allowing for the harnessing of various forms of capital, and facilitating the reorganisation of communal systems to maintain survival and adapt to multiple stages of tourism development and its associated volatilities (Movono et al., 2017; Collier, 2015; Bhandari, 2013). Gallopin (2006) proposed that communities that have adapted to specific forms of economic activity like tourism cannot return to their former state. Unlike engineered structures, societies are changing, continually responding to internal and external pressures, hinting at the centrality of adaptive capacity in resilience (Holland, 1992). This supports the notion that stability must not necessarily be about “bouncing back” to the same state, but must also appreciate the complex processes of change and adaptation initiated by people as they respond to sudden shocks (Walker et al., 2004).

The primary elements required to understanding community resilience theory within communities include notions of adaptive capacity, transformation, and structural change (Neely, 2015; Hammer et al., 2012; Gallopin, 2006; Walker et al., 2006). Adaptive capacity refers to the processes and patterns of human behaviour that change to maintain a system within critical thresholds (Movono et al., 2017; Holling, 1973). It is suggested by some that communities engage in a cyclical process

of continuous reorganisation within a system (Allen et al., 2014). Such changes have been modelled in what is referred to as the Holling Loop, also referred to as the Resilience Cycle. The cycle begins with reorganisation, leading to exploitation (where new systems are created), conservation (building for a more stable state), and release (next disturbance event) (Holling, 2001). The resilience cycle makes it possible to focus on community capacities to respond, learn, adapt, and prepare for future shocks. Self-organisation and drawing from internal resources ensure that the system can cope with any unforeseen circumstances (Folke et al., 2003; Gunderson & Holling, 2002).

On the other hand, transformation involves a more drastic path resulting in a system's collapse or shifts, influencing transformational change with an entirely new system structure (Holland, 2006; Holling, 1973). Cretney (2014) added that such change is dependent on willingness, capacity, and ability to change, distinguishing resilience from general capabilities. Community social, cultural, and ecological capacities must be empirically examined to better understand strengths (Cretney, 2014), and such information could be essential to post-pandemic tourism management. More importantly, understanding community capacities and livelihoods activities can spur structural changes within a community, leading to reorganisation, and creating more robust systems that have the necessary framework to support communities in the longer term (Connolly & Lewis, 2010).

Gallopín (2006) reviewed the concept of community resilience in detail and elaborated on the differences and interrelationships between vulnerability and adaptive capacity as academic concepts. Both Gallopín and Folke (2006) hinted that if adaptability is vital to attaining improved resilience, emerging frameworks must endeavour to encompass the prevalent ecological and socio-political contexts. The increased awareness of the complex relationships and links between society and the environment has helped catapult resilience into the mainstream through the significant theoretical advancements in social and ecological resilience (Folke et al., 2003; Adger, 2000). Folke et al. (2003) agreed that these links between system elements could either work against one another, or for mutual benefit and, in the process, affect the overall resilience of a system.

Essentially, a systems approach focuses on people and socio-ecological engagement as part of an interrelated and interacting system. Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS) theory presents an ideal tool for studying dynamic systems and concepts such as resilience (Coetzee et al., 2015; Morse et al., 2013; Holland, 1992). It focuses on understanding non-linear dynamics and attempts to show how sudden shocks experienced at the macro level can initiate complex changes at the micro-level (Holland, 2006; Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Buckley 1968). CAS, coupled with community resilience principles, opens up opportunities for communities to be examined holistically, allowing for an understanding of how the cessation of macro-level activities such as tourism in the face of the pandemic, can have wide-ranging impacts on people's resilience.

For this particular study, the case study communities are conceptualised as complex systems with social and ecological components that engage with internal and external networks, including

tourism (Movono, 2017). The foundational theory adopted by this research is concerned with complex behaviour that emerges from sudden shocks that stimulate interactions between people, their internal cultural systems, and their multiple resources and capitals (Bec et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2014; Zhou et al., 2010; Walker et al., 2004). Through a dynamic and reflexive process, a Pacific Island community, as a system, can modify its behaviour to adapt to abrupt changes in the background (Movono et al., 2017; Coetzee et al., 2015). CAS is also characterised by the concept of panarchy, which implies that a system can be dynamically influenced internally or externally, yet never return to its original state (Gunderson & Holling, 2002). The use of CAS and resilience theory paves the way for a more targeted approach to be taken when assessing the agility of tourism-based Pacific communities due to the pandemic, and providing an ideal platform with which to suggest long-term structural considerations that can potentially benefit tourism management for the future.

