
WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

EAST RENNELL (SOLOMON ISLANDS)

1. DOCUMENTATION

- (i) IUCN/WCMC Data Sheet (6 references)
- (ii) Additional Literature Consulted: Collins, N.M. *et. al.* Eds. 1991. **Conservation Atlas of Tropical Forests: Asia and the Pacific** IUCN/WCMC; Solomon Islands National Environmental Management Strategy. 1993. IUCN/SPREP/ADB 160p.; Davis S.D. *et. al.* Eds. 1995. **Centres of Plant Diversity** Vol. II. IUCN/WWF; Wingham, E. 1998. **Resource Management Objectives and Guidelines for East Rennell**. New Zealand ODA, 22p.
- (iii) Consultations: 10 external reviewers, Solomon Islands government officials, New Zealand Aid representatives, local community chiefs.
- (iv) Field Visit: Jim Thorsell and Les Molloy, February 1998.

2. SUMMARY OF NATURAL VALUES

The nominated site of East Rennell (ER) is located on the southern third of Rennell Island which is the southernmost island in the Solomon Island group. Rennell, the largest raised coral atoll in the world is 86km long and 15 km wide and contains 87,500ha. The size of the area nominated is approximately 37,000ha plus a marine area that extends three nautical miles out to sea. Rennell Island has a tropical climate characterised by high uniform temperatures and humidity. Annual rainfall ranges between 3000-4000mm with a dry season from May to August. The island is subject to relatively frequent hurricanes which are a major factor affecting the island.

Rennell was formed by the uplift of corals which formed on an undersea ridge and then were subject to faulting. The landform is a typical jagged and eroded limestone karst rising to 200m. A major feature of the island is Lake Tegano which was the former lagoon on the atoll. The lake is the largest in the insular Pacific (15,500ha). It is brackish and contains many rugged limestone islands.

Rennell is mostly covered with dense forest with a canopy averaging 20m in height. The three main vegetation types are low scrub forest on the karst ridge, tall forest in the interior and beach flora along Lake Tegano. The lake's flora is dominated by 312 species of diatoms and algae a small number of which are endemic. There are 10 endemic plants on the island and its flora contains elements from the more impoverished Pacific islands to the east and the much richer Melanesian flora to the west.

Wildlife includes 11 species of bats, one of which is endemic, 43 bird species, four of which are endemic. An endemic banded sea snake lives in Lake Tegano. The invertebrate life is rich

with 27 species of land snails and 731 insect species. Very little information is available on the marine area.

Approximately 800 people of Polynesian origin reside in four villages within the nominated area. Subsistence agriculture, fishing and hunting are the bases of the economy. The local people rely on forest products for most construction materials. The land is under customary ownership and the lake is regarded as common property.

3. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Currently, 21 islands or portions of islands are inscribed on the World Heritage list including four in the Pacific (Lord Howe, Henderson, Galapagos and Hawaiian volcanoes). Other World Heritage islands are contained within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park 1000km to the east of Rennell. There are 40 protected areas in the Papuan Biogeographical province, most occurring on the large island of New Guinea and the small islands surrounding it. In the wider context of the region, Rennell can be seen as a stepping-stone to the more distant Pacific islands to the east, all of which progressively decrease in biodiversity along a west to east gradient.

In the 1987 "Review of the protected Area system of Oceania" undertaken for IUCN and UNEP by A. Dahl, Rennell is rated in eighth place overall in terms of conservation importance but the most important one within the Solomon Island group. It is rated second to Guam in terms of conservation importance for raised coral atolls.

The distinguishing features of ER that are not duplicated elsewhere are:

- Rennell is the world's largest raised coral atoll. Throughout the Pacific there are about 25 such atolls, most of which have been significantly modified by human activity (except for Henderson Island World Heritage site which is one-tenth the size of Rennell but is more pristine);
- Lake Tegano is the largest lake in the insular Pacific and contains a number of endemic species (though not as many as the lakes in Palau);
- The forests of the nominated area are mostly undisturbed by humans and display a number of adaptations to the effects of the frequent cyclonic storms;
- For its size Rennell Island has a high number of endemic species, particularly birds. Along with 29 other islands in the Pacific, Rennell is listed as an endemic bird area by Birdlife International (though it is ranked in the third level in terms of priorities);
- Within the Pacific, most oceanic islands have been much modified by human activity. On Rennell, these impacts have been relatively light and invasive predators such as rats and alien land snails which have decimated the faunas of other islands, are absent.

In conclusion, ER has a number of marine, coastal and forest values that are better displayed in other Pacific locations. The fact, however, that ER combines them in one place and in a relatively undisturbed state, makes the island a special place in the Papuan Biogeographical Province.

4. INTEGRITY

There are three issues that need to be addressed regarding integrity: boundaries, customary land tenure, and local support for conservation.

