

Disappearing Islands

(Melanesian Mission UK supporter Alex Leger shares his memories and concerns)

I feel as if I know the Solomons well, as when I was 19 I was sent to teach at an Anglican mission school as a cadet VSO volunteer.

One boy in my class came from an artificial island, Walande, made from coral rocks that had been piled up over hundreds of years to make a platform above the waves in a lagoon – and quite by accident, I visited it. It was Christmas 1966 and there were 200 inhabitants.

The floors of the leaf houses sat directly on the coral rock and the roofs were wind blown and ragged at the edges. All water had to be brought from the mainland in containers made from giant bamboo. The only transport were canoes made from hollowed out logs. The islanders survived by fishing and by planting vegetable gardens on land rented from people on the nearby Malaita island.

Fast-forward to 2002 and filming for the BBC's Blue Peter programme, I featured Walande. The village had grown to over a thousand and fibreglass dinghies with outboard motors had replaced dug-outs. The floors of the houses were no longer resting on the coral rock. They were now perched on two-metre high stilts, and with good reason. The sea level was rising faster than their collective ability to gather rocks to raise the height of the island.

Then last year I was invited to join a group going to the Solomons from the Melanesian Mission and was asked to film the devastation that was once Walande Island. What we saw when steaming up the quiet waters of the Port Adam lagoon was extraordinary. Instead of the sizeable island crammed with houses there was only one house left.

I filmed an interview with the last occupant of the island. He readily confessed to being scared at what was happening. Everyone I spoke to agreed that the turbulent weather and sea level rise was something they had never experienced before. They knew that it had everything to do with climate change.

Throughout Melanesia, islands are being abandoned. On remote Ontong Java some 4,000 people wait to be relocated to a site on Guadalcanal. The advance party has already arrived and set up a makeshift community. In the Reef and Duff Islands in the South of the Solomons, there is a constant flow of refugees to higher ground.

Perhaps the saddest thing about all this is that customs that have survived the centuries are being forgotten in the clamour to provide a safe refuge for children and grandchildren.

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