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OPENING SPEECH



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Western Pacific Regional Workshop on Environmental Health  
Planning and Management

"Working Towards Healthy People in Healthy Islands"  
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Honorable Sandra Pierantozzi, Vice-President and Minister  
of Health  
Consultants for the Workshop  
Participants from the Pacific Islands  
Colleagues and Friends  
Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all, I would like to thank you for allowing me to  
share some of my thoughts as the Director of Public Health  
for Palau regarding Environmental Health. I recognize and  
respect the expertise gathered here today on environmental  
health. Gathered here today are the experts on  
Environmental Health in the Pacific and specifically for  
the countries that are represented.

You are gathered here for the next 10 days to grapple with  
formulating constructive, deliberate and coordinated  
strategies toward diagnoses, intervention and evaluation of  
environmental risk factors. The aspirations are, that the  
National Environmental Health Action Plan, NEHAP, will  
serve as the guideline for actions toward healthy  
environments in each of your countries. I applaud you and  
your efforts toward such action plans however, there are

few things that I would like for you to ponder on as you deliberate in the next 10 days.

The first of these issues is **Religion and Environment**, which is in my mind the biggest contributor to the "environmental crisis" that we face in this modern world. Francis Schaeffer, one of the most prolific Christian writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in his book *Pollution and the Death of Man*, writes, "Men do what they think. Whatever their worldview is, this is the thing, which will spill over into the external world. This is true in every area, in sociology, in psychology, in science and technology, as well as in the area of ecology." He goes on to say, "Technology is not going to solve the problem because it is powered with the view of men's dominion over nature, which might equal limitless exploitation. Since, the roots of our trouble is largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not."

I find this point of view interesting because, it is very much consistent with our worldview as Pacificans and for which many missionaries preached against. From the point of view of monotheism, or one God, the early missionaries could not understand the issue of sacredly laidened

environment. They called Pantheism or worship of many gods. But in calling it, Pantheism or worship of many gods, they could preach it out of our belief system; our belief that every thing is sacred and must be treated with reverence and that the dominance over the environment was protected by it is sacredness. Schaffer goes on to argue that "all things, including man, are equal in their origin" and that stewardship is only given to man. It is that stewardship that is only given to man where dominance is defined and if such were true, the early missionaries were mis-guided in their preaching. In as much as you deliberate on the NEHAP, I ask that you give some thought to this issue of belief and behavior.

The second issue is that of **colonialism and environment**. I am not talking about the contact with the outside world because it is inevitable that it would happen in the Pacific. It is not the contact with outsiders that matters in my mind in terms of environment but rather it is the demise of our own ability to manage our environment. I am talking about the changes that we have gone through in the name of progress. The changes to our social relations, land tenure, jurisprudence or legal system and our concept of management are to name of few of these changes. While

reality of survival strikes me as that of an adaptation to a democratic system, it is within that system that NEHAP is required. The aristocratic system that existed before contact with outsiders had very strict mechanism for waste management, conservation and in Palau for instance, the story of UAB, the giant who fell to form Palau advocates for integrated nature conservancy. The belief that Palau is a body of a giant, UAB, lends many lessons that our own culture teaches about environment and its survival. Unhealthy, UAB or Palau means unhealthy people. This is not a new ideal from WHO, Healthy Islands is very much Pacific in its ideals. The deliberation on NEHAP must leave room for cultural integration in how each of our societies must play out its own cultural renaissance in a time of colonial confusion.

Thirdly is **greed and environment**. I say greed only because; many Pacificans live beyond their means, which leads to many if not all of the "instant survival" violation of environment. These include uncontrolled economic adventures, poorly planned agriculture, exploited marine resources, un-regulated mining, tourism "on the run" and most of all, the out right environmental prostitution. I say greed because, Palau with its pride as one of the best

diving site in the world has at least 8 dredging sites and 7 rock quarries. Are they all necessary? No they are not all necessary but greed has dictated the behavior. The issues of ciguatera, fish poisoning and the issue of environment dependent tourism becomes a deliberation of futility. While development is inevitable, controlled development within the NEHAP framework could go along way to prevent this environmental prostitution. NEHAP must articulate for the need for the economic, environmental, social and cultural impact studies for any development project in the countries. NEHAP could serve as the environmental condom for all the environmental prostitution.

Fourth is the issue of **population and environment**. The transitioning demography, population mobilization including urbanization, "indigenous brain drain" with "expatriate brain deluge" or what one has called "brown brain out and white brain in" are some of population issues. Transitioning demography is a factor that every environmental health specialist must pay attention to because, the strategies for a young population are very much different than that of an older population. The issue of urbanization presents uneven burdens within a countries

or regions that are different than those that have sparse population. The issue of migration including urbanization brings about the issue of "permanent temporariness". This alludes to those who have no sense of ownership to the place because they are only there temporarily, even though they have been there for 3 generations. We see that here in Palau and almost every place in the Pacific, some of which have the shantytowns and some of which have been labeled 'ghettos of the Pacific'. NEHAP must articulate for permanency and sustainability of standards even in the midst of temporariness in rapidly mobile or transitioning demographics or population.

Fifth is the issue of **Horizontal Multisectoralism and Environment**: Environmental advocacy, social mobilization and action in a horizontal multisectoral approach rather than vertical in either governmental or non-governmental setting. For example, the advocacy for environment by the Division of Environmental Health, the Palau Conservation Society, the Palau Visitors Authority, the Palau Natural Conservancy and the Palauan government is a good start but it must include, the Faith Organizations, the Cultural Forum, the Chamber of Commerce, the Youth Groups and others. It must therefore be the goal of NEHAP to make

Health Island a national objective rather than be a Ministry of Health based initiative. The spectrum of all healthy settings could be vertical but the ideals of Healthy Island must be horizontal. This means, while Ministry of Health support Health Promoting Schools under the Ministry of Education, Healthy Workplace under the Ministry of Commerce and Trade, Healthy Tourism under Palau Visitors Authority the ideals of Healthy Island must emanate from the highest levels of Government, the Executive, Legislative, Judiciary and Traditional Leadership.

**Sixth is Health Indicator Based Activities and Environment:**

Last and definitely not the least are the activities of Divisions of Environmental Health. The Yanuca Declaration places environmental health at the center of activities in dealing with New Horizons in Health in the Pacific. Three out of the 5 declarations were related to environment. 1) The environments invite learning and leisure 2) Ecological balance is source of pride and 3) the ocean, which supports us, needs to be protected and sustained.

It is therefore; critical that NEHAP articulates the need for country specific health indicators specified by a

reliable health information system that can outline baseline community risk factors and monitor for progress. NEHAP must also advocate for sustainable Human Resource Development. This must not only for Environmental Health workers but also capacity building within the community at large, especially those who make decisions affecting environmental health. NEHAP in the end, must tell the Environmental Health story, it must tell the story when it is healthy and when it is unhealthy. It must allow for mechanism to preserve environmental health and allow for substantial healing.

In conclusion, our belief system, our experience, our instinct for survival and our sense of belonging to our islands, place different stresses on our physical, social and economic environments. These stresses can only be measured by a sustained and robust information system monitored by the community at large. The quality control of how things could be maintained and improved is based on how NEHAP is adopted and implemented. I see a challenge in the days ahead, but also recognize the fact that you are the right people to meet that challenge. Make NEHAP simple, implementable and improvable and that will be the bigger challenge.

Thank you for you indulgence.