

SWAINS ISLAND EXPEDITION JOURNAL

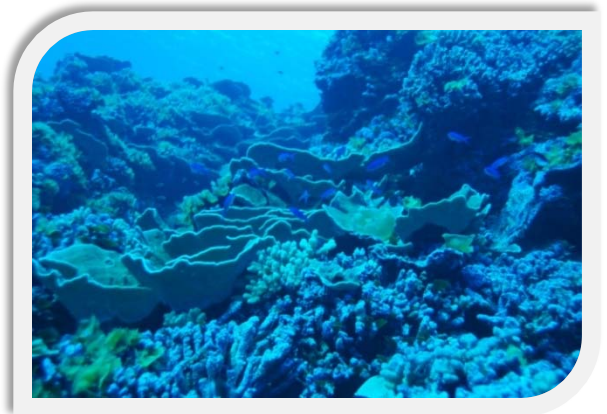


In May 2011, the Governor of American Samoa, the Honorable T.A. Tulafono joined staff from the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries (ONMS) and the Jennings' family on four day journey to Swains Island. The trip had been several years in the making. In 2009 Representative (Rep.) Alex Jennings approached the National Marine Sanctuary program to discuss the possible designation of Swains Island as a National Marine Sanctuary. The Jennings family believed that sanctuary designation would help protect the marine environment surrounding the island. Furthermore, the Jennings' family recognized that without a local sustainable economy it would not be feasible for family members to continue to live on the island. They believed that the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries could help bring positive attention to Swains Island and promote the island as an eco-tourism destination.



In collaboration ONMS and the American Samoa Department of Commerce (DOC), the Jennings' family has spent two years working towards designating Swains Island as a unit in the American Samoa National Marine Sanctuary. Towards this end, the family offered to host the Governor of American Samoa, along with several agency representatives, on Swains Island to highlight the natural and cultural resources of the remote island. The Jennings' family also wanted to return to Swains Island together as a family to share the special place with the youngest generation of Jennings' boys. It was the first time in years that three generations of Jennings' family members travelled to the island together.

Furthermore, the resource agencies hoped to assess injuries to coral reef resources resulting from the March 11, 2011 earthquake in Japan and the ensuing tsunami. No one had been to Swain's since the catastrophic event, and thus a damage assessment of the coral reef resources was necessary. The trip therefore emphasized experiential learning on the part of traditional Samoan leadership regarding the effects of anthropogenic marine debris on even the most remote islands and atolls.



The entire effort would be videotaped in HD by ONMS Videographer Paul Cheterkin. The video will be professionally edited to produce a high quality documentary to bring attention to the remote island. The resource assessment piece will be featured in the new Sanctuary Visitor's Center. The Visitor's Center will serve as the premier marine educational, outreach and learning facility in the Territory and will therefore provide a platform to increase the visibility of the resource protection efforts in the Territory and greater Pacific Islands region.

Day One



On the morning of May 10, 2010, Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary, in collaboration with Bruckner Chase Ocean Positive, and the American Samoa Coastal Zone Management Program, hosted an Oceans Forum at the Governor Rex Lee Auditorium. The event showcased twenty-five years of ocean conservation in American Samoa. The Deputy Director of the Department of Commerce Lelei Peau opened the event with remarks on the special value of marine resources to the Samoan people. Governor Togiola T.A. Tulafono recognized the agencies and organizations not only in American Samoa but also throughout the United States working to protect our islands resources and enhance the livelihoods of future

generations. Daniel J. Basta, Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, shared his vision for a Pacific Strategy to establish a network on marine protected areas throughout the region. Finally, Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary Superintendent Gene Brighthouse reviewed twenty-five years ocean conservation at the sanctuary.



Following the introduction participants heard from featured presenter Bruckner Chase. Bruckner Chase is a marathon swimmer and an experienced endurance athlete with a career dating back to the early 1980's. While in American Samoa Bruckner completed an open-water from Aunu'u Island to Utulei Beach covering approximately 8 miles. The event was part of a multi-year effort to complete endurance swims throughout the nation to inspire people to become stewards of their environment.



Following the Ocean Forum Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary hosted a ground breaking ceremony at the Convention Center in Utulei to mark the beginning of renovations for the new offices and visitor's center. The primary purpose of this project is infrastructure investment to provide a Training, Learning and Visitors Center unlike anything American Samoa has ever seen. The renovations will provide space for community training activities, youth and leadership opportunities, technologically advanced education and outreach, and it will result in economic opportunities for locals, including both short- and long-term job creations.