## Methodology

This research was initiated out of concerns shared by the authors about the impacts of the economic slowdown caused by Covid-19 on the already vulnerable tourism-dependent communities of the Pacific. Both authors have been actively researching tourism in the Pacific for some time, with the first author having deep connections with people affected by the pandemic. Inspired by Banks & Scheyvens (2014) and Smith (1999), they regard this study as part of their obligation as researchers to interpret the tourism phenomenon in a manner that is emancipatory and genuine in its concern for Pacific people's sustainable development. It seeks to place people living in tourism destinations at the forefront of understanding adaptation and resilience to create knowledge that can be useful in informing better tourism practices that benefit both people and the planet.

### *A Culturally-Embedded Research Framework*

The Pacific Vanua Research Framework (PVRF) was adopted to guide the methodological orientation of this study and woven into its ethical considerations (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The PVRF attempts to localise research methods, recognise local sensitivities, and decolonise research in the Pacific (Smith, 1999). Vanua research is grounded in Indigenous values which "...supports and affirms existing protocols of relationships, ceremony, and knowledge acquisition. It ensures that the research benefits the *vanua*..." (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p.25), where 'vanua' can refer to both the tribe and the interconnection between people and the land. This project situates Pacific people at the centre of research and uses their systems of knowledge and understandings as the basis for inquiry and investigation, opening the possibilities of extending the knowledge base of Indigenous people and transforming their understanding of the social-cultural world (Nabobo-Baba, 2008, p.141). Using the PVRF appropriately integrates this project's broad aims, with resilience and social and ecological systems theory in its focus. It allows examination of the interrelated and complex socio-economic changes that occur in communities, resulting from

unexpected perturbations. This study hopes to transform global understanding about Pacific islanders' adaptive capacities in the face of adversities such as the pandemic.

### *Covid-19: Adaptive Research in Practice*

This research targets five tourism-reliant countries of the South Pacific, namely, Samoa, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, and Fiji (Figure 1). Using a multi-country approach was necessary to capture insights into how Pacific Islanders in different contexts are coping and changing without tourism income. These Pacific Island states vary considerably in terms of population size, number of visitors annually, and how heavily they relied on tourism for revenue and jobs (shown clearly in Table 1). However, we chose to gather data for this research from specific communities within these countries that had been, prior to Covid-19, heavily dependent on tourism jobs and revenue. It is this point which enabled us to expose similarities in the experiences people had across these different contexts in terms of how they reacted and adapted to the loss of tourism income.

**Table 1:** Comparison of Tourism in Five Pacific Island Countries, 2018

	Population	Visitor Arrivals	Tourism Employment	Tourism Receipts	Tourism revenue as a % of GDP
Fiji	883,000	870,309	41,338	US \$931m	38.90%
Vanuatu	293,000	115,634	15,000	US \$281m	45.90%
Samoa	196,000	167,651	5,158	US \$248m	30.42%
Cook Islands	18,000	168,760	2,386	US \$253m	86.99%
Solomon Islands	653,000	27,866	6,400	US \$81m	12.50%

**Sources:** UN, 2019; South Pacific Tourism Organisation (SPTO), 2019

Pursuing such an endeavour under lockdowns and with significant border restrictions ultimately required research adaptivity to meet the challenges of restricted travel. As the researchers were unable to travel to the Pacific, finding effective remote means of sourcing quality data about tourism-dependent communities' experiences was necessary. The five countries were thus selected both because their tourism sectors were likely to be highly affected due to the pandemic, and because the authors had existing networks and relationships with people in these places.



employees, occupying a broad range of roles from management and business owners to kitchen staff. Just over one quarter, 27 percent of respondents, owned a tourism business, while 58 percent were employed in tourism. The remaining 15 percent were neither, but their views were also solicited because the researchers encouraged anyone living in tourism-dependent communities to complete the survey in order for the researchers to be able to examine the wider impacts of Covi-19. Of the employees, 58 percent were involved in large-scale accommodation (hotels/resorts), with groups of others from aviation, ground transportation, smaller accommodation, tour operators, and 'other' tourism-related businesses such as taxis.

