

## Cook Islands Cyclone

James Lewis

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The destruction of Avarua on Raratonga in the Cook Islands by Cyclone Sally in January 1987 was a rare reminder of an infrequent hazard. With only twenty-two cyclones in the Cooks since 1841, they are clearly not an everyday experience there. Though tiny islands may be missed even by massive cyclones, they can be totally wrecked when they are in the path of quite small ones.

Eighteen thousand people live in the fifteen Cook Islands, which together total no more than 240 square kilometres of dry land and stretch over 1500 kilometres of sea, north to south. Thankfully, no cyclone can hit all islands at once because of this spread. The largest island, Raratonga, 70 square kilometres, is beautiful and mountainous and has a population of 10,000. Mangaia is 57 and Atiu 29 square kilometres. The remainder consist of low atoll chains 30 to 40 kilometres long, but containing only minute dots of land: Pukapuka, Manihiki, Suvarrow, Palmerston and Aitutaki.

There was widespread damage in 1946 on Raratonga and Aitutaki; Suvarrow was inundated in 1942, as was Palmerston in 1926. In 1846, a year of two cyclones, a schooner was taken inland over the tops of coconut palms on Raratonga. The London Missionary Society sent clothing and The Reverend Charles Pitman acknowledged receipt adding "...but after all, dear Sir, generally speaking, the giving system is a bad one...as long as you will give, they will not work...If people could get a sure market for what they could grow...what more is wanted?"

There was a great loss of life and severe privation for survivors. Relief consignments of rice were sent from London and the "Chiefs, Governors and Landholders" wrote a letter of thanks: "When we asked our teacher how we were to cook it...some baked theirs in the native oven...others tied up portions in leaves. There was no measure to our joy.

You would have thought we were English".

Sixteen months elapsed between despatch and receipt of the supplies. Pitman himself wrote in 1847 "...food sent out for the use of the natives...is an almost useless expenditure and will benefit the people but little...Rice is an article of food to which the people here are not at all accustomed...scarcely a person in our whole settlement possesses such a thing as a pot or a pan to boil it in...a large supply of tools and other articles to assist people... will be invaluable and enable us to erect more substantial buildings than we have hitherto been able to accomplish". How little disaster relief has changed in 120 years and how often have real needs gone unattended! Dependence on external assistance still renders the helpless needful of more relief, which exacerbates dependency further.

Though much has changed in the Cook Islands since Pitman's day, greater changes are required to re-establish indigenous policies and systems to take account of hazards so inappropriately perceived by exogenous Missionary Societies or aid missions. To be better prepared for cyclones, as the Cook Islanders now undoubtedly are, does not remove the need for parallel conscious developments in all sectors. Otherwise higher and higher losses are to come.

Approved markets and appropriate prices for produce are still a major requirement and the aim of UNCTAD's special attention on behalf of all small island states is to provide these. Regional measures set up by the South Pacific Forum include a Disaster Fund into which the Cook Islands Government subscribes annually and from which it may now request assistance, but this could perhaps be better integrated with hazard-conscious development.

These international and regional activities are a crucial beginning to the reduction of the dependency of the South Pacific nations, including the Cook Islands, on disaster relief and a long awaited response to the concerns of Charles Pitman.

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### REFERENCES

Unpublished correspondence between The Reverend Charles Pitman and the London Missionary Society, in the Archives of The Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.