

The Sacred and Cultural Maritime Sites of Fiji-An Inventory in the Making

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Abstract

The Fiji Museum Archaeology Department, since 2015, has begun inventorying the different underwater and maritime sites in Fiji. Ratification of the 2001 UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage and review of the legislation on the Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Palaeontological Interest Act (Chapter 264) has had little fruition due to limitations in manpower and resources.

The Fiji Museum has however taken first steps towards realizing the amendment of the legislation by developing and drafting an overarching policy for the institution. The Fiji Museum continues to deliberate on the draft policy encompassing all aspects of its services, which includes underwater and maritime cultural heritage sites, to ensure that Fiji's cultural heritage is protected.

This paper will elaborate on the different types of underwater/maritime cultural heritage sites in Fiji and the inventory process of documenting and creating a database, including challenges and opportunities. It will highlight the importance of the database in assisting the Fiji Museum in its work to raise awareness and provide advice to Government and relevant authorities in the respect, preservation and protection of these submerged historical treasures.

The paper will also highlight the various agencies with common goals to protect underwater cultural sites and discuss the importance of inter-agency collaboration.

Key words: Cultural heritage, maritime, preservation, and protection

Introduction

The Fiji Islands

The island nation of Fiji encompasses over 300 volcanic islands. About 100 of these are inhabited, rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage.

Fiji is located in the tropics of the southern hemisphere and has a total land area of approximately 18,300km² that covers the region positioned between a latitude of 12°N-21°S and longitude 176°E-178°W (Nakoro, 2014).

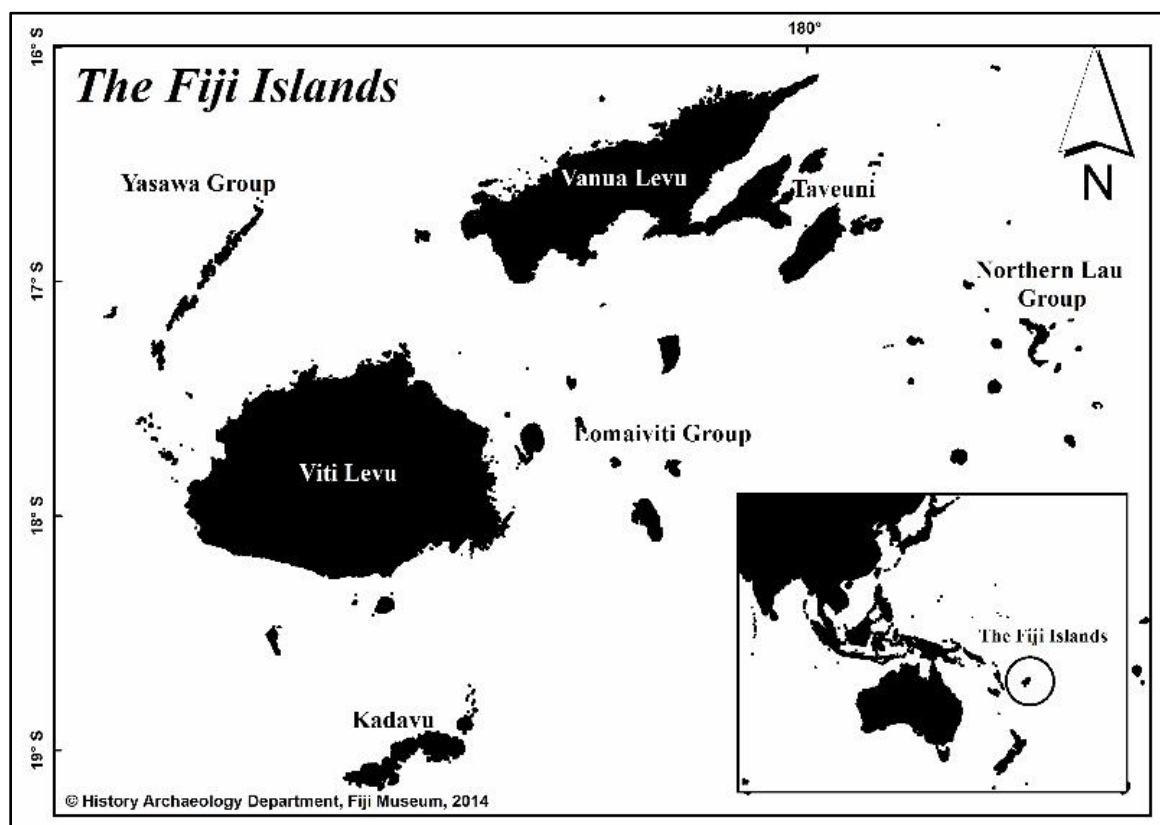


Fig 1: Map of the Fiji Islands. (Fiji Museum)