Interviews were also central to our qualitative research (Berger, 2015), but we did this in a hybrid format (using both virtual and physical interviews) by engaging in-country research associates and using the Zoom video calling platform. Interviews took place between July and September 2020. The research associates (RAs), consisting of five females and one male, were approached based on their relationships with the authors, their prior research experience, and their pre-existing links with the specific case study communities. These links provided the necessary access to communities, and were a strong platform from which to engage in meaningful conversations with community members, the majority of whom were directly involved in tourism, while others were involved in a more indirect occupation. The RAs mostly had prior involvement in tourism, either through government or NGO jobs supporting tourism enterprises, or involvement with the private sector. They were trained, via Zoom, about the nature of qualitative research, ethics, their roles, and the benefits they would receive from taking part in the study.

The RAs were asked to conduct interviews (semi-structured conversations with individuals or pairs) or *talanoa* in communities significantly impacted by the downturn in tourism. *Talanoa* are more fluid discussions or sharing of ideas and stories between two or more people; they are deemed a more organic and contextually appropriate method than structured interviews (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). RAs were asked to follow appropriate cultural protocols such as organising *sevusevu* or *koha* as required, and providing refreshments (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). The RA interviews/*talanoa* with participants centred on the following enquiry questions:

1. Please explain impacts of the slowdown in tourism on your family and community.
2. Please explain ways in which you have coped/adapted to the loss of income and other changes caused by Covid-19.
3. Please explain how the slowdown in tourism and the adaptations you made have influenced wellbeing in your family and community (both positive and negative impacts on health, economic wellbeing, cultural and social wellbeing).
4. What aspirations do you have for development of your family and community in the future?
5. What type of tourism development would you like to see here in the future to meet your aspirations?

The RAs were free to decide whether individual interviews or group *talanoa* were most appropriate in each case, given the cultural context. Selection criteria for participants included a person's standing in the community, education, experience, and authority, focusing on community members connected to tourism. In particular, we asked them to specifically seek out the voices of tourism workers, former workers, women, youth, and elders in the communities (See Table 2 for a summary of those who took part in the interviews and *talanoas*). In total, 82 participants across the five countries engaged in either individual or group discussions. The RAs were asked to provide written summary notes and quotations from participants to the research team, using pseudonyms to protect participant identities. Note that we did not ask them to provide full transcripts of interviews/*talanoa*, because most of the RAs had limited time that they could commit to our project, and the interviews were conducted in the appropriate local language, which would have required transcription then translation, an extensive and time-consuming task. Where permission was given, RAs were able to offer audio recordings and photographs in addition to the written report.

**Table 2: Interviewees**

	<b>Interviews &amp; Talanoa</b>	
	Males	Females
<b>Fiji</b>	8	8
<b>Cook Islands</b>	8	8
<b>Samoa</b>	5	7
<b>Vanuatu</b>	26	7
<b>Solomon Islands</b>	1	4
<b>TOTAL</b>	48	34

The information was analysed at the end of the data collection phase to highlight key themes relevant to this study. Reflexivity was possible because the researchers were continuously triangulating data from multiple sources and revisiting the data for further clarification (Mundine, 2012; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Further Zoom meetings with RAs were scheduled during the data collection phase, in August and September, to check on progress and to enable the RAs to present their initial findings. During these meetings, which were recorded, there were efforts to explore both unique and common findings, and it became clear that common themes were emerging in the data collected across all five countries.

One disadvantage of conducting remote research via RAs was that it was challenging to ensure consistency in terms of the process that was followed in each research location, and for the exact data that was collected. We sought to mitigate these issues through the three joint Zoom sessions with RAs, as noted above. In addition to providing opportunities to share initial findings, RAs

would share information on the process they were following, and ask for clarifications or advice; for example, if they were finding that respondents were not forthcoming with answering one of the questions, they would ask if others also had that difficulty and how they had solved the issue. Nevertheless, there were inconsistencies in terms of the interview notes that were provided at the end of the data collection phase. Some RAs summarised and generalised their findings, whereas others provided more detailed notes, recordings, or transcriptions of quotable material: thus we are able to provide more quotes from the Cook Islands, Fijian and Samoan participants than from others. In hindsight, we would advise that when researchers cannot be ‘on the ground’ to support RAs, they should ask for interview notes/transcripts/recordings from the first one or two interviews to be submitted early in the data collection process so that they can be reviewed, and any inconsistencies can be resolved. Nevertheless, doing cross-cultural research from a distance across several different countries, and engaging RAs, will always present challenges, thus researchers need to dedicate more time to preparing RAs and to establish effective and efficient processes for on-going communication with them wherever possible.

