

*“Just occasionally you find yourself in an odd situation. You get into it by degrees and in the most natural way but when you are right in the midst of it you are suddenly astonished and ask yourself how in the world it all came about.”* Thor Heyerdahl, “The Kontiki Expedition”.

After retiring from ‘proper’ work in the Queensland government during the noughties I was lucky enough to link up with Australian Business Volunteers, an organisation which supports Australian volunteers who are interested in helping economic and social development projects in third world countries. Most of their work is done in Asia and the Pacific.

I have a dual academic background – fisheries science and economics – which was a handy entrée into development projects of the type supported by ABV. As a result, I wound up doing a series of evaluation and development studies on fisheries and aquaculture projects in some strange and wonderful places, including Tonga, various parts of Indonesia and in New Guinea. As an aside, I generally learnt far more than I taught, and received much more than I was given, during most of these projects. Perhaps the strangest, and certainly the most exciting, of the projects I worked on was a six week stint in Rabaul and Nuguria. The underlying concept was to evaluate the feasibility of developing a small scale export fin-fish export operation based at Nuguria.

Nuguria is not on most people’s list of “Islands I have heard of and must visit before I die”. It’s the populated centre of a 30 mile long atoll and lagoon complex about 200 miles north-east of Rabaul. That’s getting seriously remote. The only other populated place within cooee is the island of Lihir, about 50 miles to the north-west. Lihir is mostly a large hole in what was a marine mountain – it’s one of the world’s major gold mines – and the locals tend to stick to themselves.

The Nuguria population of about 600 are largely of Polynesian rather than Melanesian descent and speak a language closely related to Samoan – one of the geographical oddities you expect in PNG, where some 700 language groups and countless local dialects are spoken. The place exists pretty much as a subsistence economy – there is no form of employment outside a tiny trochus and beche de mer diving industry and the locals exist largely on fish and swamp taro, which is the only crop the atoll will support following the collapse of the copra industry. Supply boats may or may not turn up at 3 monthly intervals, and the only concessions to modern living are short wave radio and the goodies which come on supply boats. These are paid for by family members working on the mainland.

Getting there was when the excitement kicked in. I’d flown from Brisbane to Moresby for a two day briefing, then to Kokapo, which is the new business centre for the region after much of Rabaul was wiped out in the 90s by a volcano. Was met by the project hosts – a local originally from Nuguria who ran a furniture manufacturing business, and his business partner, with whom I boarded for a few days before we set off for Nuguria. The business partner was Australian, an ex-Queensland bikie gang member and union official, now running an earthmoving business as well as being in the furniture game. Colourful doesn’t even begin to describe him. Energetic, have a go at anything, massive anger management issues, especially directed towards any of the locals with whom he crossed paths. His behaviour contrasted bizarrely with his wife, an enthusiastic Catholic teacher who had the house filled with charity cases and good works. The seemed to be happy together, but it wasn’t one of the more conventional domestic establishments I’ve come across.

After a fair amount of faffing about in Kokapo, we got underway in pleasant, warm weather. Thank God for that, because the transport was unorthodox. A 35’, home-made catamaran, built by guess

who. Ply hulls, good sails, a 20 hp Yanmar engine slung between the hulls. Basic electronics, and the engine's transmission was different. A chain sprocket that probably started life on a motor bike had been fitted onto the bobtail engine, and the associated drive chain led to a second sprocket hooked onto a drive shaft and propeller between the hulls and below the deck. Heath Robinson would have been proud to invent such a system. More later.

A good thing the weather was good. The boat was crowded with Nugurians wanting to go home. From memory, I think we had about 6-8 on board, as well as the boat's owner, myself and a couple of crew. We also had their goods and chattels as well as a huge manifest of goods that were needed on the island. Clutter doesn't even begin to describe the boat. The owner and I were the only ones on board who could navigate or keep watch, which meant the locals had to cater and I had to learn about east PNG cuisine early. It's not great. Whole, unfileted, boiled barracuda with eyes and brains included, for example, served in a pot by itself is pretty gross, and it didn't get a lot better from there. The trip itself – about two days, mostly under sail – was pretty straight-forward and the passing of Cape St George, on the south coast of New Ireland was mind-blowing. The mountains in that area come from a height of 5000 m and plunge straight into water depths of 3-5000 metres – wild scenery.

