CLIMATE RESEARCH Seasons in Samoa

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Is there a role for indigenous knowledge of weather and climate in improving scientific understanding of future changes in the climate?

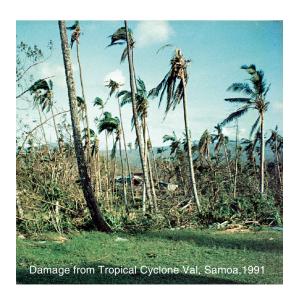
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Penehuro Fatu Lefale is based at NIWA in Auckland. Long before the advent of complex numerical climate models, indigenous communities have used changes in their environments to predict changes in the weather and climate. Social and communal activities like feasting, fishing and hunting patterns were planned in response to these changes and revolved around the different seasons.

While weather and climate patterns have been documented for many years using Western scientific techniques, little attention has been paid to documenting the traditional environmental observations made by indigenous peoples. Therefore it is possible that scientists may be missing some valuable insights into climate change and prediction.

For example, recent research by NIWA aimed at documenting knowledge of weather and climate forecasting in Samoa found that Samoans have their own unique seasonal calendar (shown opposite). Unlike the European calendar, which is based on astronomical events, the Samoan calendar is based on observations of environmental change, which are in turn largely influenced by the onset of extreme weather and climate events. The next phase of our research is to investigate whether these indigenous observations and traditional knowledge could be used to help improve scientific understanding of the climate system and its effects.



Recreational activities for Pacific children depend on historic knowledge of their environment



The scientific approach

We tend to assume that scientific problemsolving abilities are superior to those of indigenous knowledge. However, the issues facing scientists today in the area of resource and environmental management are becoming extremely complicated, often calling for more creative forms of collaboration between scientists and society and a broader range of disciplines and skills.

In research into climate change, for example, some of the most important tools being employed are climate models. These models have evolved considerably over the years and now include more detail than ever before. The outputs from various climate models are assessed by an international panel of scientists, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The climate projections in the IPCC's Third Assessment Report draw on the output from global climate models run for a range of plausible greenhouse gas scenarios. The scenarios used are the levels of greenhouse gases expected given a certain level of population change, socio-economic development, and technological change.

The best way to test a climate model is to run it for a period in the past using known greenhouse gas concentrations, and compare the output with past climate observations. This brings us to the importance of local observations, either in conventional data collection or in the documentation of indigenous knowledge and perspectives on weather, climate variability and change.

An indigenous perspective

Pacific Island Meteorological Services monitor and collect data from many parts of the southwest Pacific, continuing datasets that in

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	an seasonal calendar and its origins onal descriptions are listed under the approximate equivalent month
in English, follo	owed by an English translation and explanatory notes.
January Utu va mua	First yam digging. Utu va mua and Utu va muli, two brothers,
	fled to the earth and brought the January storms with them when
	there was war in heaven and their party was beaten. During a
	great war on earth, they escaped to the heavens. The hills are the heaps of slain covered by earth dug up from the valleys. When the
	two brothers look down upon them, their weeping, wailing and
• •	exasperation causes the storm or hurricane.
Aitu Tagaloa Tele	Great Ghost Big God
J	
February Toe utu va	Digging yam again. Further digging up of the yams to raise
	storms.
March	
Faaafu	<i>Withering.</i> From withering of the yam vine and other plants, which
Ta'a fanua	become coloured "like the shells" in March. <i>Roam or walk about the land.</i> This is the name of a god
	worshipped in April.
Atiu iti	Small gods. From the household gods worshipped at the time.
	They are specially implored to bless the family for the year "with strength to overcome in guarrels and in battles".
April	
Lo	A kind of fish. From the name of a small fish which comes in
Fagona	plentiful shoals at this time of the year. Destruction. The name of a god worshipped at the eastern
agona	extremity of the Samoan group of islands at this time.
May	
Au nunu	Stem crushed. This is from the crushed or pulverized state of the
	stem of the yam at that time. Others say the month was so named from multitudes of malicious demons supposed to be wandering
	about at that time. Even the fish of the sea were thought to be
	possessed and unusually savage in this month. May is often an
	unhealthy month, as it marks the transition from the wet season to the dry - hence the sickness and superstition.
Sina	<i>White.</i> From the worship of a goddess of that name.
June	
Ologa manu	The singing of birds. Named from the unusual joy among the
	birds over a plentiful supply of favourite buds and berries. The bright scarlet flowers of the <i>Erythrina indica</i> thenbegin to come
	out and attract a host of parakeets and other happy chirpers.
July	
Palolo mua	The first Palolo. Palolo "virides" are the worms that swim out from certain parts of the barrier reefs for three days every year and of
	which Samoans are very fond (all the more so from its rareness).
	Pa means to burst and lolo, fatty or oily. Hence, the origin of the
	name probably lies with the fatty or oily appearance of the worms as they break, burst, and are mixed up in heaps after they are
	caught. This is the first month of the half-year called the Vaito'elauo
	season. The other half of the year is Vaipalolo season.
August	The last Polele or
Toe palolo Palolo muli	The last Palolo or the last of the palolo.
September	
Muli fa	End of the stem of a taro, Arum esculentum. The month is
	unusually dry and the scorching rays of the sun leave little of the
	taro stem except for a small piece at the end. Another derivation of Muli fa is the end of the season for catching the fish Fa.
October	
Lotu o uaga	Rain prayers. Named after the special prayers which are offered
	to the gods for rain.
November	The first of planty. Fish and other food became plantiful at this
raumata mua	The first of plenty. Fish and other food become plentiful at this time and this is followed by the so-called palolo feasts. Public
	dinners in the houses of the leading men of the village are the
	order of the day.
December	The finish of the feasting or final suprar Feed is less startiful
Toe taumafa	<i>The finish of the feasting or final supper.</i> Food is less plentiful after some of the December gales or tropical cyclones.
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some areas started over 100 years ago. For example, climate observations began in Apia, Samoa, in 1890. Long-term information like this is now assisting scientists in their understanding of past, present and future climate changes in the Pacific region. This includes the testing and validation of climate models.

Unfortunately, few parallel records have been kept of indigenous perspectives on weather and climate. However, NIWA now recognises the important role of local observations, knowledge and views. Samoa, with its long history of climate data collection combined with local knowledge on predicting weather and climate events, was the obvious place to start exploring these issues in the Pacific region as a whole. A project begun in March 2001 has documented the seasons from a Samoan perspective (left). Work is also underway with Māori regarding traditional weather and climate knowledge, and adaptation to climatic events. ■

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Further reading

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