4.1. Boundaries

Several reviewers questioned why the nomination was confined to only a portion of the island. The logic here is that integrity would be better maintained by protection of the entire uplifted atoll as the forest in ER is not sufficiently large (according to a study by J. Diamond) to ensure long-term survival of the endemic birds. Certainly previous proposals for mining and forest clearance on west Rennell would have some serious conservation consequences especially as there is no land use plan for the whole island. On the other hand, the local communities in west Rennell are not favourable to being included in the nomination at this time. Furthermore, the major features (particularly Lake Tegano) are in ER. Currently the prospect of an island-wide nomination is not feasible.

4.2. Customary Land Tenure

As is the case in most inhabited Pacific islands and elsewhere, land in Rennell is owned under the traditional customary system. This situation makes it difficult (but not impossible) for national government legislation to be effective in terms of management. Indeed in the case of ER, the ability of the central government to protect the site is limited. There is a draft World Heritage Protection Bill but no action has been taken to revise or enact the Bill. In any case, the customary ownership pattern in place on many islands can be more conducive to conservation than if the land was under control of a distant government office. This presumes that customary practices in place are favourable to protection and that traditional ownership powers and community support are not being eroded.

The Operational Guidelines for the Convention note that World Heritage natural sites "should have adequate long-term legislative, regulatory or institutional protection" (paragraph 44 vi). ER at the moment does not have this, although work is underway to provide it. First, (but of secondary importance) is expressed interest at the national level to revise and consider the passing of the World Heritage Protection Bill. This Act would not be interventionist but would provide an overarching national framework for heritage protection and reinforce the conservation objectives developed by the customary land owners.

Moreover, it is noted that the Operational Guidelines (para. 24 (b) (ii)) recognise "traditional protection and management mechanisms" as acceptable for World Heritage sites which meet cultural criteria but no similar provision exists for sites which meet natural criteria. Both the Sixth South Pacific Conference on Nature Conservation, 1979 and the Global Strategy Expert meeting in Amsterdam in March 1998 recommended that the Committee recognise traditional protection for sites which meet natural criteria.

Second, and most essential, is the process just begun by the local Management and Conservation Committee (MCC) to prepare a resource management plan

for ER. IUCN's view on this, and other similar situations, is that there needs to be some official document (as would be formally prepared by the MCC as representatives of the local residents), that provides an outline of the management objectives and prescriptions for protection of the site. Until this is available it is not possible to state how customary practices in fact will provide this protection.

4.3. Local Support for Conservation

IUCN was impressed during the field mission by statements from the local chiefs and paramount chief on their desire for sustainable development for ER. The World Heritage initiative is very much linked to the desire of the Rennellese people to encourage ecotourism in the area. This will require a significant amount of education, training and cooperative decision-making. It is expected that the preparation of the resource management plan under the MCC will further strengthen this local awareness and prepare for this economic activity.

5. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Much of the effort to promote conservation in ER has been undertaken with support provided by the New Zealand Government's Development Assistance Program. A similar project in the Marovo lagoon area may also result in a natural site nomination and the New Zealand Government should be commended for its assistance in promoting the conservation of such island ecosystems in the Pacific.

One reviewer has suggested that in terms of the history of the interaction of the traditional owners with Rennell that there might be value in considering the cultural landscape values of the site.

With regard to the marine component of the nomination, very little information is available. Further research into this dimension of the nominated area is required.

6. APPLICATION OF WORLD HERITAGE NATURAL CRITERIA

As discussed under the above section on comparison with other areas, ER does not particularly stand out for its dramatic scenery, biodiversity or geological values and IUCN considers that a convincing case for criteria i, iii, and iv is not made in the nomination. The main strength of the ER nomination lies in criterion ii, dealing with significant on-going ecological and biological processes that are evident on the island. ER is an important site for the science of island biogeography as reflected in the extensive studies conducted there by the University of Copenhagen and others. These processes relate to the role of ER as a stepping-stone in the migration and evolution of species in the western Pacific and for the speciation that is underway, especially with respect to the avifauna. Combined with the strong climate effects of frequent cyclones, ER is a true natural laboratory for scientific study.

The site is thus considered to meet criterion ii but the conditions of integrity in the Operational Guidelines are not yet met. Although customary land ownership should not preclude a site from consideration, IUCN suggests that an essential requirement would be a formal statement of objectives and management prescriptions. This is particularly required in the absence of any national legal framework that would reinforce the conservation goals of the traditional owners (although this should also preferably be available). Beyond the preparation of a local resource

management document and the passage of a national law, much needs to be put in place in terms of training, education, boundary marking and other basic management activities.