Got through the Besaria Passage at Nuguria late in the afternoon, dropped off the passengers and waited for the local contacts whom we would brief and work with on the evaluation study. And waited, and waited. Reading through my 12 year-old field notes, I can still pick up the frustration of working at island pace. Organising meetings with the various local officials, chiefs, mayors and lord knows who else couldn't be done immediately; there were local protocols, on-going business, festivals, everything that could slow us down did its best to do so. The trade-off was the opportunity to walk around the main island and look at how the local community lived. It was an exercise in living simply, but living well. Pretty houses built of mainland drift timber and coconut thatch, set up above ground to keep cool, each house fenced, mostly with ropes that had washed ashore, pretty gardens and hibiscus everywhere. Locals with not much to do chopping weeds out of the local oval and sports ground with machetes.

Eventually managed to meet with all of the relevant officials and organise three teams of field samplers / fishermen. I'd planned to do some diving work to look at fish species composition and abundance. This turned out to be impracticable, so we were confined to undertaking trial fishing with three crews of local fishermen. The plan involved fishing our way through the lagoon, and around its perimeter, to get a feel for species composition, catch rates and relative abundance of fish. By comparing these data with equivalent sets from the Great Barrier Reef, where similar work had been done and ground-truthed against independent estimates of population biomass, I thought we could get a first estimate of fish biomass and production levels above the islanders' immediate needs for subsistence.

The local fishermen use minute, 3.5 m long canoes as their primary fishing boats. They don't use outriggers, and the canoes are fitted with a mast and sail. Tender doesn't even begin to describe their handling characteristics. How they could be managed in an operating fishing activity was completely beyond my imagination. We did, fortunately, have access to three 4.5 m out-board powered dories. Fuel is like gold on the island and I suspect our using it for something as obscure as a fish-sampling project seemed like a terrible waste to the locals. But we'd bought it with us for a purpose, and got on with the job. My notes show that we spent almost three weeks, with one day

off for bad weather, fishing, identifying fish, counting fish, weighing fish, distributing fish to locals whether they wanted it or not. At three degrees from the equator there isn't much relief from heat and I don't remember getting a lot of sleep during the trip.

It's going back a while now, and a lot of memories have faded. A few of the white knuckle ones haven't. The two mornings fishing outside the north east reef crest, glassy calm, a 5 m swell breaking on a near vertical coral reef crest, and drifting in to about 40 m of the break to fish along the edge of the reef drop-off was one. Thoughts were mostly around the idea that this was going to get messy if the outboard didn't go very quickly when needed, and there wouldn't be much of anything left of anything or anyone if we did go onto the reef. The night we took the mother boat (our plywood cat) north, outside the reef, to set up for a morning fishing operation, setting a course based on the latest Admiralty chart, which was drawn up in about 1870 was another good one. Turned out the navigator who drew the chart was having an off day and had managed to orientate the reef-edge chart line more or less north, rather than the true north-west bearing, an error of about 40 degrees. We missed the reef by a couple of hundred metres, but it wasn't a great feeling seeing a white breaker line in front of us and knowing we'd set up and stuck to the plotted course pretty carefully. The finest moment, however, happened after we'd finished the survey, dropped off the fishing groups and calmed down the bubbling dispute between our two crew members and the locals. (I think it was about women, never got to the bottom of it, but knives and marriages were being discussed with equal enthusiasm. They play rough politics in PNG).

Homeward bound at last, looking forward to a beer and some suggestion of civilisation, like a hot shower, in Kokopo. Got as far as Cape St. George before ugly noises started emanating from the homemade transmission system. Slowed down, but the gearing gave up after another couple of hours and we more or less drifted around the Cape in calm conditions, much too close for comfort and for my liking. Sailed the remaining 50 miles home in mild conditions – it took a good 24 hours – then spent a few days in Kokopo writing an initial report.

And the bottom line? My back-of-envelope modelling and financial review suggested a small quantity of bottom-dwelling fish – perhaps 50 or so tonnes a year – might be available for an export operation. Financially, it might be possible, but marginal, and when you take into account the uncertainties of data accuracy and analysis, and the challenge of getting the million or so of capital needed to set up infrastructure to support the operation, it was always going to be a very, very risky venture. And so it played out. The report I prepared was presumably read by the clients, I heard not a word afterwards and to the best of my knowledge Nuguria remains an isolated backwater without any real economic capacity beyond family remittances from the mainland.