The Convention Center is owned by ASG and operated by the American Samoa Department of Commerce (ASDOC). The Convention Center facility is a landmark with a central location to link government, private sector and community together. The facility is also in close proximity to the Port, to provide cruise ship tourists with information about American Samoa, tropical coral reefs, and the wise use of marine resources. The project proposes to add approximately 2,000 square ft to an existing building of 3,350 square feet this includes the adjoining rotunda, which has a display highlighting the features of the marine resources of American Samoa and will be used by school groups, American Samoa Community College, and a conference area for a number of meetings, trainings, and workshops.



After lunch, the delegation travelling to Swains Island met at the boat dock to begin loading the Lady Naomi for the expedition to Swains Island. According to Rep. Alex Jennings, the size of the travelling delegation was unprecedented. The delegation lead by the Honorable T.A. Tulafono included the Director of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries Dan Basta, the Deputy Director of the American Samoa Department of Commerce Lelei Peau, Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary Deputy Superintendent Kevin Grant and Policy Analyst Emily Gaskin, National Park of American Samoa Dive Officer Jim Nimz, American Samoa Department of Marine and Wildlife technician Siafoi Fa'aumu. The delegation also included representatives from Marine Patrol, the local media KVZK, and members of the



Governor's security detail. Members of the Jennings' family included Rep. Alex Jennings and wife Rowena Jennings, David Jennings, Salani Jennings, Dalen Jennings, Don Jennings, Bill Sears, and Bessie Thomas. Their invited guests included Marshall Ashley, Hobbs Lowson, Otto Hansell, and Dr. Peter Palsha and his wife Judy. Boat Operator Tulafono Umi and NOAA National Weather Service Techs Bob Watanabe and Marcus Lankilde also made the trip. Several members of the Jennings' family had travelled to Swains Island several weeks earlier to prepare for our arrival. They departed the island with us and made the return journey back to Tutuila.



The Lady Naomi set sail for Swains Island just after 1PM in the afternoon. It would be the first trip back to the island in 46 years for the oldest member of the delegation, Bessie Thomas. Nearly half a century ago Bessie had been married on Swains Island and so the atoll still held a very special place in her heart. Her excitement was contagious and as the boat set off everyone felt that they were going to be a part of something special.



The journey to Swains Island was quite calm and gave the delegation an opportunity to acquaint themselves with one another. Rep. Alex Jennings provided a briefing aboard the ship about the history and culture of Swains Island. ONMS Director Dan Basta offered his insights on the potential to protect the marine ecosystem and historic sites as a National Marine Sanctuary. The first evening the entire delegation gathered in the mess hall for a delicious meal which included octopus, chicken, taro, pulasami and salad. After dinner most of the delegation retired to their bunks for the evening.

Day Two

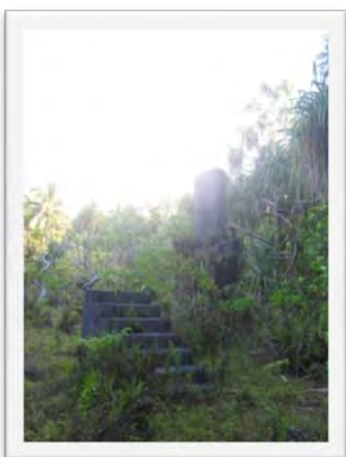
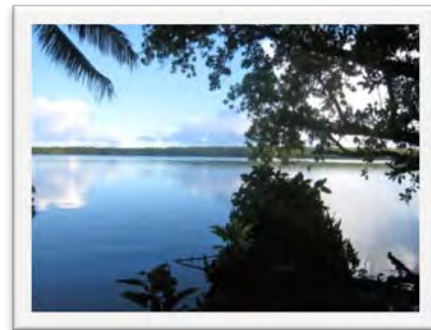


The following morning most people rose early and gathered in the mess hall for breakfast – another delicious meal this time consisting of eggs and sausage, toast and cereal. Shortly after breakfast the first signs of Swains Island started to appear along the horizon. Everyone hurried to the deck to take pictures and watch the approach. By 9AM the Lady Naomi arrived at Swains Island. The boat could not traverse the coral reef surrounding the island so passengers and cargo travelled to the island aboard two small boats that made several trips back and forth.