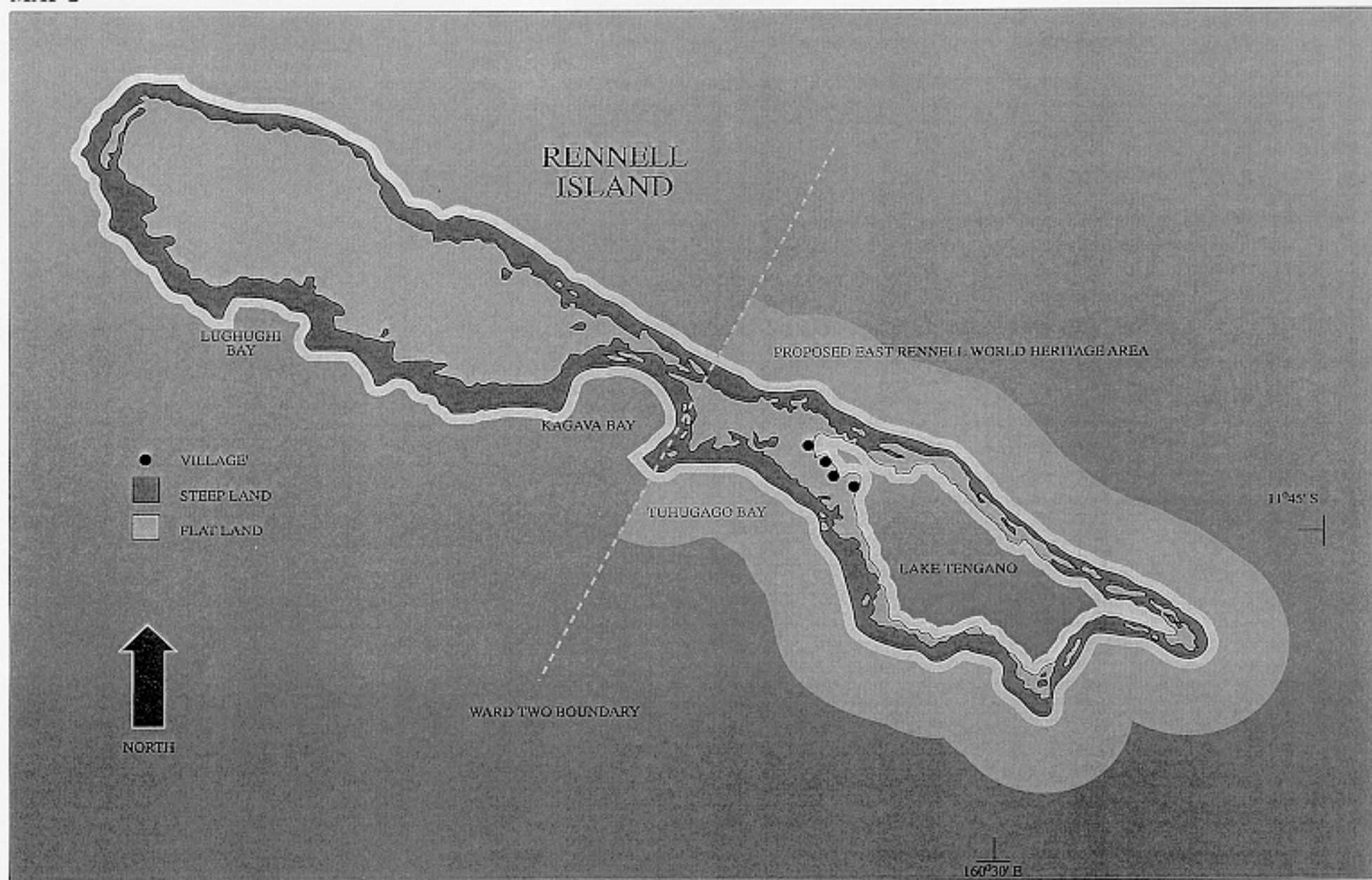
NEW INFORMATION: Subsequent to the Bureau's concurrence with the above conclusions as relayed in a letter from the Centre, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Commerce, Employment and Tourism has responded (September 1) to note that:

- a "Resource Management Objectives and Guidelines" document has been prepared by a New Zealand consultant. This is the first phase in a process that will lead to a management plan that will be prepared by local landowners and institutions over the next three to four years. IUCN considers this document as a strong beginning for a sustainable management regime but there are no indications as to what reaction the local landowners and the MEC have to it.
- The draft World Heritage Protection Bill is not currently being put forward although the Solomon Islands Government is considering a new Environmental Bill. IUCN notes that the rights of customary landowners and customary law is acknowledged in the Constitution of the Solomon Islands but feels that an appropriately worded World Heritage Bill could reinforce those rights while at the same time giving some legal commitment for World Heritage sites at the national level.

7. RECOMMENDATION

The Bureau recognised that the ER nomination breaks new ground in terms of nominating a natural site that is under customary land ownership, that has no formalised legal basis and for which the objective is sustainable resource use. The Solomon Islands authorities have responded to these concerns to note that it will be some time before a plan or national World Heritage legislation is in place.

Considering, however, that the site does meet criterion ii, that there is support among the local landowners for the World Heritage listing, and that the planning process has begun, IUCN recommends that the Committee inscribe the site. At the same time they should reiterate the need for a locally-developed management plan, a national World Heritage Protection Bill, and the suggestion that a mission in three years time to gauge progress be undertaken.



Rennell Island showing the proposed East Rennell World Heritage Area which includes Lake Tegano, the land and the sea out to three nautical miles.