## Findings

This section draws on data from both the survey, and the interviews/*talanoa*. Through these sources the participants, who were purposefully selected, provided rich information that sheds light on the socio-economic impacts of the slowdown, but which also details how people in the Pacific are experiencing the problematic situation. It shows clearly how they are learning, reflecting, and seeking out opportunities to use their available resources in order to adapt.

### *Financial Collapse*

A key revelation from the survey was that people suffered immense financial difficulties due to the loss of tourism-based income. The sudden and immediate impacts of the global lockdown and border closures resulted in workers being sent home from hotels, resorts and tour operations. In Fiji alone, 279 hotels and resorts closed down and approximately 25,000 people (either directly or indirectly employed in tourism) were laid off in the first two months of the lockdown (Chanel, 2020). Cook Islands is estimated to have experienced a 60 percent reduction in GDP in the first three months of the pandemic, while in Vanuatu, 70 percent of tourism workers lost their jobs (Pechan, 2020).

Unsurprisingly, Covid-19 has led to drastic reductions in household income across all respondents surveyed. Around 73 percent of the respondents reported that their households had experienced a ‘major decline’ in income, while another 16 percent stated that their households experienced a ‘moderate decline’ in income (Scheyvens et al., 2020). Owners of tourism-related businesses faced particular financial strain; around 85% of them experienced a major decline in earnings, losing three-quarters or more of their usual income (Scheyvens et al., 2020).

The survey data confirmed that loss of livelihoods had led to increased levels of anxiety brought on by the financial struggles. Participants also observed an increase in instances of petty theft, people turning to ‘loan sharks’, alcoholism, violence, family disruptions, and increases in other unwanted social impacts. Participants also stated feeling ‘despair’ and ‘hopelessness,’ especially those dependent on tourism income in the Solomon Islands, when realising they had no backup plans or alternative livelihood sources to support themselves and their families. Quotes from respondents and participants indicate the gravity of the financial pressure on many households, and the links between this, and their social and mental wellbeing. For example, a Cook Islands woman with a tourism-related food business which normally employed four of her family members and provided for two children and two elders as well, said they had earned around NZ\$4,000 per week prior to border closures but that had been reduced to NZ\$180 per week:

“Financial struggles have caused us to exhaust all our resources. Stress of not having food to get by is depressing.”

The owner of a tourism business in Samoa expressed those financial issues also caused tensions within her home:

“Stress comes with no income and you only pay but don’t receive income. This is very difficult and promotes arguments...”

Similarly, a Cook Islands man who normally works in a tourist resort and lives with a large, extended family noted that:

“There's so many people in the house that were fighting over who's going to pay for this, who’s going to pay for that. And so that's why I've got to go out fishing for the family, filling up the freezer for them.”

Despite the financial hardships, some people noted that there were benefits emerging from the loss of income. In the survey, respondents pointed out improvements in household budgeting and financial management skills, and one noted there was, “A lot less wastage and more conscious spending”. In addition to more careful budgeting, the other main strategy used by financially strapped households was to go back to the land and sea as a source of sustenance, as discussed next.

### ***Moving Back to the Land, Drawing on Customary Resources, and Re-learning Old Skills***

The collapse of tourism in the Pacific has meant that tourism-dependent regions and townships where people had migrated for work can no longer be viable as places to live, since people cannot afford to pay rent or meet other costs necessary to sustain life. Many people have said that “COVID has brought me home” to the rural areas, reversing the dominant migration trend from rural to urban areas. Many people who moved back to their villages were prompted to seek alternative livelihoods using whatever means were available; of the five countries we examined, wage subsidies were only offered in Cook Islands.

The survey and interview/*talanoa* findings strongly corroborate one another, showing a wide range of new economic strategies adopted by households, many of which are based on utilizing their customary land and the sea to grow and harvest food. For example, a 28-year-old Samoan man who lost his job as a waiter in a local hotel, stated that,

“This [pandemic] has been an opportunity to go back to work the land and grow plantations and also raise pigs and chickens, things we have neglected for a while...we are now reminded of how useful it is to keep these activities going as we can fall back to it during hard times like the pandemic we face now.”

Respondents talked about using the natural abundance of the land and sea to provide food, with more food being grown or harvested and being shared with others. A businesswoman from Fiji noted that, rather than visiting the supermarket:

“We eat mainly from our plantations, catch our own fish, crab, clams, seaweed and all that's out there that doesn't need cash.”

