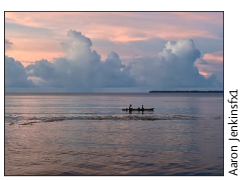
Healthy Islands at 30: revitalising an ecological framework for planetary health



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In 1995, health ministers from the Pacific Islands gathered on Yanuca Island, Fiji, to declare a visionary Healthy Islands idea, a holistic framework linking human wellbeing with environmental stewardship. The ministers imagined island communities where children thrive, people live and age with dignity, and "ecological balance is a source of pride and the ocean which sustains us is protected".[1] This Healthy Islands vision anticipated by decades the core principles of the current planetary health movement. Indeed, as one Pacific health official later observed, "The Healthy Islands vision was ahead of its time. Its time is now".[2] 30 years on, amid escalating climate and health crises, that prescient vision now demands urgent revitalisation.

Globally, humanity has crossed at least six of nine planetary boundaries, pushing Earth outside the safe operating space for humanity.[3] Pacific Island Countries and Territories are on the frontlines of intertwined environmental and health challenges. The region is among the most vulnerable globally to health effects of climate change, facing trauma from extreme weather, threats to water and food security, surges in infectious diseases, and rising non-communicable disease burdens.[4] Intensifying cyclones, sea-level rise, deforestation, and resource losses are eroding livelihoods and straining health systems.[5] These overlapping crises echo the foresight of the 1995 declaration that human health ultimately depends on thriving ecosystems.

The emerging field of planetary health offers a contemporary, systems-based approach to revitalise the Yanuca Island vision. Planetary health underscores that human wellbeing is inseparable from ecological health.[6] By embracing planetary health, Pacific nations can transform siloed sectoral strategies into coordinated efforts that comanage human and natural systems. For example, integrating watershed management and ocean protection into health planning yields cobenefits: cleaner water and fisheries, strengthened climate resilience, reduced infectious disease risks, and healthier communities.[7] Such integrative solutions draw deeply on indigenous knowledge systems and community stewardship, reflecting an understanding that scientific and traditional ecological knowledges have always worked, and need to continue to work, in unison.[8]

Encouragingly, Pacific leaders are reasserting this holistic approach. The 2025 Oceania Planetary Health Forum—convened on Yanuca Island, 30 years after the original declaration—produced a bold call to action emphasising upon Indigenous leadership, youth engagement, and cross-sectoral collaboration.[9] The Forum promotes nature-based solutions for health, asserting that protecting ecosystems is essential preventive medicine. These priorities, guided by ancestral wisdom, offer a practical roadmap to operationalise the Healthy Islands vision under contemporary conditions.

A crucial shortfall, however, lies in how progress is measured. The current Healthy Islands Monitoring Framework under-represents the ecological determinants of health. Of its 47 indicators, only five reside in the environment or ecology pillar.[2] Even these few environmental indicators are patchily reported; fewer than half of Pacific countries have the latest data, and none have data for climate change and natural disaster resilience.[2] Crucially, the framework omits direct measures of natural system health—no metrics exist yet for watershed and forest integrity, biodiversity status, or coral reef condition, despite their obvious effect on food security, disease ecology, and community wellbeing.[7] This gap leaves decision makers partly blind to the ecological trends underpinning health outcomes.

To truly fulfil the original promise of Healthy Islands, Pacific health leaders and development partners need to upgrade data collection and indicators to integrate these ecological determinants fully. Monitoring platforms need to incorporate indicators of watershed quality, reef vitality, forest restoration, and biodiversity alongside standard health metrics, and these indicators need to be informed by indigenous and local knowledge systems to ensure cultural relevance, ecological validity, and community ownership. Strengthening environmental surveillance and linking it with health information systems will enable proactive, preventive policies. By investing in such integrated data systems and cross-sector analytical capacity, Pacific Island Countries and Territories can better manage the cascading effects of environmental change on health.

Realigning Pacific health development with ecological stewardship requires political will, the inclusion of

indigenous values such as reciprocity and reverence for nature, innovative partnerships, financing mechanisms, and inclusive leadership. Frameworks should institutionalise whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches—ensuring meaningful collaboration across sectors and communities—towards shared ecological and health goals. Effective governance mechanisms need to be established to actively respond to monitoring outcomes, creating systemic feedback loops that identify successes, pinpoint failures, and rapidly implement necessary adjustments through adaptive management. Regional technical agencies such as The Pacific Community and The Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme have a crucial role in facilitating these mechanisms by generating evidence, guiding policy, building capacity, and influencing responsive governance at local and national government levels. Encouragingly, a new generation of Pacific leaders and scholars is emerging with a passion for climate action and ancestral wisdom, driving sustainable lifestyles and holding governments accountable.[9]

This shift aligns with broader regional visions, notably the Pacific leaders' 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, an overarching blueprint for regional resilience and health equity.[10] Embracing planetary health will unite objectives under one umbrella, accelerating progress on climate adaptation, food security, and pandemic preparedness. By marrying ancient and accumulating wisdom with the latest cutting-edge science and updating success metrics to include the pulse of nature, the Healthy Islands vision can be revitalised for the 21st century and beyond.

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