The Republic of the Fiji Islands is a multicultural nation with a tapestry of cultural traditions of Indigenous Fijians (iTaukei), Indians, Europeans, Chinese and other minority cultures. While all the various cultures can be linked to the underwater heritage of the nation through shipwrecks, the

iTaukei people are custodians to a special, sacred and mysterious connection to the land, which includes sacred underwater or maritime sites.

In capturing the fascinating connection between the sacred maritime sites and its owners, the Archaeology Department embarked on a digitization project in 2015 to document details pertaining to the sites and protection under legislative powers¹ entrusted to the Fiji Museum. Utilizing the basic Microsoft Access tool, the department developed its maritime sites database.

The Fiji Museum

The Fiji Museum is located in a historically significant site within an old fortified village that was called Suva. During the expansion of the city, the inhabitants of the old settlement were relocated across the harbor. Today, the area known as the Thurston Gardens complements the Fiji Museum in the background. Currently under the jurisdiction of the City Council, the Thurston Gardens have great potential for a facelift with plans in the pipelines for this to eventuate before the end of 2017. Adjacent to the Gardens is the historic and newly refurbished Albert Park where the monoplane *Southern Cross*, piloted by Sir Charles Kingsford Smith made a safe landing on its first transpacific flight from Hawaii to Fiji en route to Australia in 1928. Similarly the northwestern fringe contains the remnants of the World War II underground tunnels and the Allied forces military headquarters, which now accommodates the residence of the British High Commission and Fiji's presidential palace and compound



Fig. 2: Location of Fiji Museum. (Google Earth)

Since its establishment in 1904, the Fiji Museum has been governed by two legislations - the Fiji Museum Act and the Preservation of Objects of Archaeological and Palaeontological Interest (POAPI) Act, enacted in 1940. The latter, which is administered by the Archaeology department of the institution, is the legal instrument covering the protection of cultural heritage sites in Fiji. This legislation has a more generalized definition of cultural heritage where underwater cultural heritage sites such as shipwrecks, planes, sunken villages, islands and the likes are not specifically mentioned but in the clause which reads ‘...or any objects of archaeological, anthropological, ethnological, prehistoric and historic significance....’ covers any form of culturally significant sites and objects without distinction of their location. As such the Fiji Museum, Archaeology Department with limited manpower and resources tries to cover all aspects of Fijian cultural heritage.

In early 2017, the institution underwent a change in leadership involving the designation of a new Director and Board of Trustees members. The

driving force behind changes to the Museums' priorities, new leadership identified gaps in legislation of the safety of cultural heritage sites in Fiji, as a target area to be addressed. The Board endorsed the review of the legislation and the Archaeology Department is currently in the process of forming the relevant committees to spearhead this process. These committees will be tasked with development of policies to strengthen the role of the department and its legislation. The Convention on Underwater Cultural Heritage has also been highlighted as an ideal approach in the near future.

The Archaeology Department

Cabinet endorsed the legislation that governs the work of the Archaeology Department in 1940, however the Archaeology unit of the Fiji Museum was not formally established until over 5 decades later in 1995. Since its establishment, the Archaeology Department has been involved in the identification, documentation and protection of terrestrial archaeological and cultural heritage sites of the nation. This includes the protection of ancestral old village sites, sacred grounds, cemeteries, caves, or any prehistoric or historic significant places discovered from the impacts of development.

Today, the Archaeology unit at the Fiji Museum is comprised of four staff members who look after the entire Fijian group of islands. At present the team, focuses much of its efforts on terrestrial cultural heritage sites meeting an influx of community requests to survey, record, document and protect places of cultural heritage significance against the ever-looming threats of development. Most of these issues are related to a complicated land acquisition system that was developed in the early stages of Fiji's colonial administrative system.

The Archeology department plays a crucial role in the implementation of Archaeological Impact Assessments (AIA) in line with Environment Impact Assessments (EIA) for national development projects such as tourism development, infrastructural development, agriculture, and other land use development.