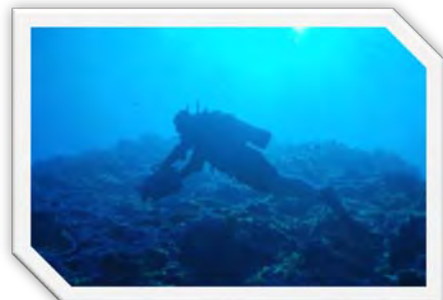
When the delegation arrived on the island they were treated with true Swains Island hospitality. They were presented with fresh cold coconuts to enjoy under tents on the beach. The Governor was briefed on basic things to look for on a resource assessment, and then joined Dan Basta, Jim Nimz, and Videographer Paul Cheterkin on the first resource assessment dive. The group spent 30 minutes under water and dove to a maximum depth of 40ft. The Governor was very pleased with the experience and everyone agreed it was a very successful dive. After the dive the entire delegation was treated to lunch in the village. The Jennings' family had produced a feast combining traditional local cuisine with other flavors. Everyone was very impressed that they were able to put together such an elaborate meal in such a remote environment with limited kitchen appliances.

Following lunch the Governor joined several members of the Jennings' family on a tour around the island. Swains Island is an unbroken circle of land enclosing a freshwater lagoon that has been cut off from the sea. Swains Island has a total area of 460.9 acres (186.5 ha), of which 373 acres (150.8 ha) is land. The central lagoon accounts for the balance of 88 acres (35.8 ha). On the tour, the Governor was shown a "whale pot" – an old relic from the days when the original Captain Jennings used the island as a whaling station to process blubber. The family then walked to the cemetery behind the village to place flowers and gifts on the grave sites of their ancestors. Then they proceeded to the central lagoon. From there they went to see the ancient Idol [...]. The 18 inch stone alter sits on top of a four foot stone structure in a clearing.



No one knows the origin of the idol although some of the family members have speculated about its purpose. One family member suspects that in the past the ocean water flowed into the lagoon through a small channel at high tide. They suggest that the idol may have been a marker to show travelling Polynesians how they could enter the lagoon and seek shelter on their journeys throughout the Pacific. A similar account suggests that the idol was used to communicate directions to other island chains. However no one knows for sure and so the idol continues to be a mystery. In jest the Governor asked the idol to please ensure that the walk back to the camp site would be shorter than the walk around the island. Upon returning to camp he joked that the idol had no mystical powers since the walk back along the beach had proven to be much longer!

While the Governor enjoyed a tour of the island, others took the opportunity to dive to assess the reef for marine debris and to assess injuries to coral reef resources resulting from the March 11, 2011 earthquake in Japan and the ensuing tsunami. They were pleased to note that the coral cover appeared to



be healthy and there was no visible sign of and marine debris on the reefs. As dusk approached a crew set out to catch some fish for the evening dinner. The women spent some time sharing stories and singing hymns in the shallow pools as the sun set. Meanwhile several men shared stories around the campfire. After the sun set the hosts set three large bon fires to acknowledge their guests visits to the island. Traditionally the fires would have been set during the send off but they concluded that this would be a more appropriate time.

Dinner was another wonderful event with fresh sashimi and ginger coconut chicken. Bessie prepared three of her now infamous cherry cobblers and all three quickly vanished. Following dinner everyone retired to the camp site on the beach for an early night.



Day Three



The following morning staff rose early to capture more underwater footage for the video documentary. On the dive they were lucky enough to view a white tip shark pursuing and finally capturing a fish for his morning feed. The divers were also privileged to see several green sea turtles as well as an adult Humphead wrasse suspended idly above the magnificent coral reefs. After the dive the entire delegation joined the Jennings' family for incredible breakfast feast in the village before loading up the boat and returning to Tutuila. The trip home was also surprisingly calm – “the best weather yet!” exclaimed a member of the family who had visited the island many times.

On the ride home many people had the opportunity to share their experiences. All agreed that Swains Island was truly a special place, not only for its unique biological diversity but also for its rich cultural heritage. Many also found the vivid blue color of the water to be breathtaking. The divers found the unlimited visibility and warm water to be particularly inviting and ideal for visitors. It was a unique opportunity to be able to experience the island with such a diverse group of individuals who brought many different experiences to the trip. It will be a journey that many will keep in their hearts and share with their friends and family for many years to come.

