

The forgotten survivors of Cyclone Pam

By Jamie Joseph

One month on from Cyclone Pam, and there is still very little mention in the news of the forgotten survivors in the remote Solomon Islands. Element writer Jamie Joseph interviewed OceansWatch founder Chris Bone, currently based at his eco village in Northland, and preparing to return to the islands on another seven month expedition.



OceanWatch, a small and robust New Zealand NGO, will soon head to the islands to give aid in the ongoing aftermath of Cyclone Pam. Photo / Britt Basel

"Parts of the Temotu province of Solomon Islands has been affected nearly as badly as Vanuatu," explains the seasoned skipper. "But because far less people live there it has not triggered an International Aid effort and some communities have been left stranded. So we are focusing our efforts on the most vulnerable and isolated villages, where we have already been working at the grassroots level for around five years. Cyclone Pam is one of the strongest to hit in the last decade, and this is exactly the sort of thing that we expected to happen as a result of climate change. Houses are wrecked,

fruit trees blown down, water catchments ruined. The people have survived, but now every day is a struggle."

A small and robust New Zealand NGO, OceansWatch has been working with island communities for many years, developing sustainable livelihoods, building resilience and educating the locals on sea level rises, erosion control and marine conservation, while at the same time blending this with tribal knowledge so that the islanders can live a more sustainable life without having to forgo their indigenous roots.

"Right now it's a battle to find food and water and rebuild homes and infrastructure. We have appointed Nelson Nyieda, a Temotu resident, to provide on the ground organisational support to the villages and update us and the Solomon Islands National Disaster Office. He will be responsible for distributing our aid resources and mind the equipment we have available."

Under the guidance of OceansWatch specialist volunteers, Nyieda has trained as a Reef Guardian and is also trained in the Virgin Coconut Oil Sustainable Livelihoods program. When the OceansWatch yachts arrive in Solomon Islands in a couple of months Nelson will travel with them and continue his training in all areas of Sustainable Livelihood projects so that communities can self fund their own adaptation strategies and development.

Director Chris Bone points out that they only go where they are invited. It often begins with a random text, or someone walks up to a crew member in the provincial capital Lata and starts a conversation. From there they have to go back to their village, discuss it with their community, and ask the chief to write a letter. Right now there are more villages than OceansWatch have capacity to work with, but they are doing their best to expand as donations roll in.

They are currently tackling the most urgent issues, assessing how Cyclone Pam has affected the relationship between the communities and their environment in terms of fishing and protected areas, and they are identifying ways in which any negative anthropogenic impacts can be mitigated.

Joining Solomon Islander Nelson Nyieda on the trail is New Zealand volunteer, arborist Bruce Pryor. He will be helping with the rebuild, clearing fallen trees which will be turned into timber for house repairs.

Says Chris Bone, "Yes, it's about building resilience to natural disasters, but our long term mission is always to empower communities to live sustainably, merging their ancient wisdom with contemporary science. Our Pacific neighbours are very spiritual and quite wise about maintaining their lifestyle. Their view of the outside world is through video clips via mobile phones, and they do realise it's not always greener on the other side. Their wants are basic needs, food and water, and a light to read books in the evening. There are no cars on the islands. No one is trying to get a beer fridge or TV."

If you would like to support the people of the Solomon Islands please visit the [OceansWatch](#) website, or join the conversation on [Facebook](#).

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