In addition to this, the department is engaged in national projects for climate change mitigation and reducing carbon emissions through carbon trade with the Reduce Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and Foster Conservation (REDD+) and the Mangrove Ecosystem Conservation and Livelihood (MESCAL) projects. This includes the setting up of new forest reserves where a rapid survey is warranted. The Archaeology team's role in these projects is to identify cultural heritage sites within the earmarked forest boundaries and to examine and record the ancient forest system - in particular, evidence of the impacts of human activities on natural systems.

The Archaeology Department is mandated under the same legislation to issue archaeological research permits for local and international researchers and field schools. During the course of the research, the officers of the Archaeology Department are required to be present providing advice to researchers, conducting the various traditional protocols on their behalf and ensuring that proper procedures itemized in the research permits are carried out.

This paper will explore and discuss the different types of underwater cultural heritage sites in Fiji with focus on traditional maritime sites. It will highlight the inventory process of documentation and the creation of a database to assist in the preservation and protection of these submerged historical treasures.

The paper will also feature the various institutions or agencies with mutual goals to protect underwater cultural sites and discuss the importance of stakeholder collaboration.

Maritime Cultural Sites Database

Fiji is one of the more developed nations in the Pacific region making it particularly vulnerable to the destruction and loss of significant cultural features related to the history and identity of its people. With limited resources and manpower, the Archaeology Department is at the forefront of defending the nation's cultural heritage from such threats. At present the department manages six databases, as listed below:

1. Terrestrial Cultural Heritage Sites
2. Traditional maritime cultural heritage sites
3. Shipwrecks
4. Excavated Archaeological Research Materials
5. Lapita Sites
6. Oral History recordings

Excavated archaeological research materials that are kept in the department's storage facility and oral history recordings are managed using the Microsoft Access platform.

Terrestrial cultural sites, maritime heritage sites, shipwrecks, and Lapita sites, on the other hand are maintained using the Geographic Information System (GIS) program ArcGIS. Since the information has spatial attributes, the ArcGIS program is an appropriate tool for such systematic recording, information analysis, mapping, and data sharing within national authorities on the preservation of cultural heritage sites.

After each survey, the Archaeology team members marked each site visited using a Global Positioning System (GPS). The GPS data is later

transcribed for report compilation and corresponds to the national register or database. The database is rather a useful tool in decision-making, advising authorities dealing with national development on the existence of cultural heritage sites in earmarked project areas.

Given that a small team looks after the various functions of the Archaeology unit for the whole country, managing four separate databases on ArcGIS was a challenging responsibility that fell solely on the Head of Department. A combination of limited human resources, a lack of capacity in team members and no centralized system contributed to a constant backlog in updating the database.

Ideally, the vast information database managed by the Archeology department needed to be maintain on a single database as all databases shared common coordinates from the various sites surveyed, the only difference being in the key thematic areas.

In June (2017), the Fiji Museum successfully installed a file server for a centralized mechanism available to all the museum departments. This was a great boost to the institution, as each department ceased to have separate databases of the same contents to manage. Soon after the installation of the server infrastructure, the Archaeology Department embarked on a weeklong staff capacity building in the areas of field mapping with the use of conventional survey methods, the use of GPS, GIS and database management including Microsoft Access. This enabled all team members to update the database in a shared folder as and when needed, freeing up time for departmental heads to carry out their supervisory functions improving productivity greatly.

Merging the 4 data sets was advantageous and crucial to improve database management efficiency while ensuring that all four themes of

terrestrial sites, maritime sites, shipwrecks and Lapita sites are equally represented in the Archaeology departments work.

Legislation Pertaining to the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage Sites in Fiji

Currently, the overarching legislation (POAPI Act) makes feeble reference to the safeguarding of underwater or maritime sites. However, it is encouraging that there are agencies that share similar goals to protect Fiji's cultural heritage including underwater sites. In the past year, these agencies have taken a stance on the activities within Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone propelled by a nationwide implementation of marine protected areas towards the sustainable monitoring and use of marine resources as food supply and transport. The global concerns of mitigating climate change and the different treaties and conventions that Fiji is a signatory to have elevated these agencies to take action.

Below is a list of these agencies, which include Government, civil society organizations and regional institutions now in the forefront of maintaining marine protected areas.