Some participants in the interviews/*talanoa* specifically noted that “No one is going hungry”<sup>1</sup>. This seemed to be due to a number of factors that were centred upon having access to customary land on which to grow food. This traditional arrangement meant that neighbours, clan members, and members of church communities, were able to help to provide for those who were more vulnerable. There was still sufficient knowledge within communities to teach younger members who had lost jobs about how to grow food and fish – essentially, knowledge and skills of those who had toiled the land in the past were being passed on, re-learned, and given a chance to survive.

The following comment illustrates the opportunity-seeking nature of Pacific Islanders as they adapt by embracing cashless exchange systems and relearning old skills. This Samoan man who was laid off from his long-term job as a resort worker tapped into cultural resources and community capacities to withstand the pressures of the pandemic:

“...I've had to relearn skills that have not been used for years, skills in planting, and especially in fishing. Having to get used to fishing, where to fish again and how to plant crops has brought its challenges, but just after a few months, we are also getting used to it. I am happy and now and feeling confident we will be ok moving forward in these times of uncertainty of the pandemic.”

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<sup>1</sup> This statement was made during the data collection period of June to September 2020. At that time, few active cases had been recorded in the Pacific. From May 2021, however, one of our case study countries, Fiji, had a major outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19, and we are aware that more people will be struggling in relation to this event and the highly contagious Omicron variant which emerged at the end of 2021. Nonetheless our ongoing data collection through to early 2022 is finding that resilience strategies adopted in 2020, such as people growing more food for themselves and taking care of others who are more vulnerable in their communities, is helping people to cope.

### ***Small Businesses and Bartering***

There has also been a marked increase in entrepreneurial activity and sharing. People have engaged in a wide range of initiatives to earn cash, from selling products from their farms (fruit, root crops, other vegetables, cocoa, pigs and chickens) and the sea (a wide range of fish and shellfish), to starting small businesses. In the Solomon Islands, for example, a woman who had previously relied mainly on her husband's income as a cultural performer for tourists, stated that:

*I [now] make doughnuts and my husband sells them at the market every day along with fresh green coconuts...my husband and son started a small convenience canteen from our money saved and support from other extended family members ...[and] two other women have joined the community women in planting flowers to sell on Saturdays at the market and started bbq stands on the main road.*

It was notable in other examples, however, that those initiating small convenience stores sometimes struggled with competition from larger stores. It was also interesting to see how some respondents were careful not to focus solely on activities that earned them cash, as honouring cultural commitments was important to them too. Thus in Samoa, one respondent explained that they bred pigs and grew coconuts as a source of income, while keeping their taro, yam and banana plantation to meet the family's needs, to provide *tautua* [service] for the church minister on Sundays, and to help with village obligations.

Adaptive responses include a notable increase in the self-organisation of the people, with groups of women, youth, and former hotel workers collaborating to earn a living either through small agricultural schemes, or the development of micro-enterprises. Using their skills from the resorts, groups have established businesses offering catering, event set-up and decorating, lawn care and ground maintenance. Some businesses earn cash while others trade services for groceries and other essential items. In one case a group of young men living in a village near to the tourism hot spot of Denarau Island in Fiji have secured the contract to provide lunches for a local rugby club for the season ahead.

Another strategy that emerged was the increased use of bartering, prompting a rise in new social media groups which were used as a platform where people can trade goods and services without cash transactions. One such example is where people in Fiji bartered pigs for a kayak, news that was published in the international media outlets such as the BBC (Tora, 2020).

### ***Time for Reflection and Re-prioritising***

Participants revealed that despite their struggles, their awareness of the Covid-19 situation is influencing more engagement in a dynamic process of deep reflection, and an emerging sense of self-determination. Participants' contemplations on their situation are linked to their learning and coping experiences after having endured the socio-economic shocks sustained from having to close the doors of their businesses, or losing jobs as flight attendants, handicraft sellers, and hotel

workers. People are also voicing their renewed appreciation for their families, their resources, and spiritual and cultural capital, including customary land. This is evident in the comments of a 55-year-old Fijian man, who grew up, and has lived all his life next to a large resort. He noted that during the pandemic, the resort had not really been able to help his community, but they had helped one another instead:

“Lifestyle in Fijian villages is such that we were taught to share farm produce when harvested, share your catch from the sea when fishing, etc. We are doing this again, and are also visiting families that require basic staple items like flour, sugar, rice, oil, and toiletries (bathing soap, washing soap, washing powder)... At the moment, at [our] village, each [sub-clan] does rotational visits to a household weekly, mainly on Wednesdays during evening devotion...we catch up over tea or kava afterwards and socialise and de-stress.”

