



ISLAND LIFE: Professor Edvard Hviding shot this photo during fieldwork at the Marovo Lagoon in Solomon Islands in 2010. It shows a fast eroding village shore. PHOTO: EDVARD HVIDING/UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN

Pacific front lines of climate change

The EU-funded ECOPAS project brings together anthropology, climate science and performing arts to highlight the challenges faced by Pacific Island nations.

TEXT • SVERRE OLE DRONEN

Professor Edvard Hviding is excited about the ECOPAS project, or European Consortium for Pacific Studies. He has been working on a wide range of fieldwork-based projects concerning the culture, environment and politics in Pacific Island nations since 1986.

With the ECOPAS project, funded by the EU for the period from 2012–2015, Professor Hviding hopes to create a stronger and more well-oriented European focus on the plight of the island dwellers of the Pacific.

“The Pacific is at the frontline of global climate change. The island

nations contribute the least to global warming but are set to suffer the most from its effects. We want to bring the human dimension into the climate change debate and are enthusiastic about the interest shown by the European Commission in our strong network of research groups

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and institutions in Europe and the Pacific,” says Professor Hviding, who works at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Bergen (UiB) and is the director of the Bergen Pacific Studies Group.

Fresh and interdisciplinary approach

He points out that the EU’s role as a major player worldwide includes an interest in the Pacific, where the EU is the second largest development donor.

“What is interesting to see is that with the support for ECOPAS, the Commission has expressed the need for fresh and diverse research perspectives on the Pacific, notably from the social sciences and the humanities, in new forms of dialogue with the natural sciences,” the social anthropologist says.

This interdisciplinary approach is exactly what ECOPAS is bringing to the table. At UiB, the ECOPAS project counts three PhDs in social anthropology and one PhD in geophysics. With the participation of the Pacific Island region’s strongest team in performing arts, what is essentially a network project brings new interdisciplinary research and dissemination to the forefront, under the ECOPAS banner of ‘restoring the human to climate change.’

Two specific goals

As the ECOPAS project coordinator, Professor Hviding manages this extensive Europe-Pacific network. From its start the project set out two specific goals.

“The long-term goal is to develop and consolidate connections between research and policy communities within Europe and the Pacific, as well as on a Europe-Pacific axis,” he says, adding provocatively:

“A more short-term goal is to make our friends in the Pacific nations, as well as the Pacific-oriented agents in Brussels, more independent of Australian consultancy work, which relies strongly on that country’s foreign policy as an ambitious regional ‘superpower.’”

The explicit ambition is to provide European development initiatives in the Pacific region with a new knowledge base. To this end, in 2014 ECOPAS submitted to the European Parliament a new EU Development Strategy for the Pacific.

Fighting stereotypes

According to Professor Hviding, challenges facing the Pacific today are about more than those processes of climate change that people in the West seem mostly concerned with. Questions of long-term social dynamics and cultural heritage are integral parts of the wider discussions about Pacific futures.

“What we are trying to bring into the debate with ECOPAS is an antithesis of stereotypes that exist about the Pacific,” says the Norwegian social anthropologist. “We hear a lot about how not only sea-level rise, but also tsunamis and earthquakes, destroy coastlines in the islands. But to the people who have inhabited these islands for thousands of years, severe

environmental challenges are part of their history and cultural knowledge.”

Professor Hviding believes that this explains a certain stoicism and pragmatism found in island cultures. People are simply used to having to take to the ocean and resettle elsewhere.

However, the challenges currently posed by global warming are greater than anything even these resilient islanders or their ancestors have ever had to face, and given the nation-state structure of today, there are few alternative places to settle for displaced islanders. The ECOPAS team is finding inspiration in Pacific folklore.

“There is an abundance of written records of local traditions,” Professor Hviding says, referring to written records made by early missionaries to the Pacific and islanders themselves.

“In addition, there are old newspapers published in Pacific languages, notably in Hawai’i where such materials were in print from the 1850s. Literacy was well advanced at an early stage and there is plenty of local literature to draw on to help us gather information about the changing patterns of weather and environment in the islands.”

>>> Our photo essay from the Moana show and interviews with a selection of the participants at the Pacific symposium in Bergen follow on **pages 22–29**