Government Agencies

1. Maritime Safety Authority of Fiji (MSAF)

MSAF is responsible for the registering, regulations and safety of shipping services and shipping routes in Fiji. As a member state of the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the United Nations specialized agency with responsibility for the safety and security of shipping and the prevention of marine pollution by ships, Fiji is trying to secure the international recognition for the protection of two significant sea areas recognized for ecological, socio-economic, cultural and scientific reasons which may be vulnerable to damage by international maritime activities (www.imo.org,

16th July 2017) under the Particularly Sensitive Sea Area (PSSA) special protection action by IMO.

Fiji has several maritime ports of entries and two of these have been identified as meeting the criteria for PSSA. This further enhances the local regulations in the protection of maritime cultural significant areas. The two sites, the Beqa Passage and the Vuda Passage, may have shipwrecks and other sensitive cultural components necessary for submission to have the passages protected. The Archaeology Department is a new member of the taskforce for the PSSA. On the 14th of July, 2017, the taskforce held its second meeting since its establishment and many stakeholders attended. The PSSA taskforce is in the early stages of information gathering and report submissions.

2. The Department of Environment (DOE)

Mandated to protect the environment and regulate development procedures in the country, the DOE, under the Environment Management Act (EMA-2005) is vital in the protection of coastal cultural sites. In July 2017, the Fiji Museum was consulted to assist in the protection of three World War II lookouts constructed out at sea threatened by a development application for the construction of a jetty.

3. The Fijian Naval Unit under Republic of the Fiji Military Forces

The Fiji Navy is responsible for the maritime needs in boarder control such as watching over Fiji's exclusive economic zone and organizing task and rescue missions. Similar to any naval force, the Fiji Navy is equipped with a dive team that recently (2017) spearheaded a diving expedition to assess the discovery of seven chests in Fiji waters. The chests were believed to contain explosives and arms. Unofficial information stated that

these would have been WWII materials-mine. The Fiji Museum continues to work closely with the Fiji Police to confirm the contents of the chests.

4. iTaukei Affairs Board (iTAB)

i-Taukei Affairs Board is the Government arm that looks after any matters concerning indigenous Fijians or *i-Taukeis*. With crucial mandates for safeguarding Fiji's indigenous culture and traditions, it is vital that iTAB is aware of the significance of the maritime sites as all the sacred sites are of iTaukei origins. iTAB has access to legal expertise to be able to assist with the protection of intangible cultural heritage.

Non-Governmental Organizations

5. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)

The IUCN is heavily engaged in conservation works in the Pacific and in Fiji, with a regional office in Suva, Fiji. The organization has signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Fiji Government to provide advice and review legal frameworks, policies, legislations and conventions in safeguarding and protecting Fiji's environment. In 2016, IUCN included the cultural heritage sites (an area that is usually overlooked) in its list of marine protected areas and consulted the Fiji Museum for information and advice (H. Wendt and N. Yakub, personal communication, July 12, 2017).

Regional Institutions

6. The Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)

Similar to the role of the IUCN, SPC has the expertise and equipment for underwater surveys. SPC also has a unit that looks after the cultural affairs of the Pacific region and is aware of the significance of underwater cultural heritage.

While these institutions and agencies have a shared vision to promote the protection of Fiji's underwater cultural heritage sites, there is a need to inform these stakeholders on the role and functions of the Fiji Museum in safeguarding UCH. The Archaeology Department needs to lobby and promote the significance of UCH and the need for collaboration between all stakeholders involved.

Sacred Maritime Sites

Fiji is filled with many traditional or cultural sites and practices which cannot be explained with scientific knowledge. Attempts by Mr. David Attenborough, a BBC documentary reporter in the early 60s were futile as he tried to explain some of the practices he came across such as the fire walkers of Beqa, the turtle calling in Koro, the fishes in the lake on Vanua Balavu.

Below is captured some of the fascinating and respected maritime sites that the Archaeology Department has already listed in its database:

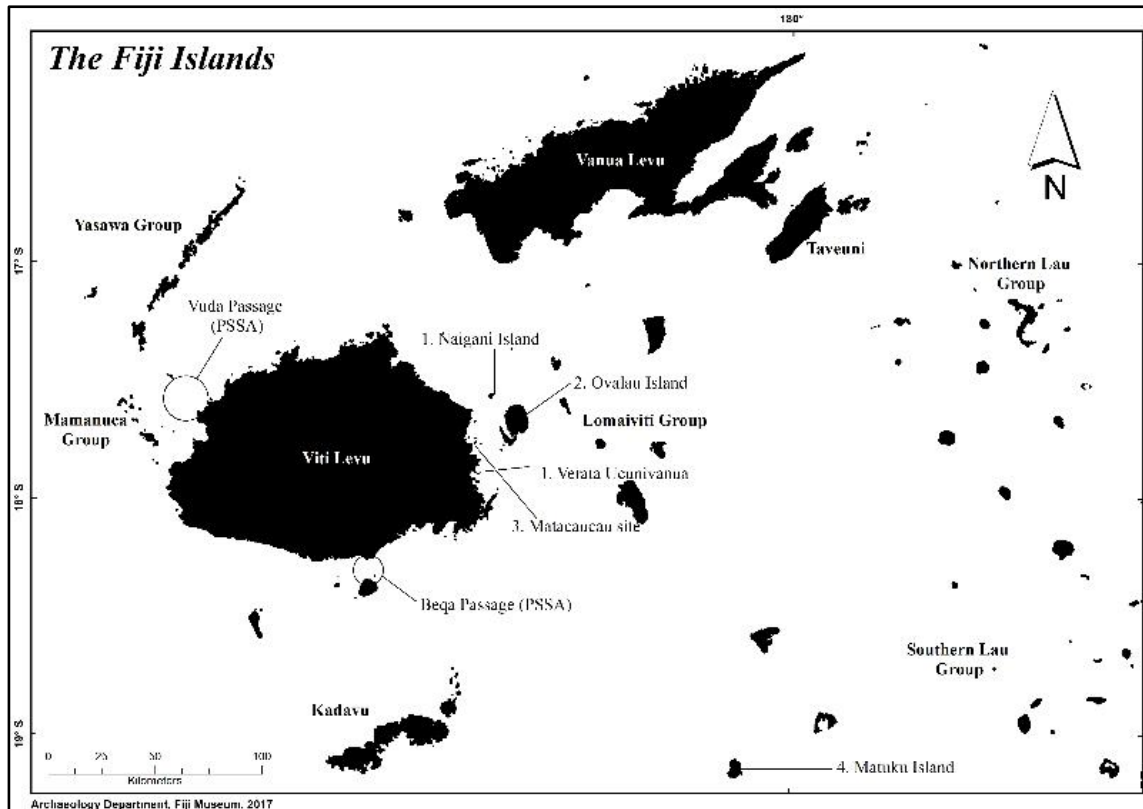


Fig. 1: Map showing the names of places mentioned in the Sacred Maritime Sites section.

1. The sacred fishes of Naigani Island

On the eastern coast of mainland *Viti Levu*, the paramount chief of *Verata*, *Rokomoutu* holds and can be identified with the traditional title ²of the ‘*Ratu*.’ It was said that when the first Fijian’s left Lake Tanganyika in Africa for Fiji, the daughter of *Lutunasobasoba* (the chieftain of the group) asked to take with her some pet fish. In Fiji, the fishes ([Sardinella fijiense](#)) known as *Daniva* or sardines, were put in the *Verata* waters by the princess. So catching the fish with a spear or using of fine nets or fishing lines were prohibited. Normally the Trevallies would swim after the *Daniva* and push them close to land and during this pursuit there would be a lot of splashing

noise on the beach. People would normally go to the beach and pick the *Daniva*.

When the fishes were in *Verata, Rokomoutu*, one day tried to use his spear on them. He threw his spear, missed them and it landed on the rocks. He slipped, hitting his knee on the rock (today, the mark of his spear and his knee on the rocks are still evident). Furious, he said to the fishes, “go down to *Naigani* (an island about 37.5 kilometers north of *Verata* as shown on the map) where I will not see or hear you, and when I want to drink boiled water, I will come down for you” (oral history recording with Naigani village elder, 2004)

The people of *Naigani* would catch the Trevallies as they come close to land with the sardines. Similar to the Norse folklore of Thor and his goats, when consuming the Trevallies, the bones are not allowed to be broken. The bones are then carefully placed back in the water where it comes back to life. According to the people of *Naigani*, one can easily tell the difference between a newly formed Trevally from an old one and this is a traditional practice that is still carried out today.

2. The sacred passage between the island of Ovalau and Naigani

One of the oral accounts collected from *Naigani* was that there were two cousins named *Laginiwasa* and *Rakavono*. One day, the cousins ate the young germinating coconut palms, which is called ‘*vara*’ in the iTaukei dialect. The *vara* had been planted by *Laginiwasa*’s father *Ratu* (chief) *Matanabalavu*. Hearing *Ratu Matanabalavu* coming, *Rakavono* fled but not before he was seen by *Ratu Matanabalavu*. Encountering *Laginiwasa* and enraged at his behavior, *Ratu Matanabalavu* banished him from the island. *Laginiwasa* took his double hull canoe (*drua*) and fled to the island of *Moturiki* which is south of *Ovalau* Island (Ramoli and Nunn, 2001).