The return to customary land and kinship has aroused feelings of an “appreciation for the important...and simple things in life”, as noted by a 35 year old woman from Fiji who had previously worked in the hotel sector. Respondents reflected profoundly on finding enjoyment, solace and peace by spending time with family, helping out others in the community, and “taking care of the essential things”, referring to activities such as checking on neighbours and engaging in spiritual activities that would typically have had to be foregone for paid work in the tourism sector.

Pacific peoples are thus trying to improve their situation in the face of Covid-19, and do not see themselves merely as victims. Rather, they are ruminating deeply on the past, appreciating more about their own people and cultures, and thinking about what they want in future, as explained by a former tourism employee from Fiji:

“Perhaps, the positive side of things I believe is, it has allowed a lot of family time with everyone at home. It is a particular time to wait for one another and value the time together as precious and unique when you did not always have this in the past. It is a learning curve when we think about placing your eggs in one basket rather than diversifying it. Realising how vulnerable and brittle this [tourism] industry is...”

## **Discussion: Adaptive Capacity and Resilience Building in Action**

From a complex adaptive systems and resilience theory perspective, Covid-19 has spurred social reorganisation within communities, demonstrating Pacific Island people’s ability to bounce back in some ways from sudden shocks (Gallopín, 2006; Folke et al., 2003; Gunderson & Holling, 2002). In essence, this has revealed the resilience of Pacific Island cultural systems as having various resources that allow for inevitable perturbations to be absorbed (Berkes et al., 2003).

However, as shown from the multiple *talanoa*, these skills and resources had been ignored or overlooked for some time because of respondents' focus and dependence on tourism as a primary livelihood source. Participants of the study have been prompted by the pandemic's effects, to actively seek ways to reduce their vulnerable state, especially in sustaining life, food, and creating alternative livelihoods for their families, which is in line with what Walker et al. (2004) advocate. Their awareness of the available resources, including social, cultural, and spiritual capital, is embedded within their kinship systems. It is woven into natural resources use and custodianship of the land and marine resources.

The adaptive response exemplifies the panarchical nature of Pacific Island systems. Cyclical evolutionary patterns help to explain how the pandemic, an external shock, has stimulated a complex and embedded response with relation to various elements of communal social and ecological systems (Berkes et al, 2003; Holland, 1992). This is further supported by the complex manner by which people are relearning old skills to allow them to utilise their customary resources, develop social capital and forge closer internal ties and togetherness with community members (Allen et al., 2014). These responses have enabled people to cope with the stresses created by the shock to the tourism system, opening further opportunities for community resilience building by recognising the imperative to diversify their livelihood sources. This could have significant implications for withstanding future shocks (Berkes et al., 2003).

Reorganising and working together, looking within, and collectively adapting were central themes that emerged from the data. Despite the many struggles and possibilities for a different outcome, respondents asserted that people are now supporting each other more, engaging in *solesolevaki* (Fijian term signifying communal work for the collective good with no direct individual return). They are reorganising (Olsson et al, 2004) and working in solidarity at a time of crisis. Covid-19 has become a trigger (Holling, 2001) for a complex resurgence of togetherness, which in turn has stimulated actions that can help strengthen food security, cultural skills and innovations, and entrepreneurial activities. While these actions are not demonstrated to the same extent in all communities, they do seem evident in the tourism communities that were the focus of this study. The findings lend credibility to arguments made in the work of Pacific scholars who have a long-held appreciation for the Pacific ways of life, including communalism, and community solidarity (Movono et al., 2017; Meleisea & Linnekin, 2004; Hau'ofa, 1993).

## **Implications for Tourism Management**

Two key tourism management implications are discussed in the paragraphs below: (1) that supporting employee wellbeing should be central to efforts to re-start tourism development; and (2) that policy development should move in the direction of diversified and resilient tourism sectors, especially in small island states that have been heavily dependent on tourism income.

