

PRIME MINISTER'S SPEECH CLOSING THE 9TH PACIFIC
ISLANDS CONFERENCE ON CONSERVATION AND
PROTECTED AREAS

The Prime Minister of the Cook Islands

The Attorney General and Minister for the Environment

Your Excellencies, members of the Diplomatic Corps

The Director General of the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional
Environment Program.

The Chairperson of the Pacific Islands Round Table

Representatives of Civil Society and the Private Sector

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula Vinaka and a very good afternoon to you all.

It's a great pleasure for me to have the task of formally closing
the 9th Pacific Islands Conference on Conservation and
Protected Areas.

Fiji is proud to have assumed the chair of this conference and
the responsibility for guiding our collective agenda forward.

We welcome the opportunity to take a leadership role in this
forum, just as we have when we've chaired the Melanesian
Spearhead Group, the International Sugar Council and the G77
Plus China – the largest voting bloc at the United Nations.

In all of these forums, we have seen it as our duty to provide enlightened and purposeful leadership, create an inclusive environment where a range of opinions can be heard, try to forge a consensus, achieve positive outcomes and insist that those outcomes be implemented and tested against measurable performance standards.

That is the discipline we want to bring to our collective conservation effort over the next five years. The many challenges we face require resolute action. And now that the talking here is drawing to a close, it is time to act.

This is the prime reason why Fiji has pressed for, and offered to host, a high-level meeting by the end of April, 2014. We have the next few months to process all of the measures that we have adopted here in Suva and forge a stronger action plan and build a stronger alliance.

We will secure the participation of the Pacific countries and relevant ministers to ensure a firm regional commitment and an action-based alliance. In the meantime, Fiji would also like to see a greater participation in our endeavours by the corporate sector. We need their practical expertise as part of our existing partnership. And together, we can build a grand coalition to achieve better outcomes than have been possible to date.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you have all been very welcome guests to Fiji as we work collectively for the preservation of our surroundings and biodiversity. I hope you have enjoyed both the formal discussions and our hospitality. Permit me to say a few words of my own to explain my own passion in this area.

I regard it as the solemn duty of every Pacific Islander to assume a personal responsibility to contribute to our conservation effort.

For too long, our people have taken their beautiful surroundings and abundant natural resources for granted. For too long, we have seen conservation as someone else's responsibility.

Paradoxically, we use the vast ocean around us as both a food source and a refuse dump. We take its abundance of seafood and give back sewage and garbage.

None of us would dump rubbish in our own backyards yet think nothing of dumping it in the ocean. In my naval career, I've been staggered and angered by the sheer volume of floating plastic bags, plastic bottles and other cast-offs that I've seen in the water sometimes many kilometres offshore.

Someone put them there, sometimes a Pacific Islander with a big smile.

Something had to give as time went by and it has. Our ocean, its shoreline and reefs have come under such intense human pressure that whole ecosystems are under threat. It has to stop.

Our arable land and fresh water streams and rivers are being polluted and their biodiversity, at times, affected by invasive species.

I heartily agree with His Excellency our President when he said at the opening session of this gathering that we need to inculcate a new culture of personal responsibility on the part of every Pacific Islander to end this assault on our living space.

I also endorse his call for the global community to finally face up to its responsibility to tackle the issue of climate change.

Fiji may not face the crisis of some of our neighbours in disappearing under the waves altogether. But already, some of our villages have had to be moved. And we are certainly having to shoulder some of the fallout of the looming catastrophe for some Pacific Small Island Developing States.

The Government of Kiribati – a nation whose very existence is threatened – has bought a significant land holding of six thousand acres on our second major island, Vanua Levu, as something of an insurance policy against that threat.

If the sea level continues to rise because the world won't tackle global warming, some or all of the people of Kiribati may have to come to live in Fiji.

In historical terms, this is an unprecedented scenario - a sovereign country and member of the United Nations simply ceasing to exist in physical form.

Fiji will not turn its back on our neighbours in their hour of need. We accepted the Banaban people when they were forced to leave Ocean island because of the pressure of phosphate mining there. The British started to move the Banabans to Rabi Island in Fiji in 1945 and there were further migrations in the 1970s and early 80s, after Fiji became independent.

The Banaban homeland was not a sovereign state. The citizens of Kiribati most certainly are. So Fiji is facing a range of unprecedented and perplexing decisions as we contemplate giving them refuge against the rising sea. We clearly cannot have another sovereign nation within our borders. So what do we do? Are these people prepared to become Fijians? Can they be dual nationals of Kiribati and Fiji? How will the whole thing work? These are just some of the aspects we are having to consider as the climate change crisis escalates.

Today I repeat the appeal I made in London two weeks ago to the industrialised nations: For God's sake, please act now to finally set the appropriate carbon emission targets to arrest rising global temperatures. The melting of the ice caps and the consequent rise in sea levels threatens the very existence of some of our Small Island Developing States. You must do more or history will judge you extremely harshly for your negligence and selfishness.

For the record, these are the top ten carbon emitters: China, the United States, the European Union, India, Russia, Japan, Germany, Canada, Iran and the United Kingdom. They are our friends but need to treat us all collectively in a more responsible manner and deal with this crisis. We certainly expect them to shoulder the financial impact that we suffer as Pacific Islanders.

It is the right of Pacific Islanders to survive the devastating impact of the carbon emissions. It is a moral and ethical conundrum that these countries are refusing to face.

By now, you will have all seen the action strategy that has been formulated here this week to take us all forward, not only on climate change but the conservation of our surroundings and biodiversity. Many of these are principles crying out for a practical response and Fiji wants to do a lot more itself to address them.

Indeed we are legally obliged under our new Constitution to protect our natural heritage. Section 40 says that every person has the right to a clean and healthy environment, which includes the right to have the natural world protected for the benefit of present and future generations through legislative and other measures.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we in Fiji look forward to seeing many of you here before the end of April as we build on the efforts of this week. With those words, I formally close – for the moment at least - the 9th Pacific Islands Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas.

Vinaka vakalevu, Thank you.