A few days later *Ratu Matanabalavu* confronted *Rakavono* and told him that he must leave the island as *Laginiwasa* had done. Lacking his own *drua*, *Rakavono* swam to *Rukuruku* on the northwestern coast of *Ovalau* island (Ramoli and Nunn, 2001).

According to the oral narrative, the path when *Rakavono* swam, is a warm passage about 8 kilometers in distance. Several fishermen from both *Naigani* and *Ovalau* have swam the passage without any swimming aid stating that the warmth provided buoyancy and any cold water encountered during the swim meant that the path where *Rakavono* swam was not being followed.

3. *The sacred stone of Matuku*

Matuku is an island located in the *Lau* group (southeast of *Viti Levu*). It was also the only island in the *Lau* group that was not conquered by the Tongan army led by the Tongan prince, *Enele Ma'afu'out'itonga* (around the 1840s). On the eastern end of the island, there is a stone which is submerged during high tides. The stone, reddish in color is almost rectangular in form and about 1 meter x 1.5 meters in dimension can be found amidst beach cobbles near *Levukaidaku* village. This reddish stone displays traditional relationships between *Levukaidaku* and the neighbouring village, *Raviravi*. According to the oral accounts collected from both villages, giant tidal waves occur instantaneously when a villager from *Raviravi* walks past the stone.

Similarly, another reddish stone which is smaller in size is located about 20 meters west of the previous one happens to cause giant tidal waves when it is disrespected through speech or action.

The giant waves can only be calmed when a clan member from *Levukaidaku* performs a ritual by covering the red stones with leaves from a particular tree.

4. *The sacred mosquito crevice, Matacaucau*

Along the eastern coast of the main island, Viti Levu, there is a mysterious maritime site. This is a crevice at the foot of a cliff at high water mark. The crevice is called '*Qara ni namu.*' *Qara* is opening and *namu* is mosquito. The *Qara ni namu* contains mythical history. It is said that this was a gift by *Rokomoutu* who was the leader of one of the migrating party from the hills of *Nakauvadra*. While sailing across towards *Verata Ucunivanua*, strong winds tore his sails and he decided to seek shelter close to land to mend his sails. As a gift for the people that helped him, *Rokomoutu* presented a parcel containing mosquitoes, which was supposed to be his present to the *Turaga na Ratu* from *Verata* to awake him every morning. This was instead gifted to the people of *Matacaucau* for their assistance.

The villagers of *Matacaucau* relayed stories that anyone who disturbed the *Qara ni namu* would suffer dire consequences in that mosquitoes would swarm the village resistant to repellents and sleeping nets. It was also relayed that during ceremonial festivities young men would purposefully stir the *Qara ni namu* to

Conclusion

Pacific Islanders are deeply connected with the ocean. The ocean as the source of life, the medium for transportation between islands and sustaining livelihoods, much of the Pacific's history is related to the use of the ocean where some of it are now underwater.

Similarly, the Fiji Islands is littered with historical sites related to maritime heritage. This paper offers a glimpse of the diversity of distribution of maritime heritage sites, most of which are connected through myths and legends and have unexplainable occurrences. However, these mysterious heritage sites are considered in the iTaukei language as the '*sau ni vanua*' or the power of the land and its people.

On the contrary, current climatic conditions should also be considered. Fiji is experiencing the threats of global sea level rise where a total of 64 coastal villages are earmarked for relocation. More than 3 villages have already been relocated under the National Climate Change Fund and the Archaeology Department is mapping a proactive strategic plan on the potential of documenting all community related heritage in affected villages which will add to the list of underwater heritage in the future.

Given that human and financial resources are lacking, the Fiji Museum will slowly proceed and continue to document underwater cultural heritage sites while working in collaboration with other government agencies and NGOs in creating awareness on the significance and protection of UCH.

Endnotes

¹ Preservation of Objects of Paleontological Interest Act: (Laws of Fiji, Chapter 264)

²Title, name by which a person or group is identified, the (usually honorific) name by which a kin-group is known or, less commonly, their plant, fish or other animal (Gatty, 2009).

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