First, supporting employee wellbeing should be a priority when borders open and these island countries can once again welcome international tourists. Pacific people's happiness is embedded within their cultural structures (Scheyvens et al., 2021), and tourism can negatively impact on this if, for example, it prevents them from attending cultural events and meeting their wider family and community obligations (Pratt et al., 2016). Thus, managers of hotels and tour operations should seek out, and listen carefully to, the voices and concerns of their employees. This assertion is supported by Carr (2020) and Higgins-Desbiolles (2020) who have suggested that those people most impacted by the slowdown in tourism, especially Indigenous peoples, should be at the forefront of directing recovery efforts.

Pacific tourism employees, although having mixed feelings, expressed to us that they want tourism to return. However, they desire better wages, job security, improved working conditions and insurance for shocks such as pandemics (Scheyvens et al., 2020). Flexible hours and part-time work were also mentioned by a number of interviewees who would like to earn some income from tourism while continuing what they started during border closures, that is, devoting more time to family or community work, and engaging in fishing and agriculture for subsistence and sale. While recognising that having more part-time employees creates more work for management, this could also be a win for them in the longer term because allowing workers more of a say over their hours and conditions will lead to happier employees, with flow on benefits for the guest experience (Deery & Jago, 2009). Ultimately, people are seeking a better work-life balance. As one Fijian elder expressed in terms of his hopes for tourism in the future:

"Tourism must complement our way of life rather than taking over."

Supporting worker wellbeing through providing a financial safety net (such as tourism worker pension schemes, credit unions, and insurance) is raised as a possible management strategy because of inconsistencies in support for tourism employees across the region. The wage subsidy scheme in Niue and the Cook Islands has supported many families, whereas in other countries like Fiji, workers have had to dip into their pension funds to get access to cash, and thus many have depleted their retirement savings. Some form of tourism worker insurance or pension scheme could help to minimise this financial vulnerability.

The second major management implication is that decision-makers must seek out ways to see how tourism, when it restarts after borders re-open, can complement the reinvigorated traditional systems discussed in this article. Our results show the strength, responsiveness, and stability of Pacific systems when responding to a crisis. Many of the people interviewed had gone through a process of relearning skills once forfeited for work in the hotels, such as growing and harvesting food, bartering, sharing and communalism. This has led to a renaissance of sorts and a return to the land and traditions, which is central to considering how to reduce potential vulnerabilities and build resilience in the islands. To ensure that future shocks can be absorbed, it will be important for governments in the Pacific and foreign donors to support the protection of traditional knowledge systems and the maintenance of alternative livelihoods that draw on the local strengths and resources within the islands. Supporting these alternatives offers legitimate ways of

diversifying away from the over-reliance on the tourism industry that plagues many island states (Hoarau, 2020).

A conceptual model presented by Bec et al. (2016) provides a pertinent framework to understand the relationship between critical resilience dimensions and long-term structural change. While in some cases external shocks may create the conditions for a deep-seated vulnerability to be experienced by communities (Füssel, 2007; Adger, 2006), in this research in the Pacific, economic instability arising from Covid-19 positively influenced community resilience; this is because the pandemic initiated a process of change through which people sought out livelihoods alternatives that are culturally focussed and lean on traditional Indigenous systems. This, albeit short term structural change, has reduced the vulnerability of a number of those consulted in this study. Therefore, it is relevant to consider how changes in these communities can be strengthened to achieve long-term resilience (Linnenluecke et al., 2012). Potentially this could occur through tourism management approaches that are open to harnessing local social systems' strengths, including making cultural tourism and agri-tourism stronger components of their overall product offerings. This paper proposes a move towards more regenerative forms of tourism (Ateljevic, 2020; Sheller, 2020), that reinforces local cultural systems and aims to achieve sustainability and long-term resilience.

A few national tourism and planning offices in Pacific Island countries have been engaged in planning, pivoting, and resetting the direction of tourism policy in ways which align with the above ideas. Their approaches help to show how a policy reset around tourism can be enacted. In Vanuatu, for example, the Sustainable Tourism Policy (2019-2025), established just prior to the pandemic, is encouraging a transition towards a more diversified and resilient tourism economy (Tokona, 2021). It encourages visitors to connect with Vanuatu's environment, culture, and its people in responsible ways. The shock of the pandemic has forced business owners to act in line with this policy. Notably, the Director of Tourism, Jerry Spooner, has asserted that "Any planning we do now is in preparation for a new normal, [because] tourism will never be managed how it was before" (quoted in Tokona, 2021). Spooner has praised local and foreign business owners who have successfully adapted in the face of international tourism losses, either by targeting new domestic clients, or diversifying beyond tourism in ways that complement their tourism businesses. The strategy also supports multi-sectoral integration, recognising that tourism ministries and departments cannot work effectively in silos. For example, the Vanuatu Sustainable Tourism Policy (2019-2030) seeks to build stronger links between the agricultural, handicraft and tourism sectors (Tokona, 2021).

Meanwhile, in the Solomon Islands the Ministry of Culture and Tourism is thinking innovatively about the pandemic's realities and the need to build a more robust and resilient domestic tourism base. The Ministry has been exploring how civil servants' leave entitlements could be adjusted to encourage government workers to take seven days of paid holidays in local hotels (Zoom Interview, Senior Tourism Official, April 2021). This has since translated into the Iumi Tugeda Initiative which is the Solomon Islands largest domestic tourism initiative created by Solomon

Airlines in partnership with Tourism Solomons and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Such moves could generate consistent local demand for accommodation and air travel into the future.

## **Concluding remarks**

This research has shown how members of tourism dependent communities in the South Pacific region have adapted to the loss of tourism-based income due to Covid-19 and the global slowdown. When sudden shocks occur, many difficulties are endured, yet Pacific Island peoples are responding in a manner that has allowed vulnerabilities to be addressed. In addition to having the largest geographic Covid-19-free cluster on the planet during 2020, Pacific people clearly have strengths that have enabled many formerly tourism-dependent communities to meet their basic livelihood needs in the face of border closures that have almost crippled their economies. They have the potential to be even more resilient if tourism management practices embrace the strengths of island peoples and cultures.

Pacific Island communities are complex systems that respond in various ways to external influences such as Covid-19. By analysing Pacific people's responses to the pandemic, this paper has shown that despite many challenges of Covid-19 and its impacts on tourism, the resulting adaptations have strengthened social cohesion, and engagement with the cultural and ecological environment. Community capacities, local cultural systems, customary resources and people's connection to their land, are useful tools to reduce vulnerabilities, and which can be embraced as a means to increase resilience and add value to tourism management practice for the future.

The findings further show that Pacific peoples are often innovative in their responses to significant shocks, which stands in contrast to dominant representations around other challenges they face. For example, an analysis of representations of the Pacific in media reports on climate change found that there was an "...overemphasis on vulnerability [which] potentially downplays the importance of the resiliency and action of Pacific Island communities..." (Shea et al. 2020, p.89). Thus, contrasting with narratives of 'smallness' and 'vulnerability' dominating the SIDS space, tourism-dependent communities in SIDS have shown that they are not mere spectators of development, but are active agents, who cope and evolve in the face of challenges associated with the pandemic and resulting lack of tourism.

The findings discussed above serve to inform tourism management experts of the need to understand the intricate mechanics of communities in SIDS, their adaptive capacities, and the strength of customary and traditional systems. Improvements can be made in the management, design, and conduct of tourism so that resilience becomes a long-term structural change process, not just a response to shocks. Better planning, informed by Pacific people's voices, will ensure that Indigenous peoples not only benefit economically from tourism when it resumes, but are able to maintain their culture, reduce vulnerabilities, and build resilience. The findings from our research lend value to arguments to protect their social and ecological resources which served as

safety nets for Pacific Island communities during the pandemic and, if well managed, could provide an ongoing a source of wealth and sustainable development for many decades to come.

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## Authors' biographies

Dr Apisalome Movono is a senior lecturer at Massey University where he continues his passion for the Pacific through researching and promoting development that is fair, resilient and sustainable for future generations. He is an active conservationist and community development advocate for his people in Fiji and the Pacific region. Api has published a number of papers and articles focussed on resilience, adaptivity and development in the Pacific. Api is a current recipient of a Marsden Fast-Start Fellowship, Te Apārangi/Royal Society of New Zealand.

Professor Regina Scheyvens is Director of Development Studies at Massey University, where she combines a passion for teaching about international development with research on tourism, community empowerment and sustainable development, especially focusing on the South Pacific. Along with books on 'Tourism for Development: Empowering Communities', 'Tourism and Poverty' and 'Development Fieldwork: A Practical Guide', she has published a wide range of articles on tourism, aid and development. Regina a current recipient of a James Cook Fellowship, Te Apārangi/Royal Society of New Zealand.

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