Chapter 17
Across the Seas:
Collaboration between Australia and the Pacific Islands

Jayshree Mamtora
Charles Darwin University, Australia

Peter Walton
Freelance Consultant, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on four current and significant collaborative projects between Australia and the Pacific Islands in the area of libraries, archives and information centres, their respective staff, and Pacific counterparts. In the context of this chapter, and mirroring the Australian Government's Pacific policies, all the collaborations mentioned involve countries in the south Pacific (i.e. Melanesia and Polynesia), although two Micronesian countries with strong links to Australia—Kiribati and Nauru—are included. The projects are: Pacific Manuscripts Bureau – microfilming and preserving historic documents; Pacific Islands Law Library Community Twinning Program; Marine Library Twinning Project; and the Melanesian Agricultural Information System. Based on experiences in carrying out these projects, this chapter shares some strategies for successful collaboration and the value of such projects.

INTRODUCTION

In popular culture, the image of the Pacific has been formed by the book, film and musical, *South Pacific*; by the mutiny on the Bounty and Captain Bligh; by Gauguin, and all those Tahitian beauties; and by countless stories of languid days spent on endless white sand beaches with azure blue seas

and plenty of coconuts. Like all popular myths (or otherwise), there is more than a grain of truth to it, although the reality is a lot more complex.

The region known as 'The Pacific' is made up of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, which are cultural and racial groupings. Melanesia comprises the high islands of the south-west Pacific, more or less in a chain from Papua New Guinea (on the island of New Guinea, the world's second largest island, to the north of Australia) down through
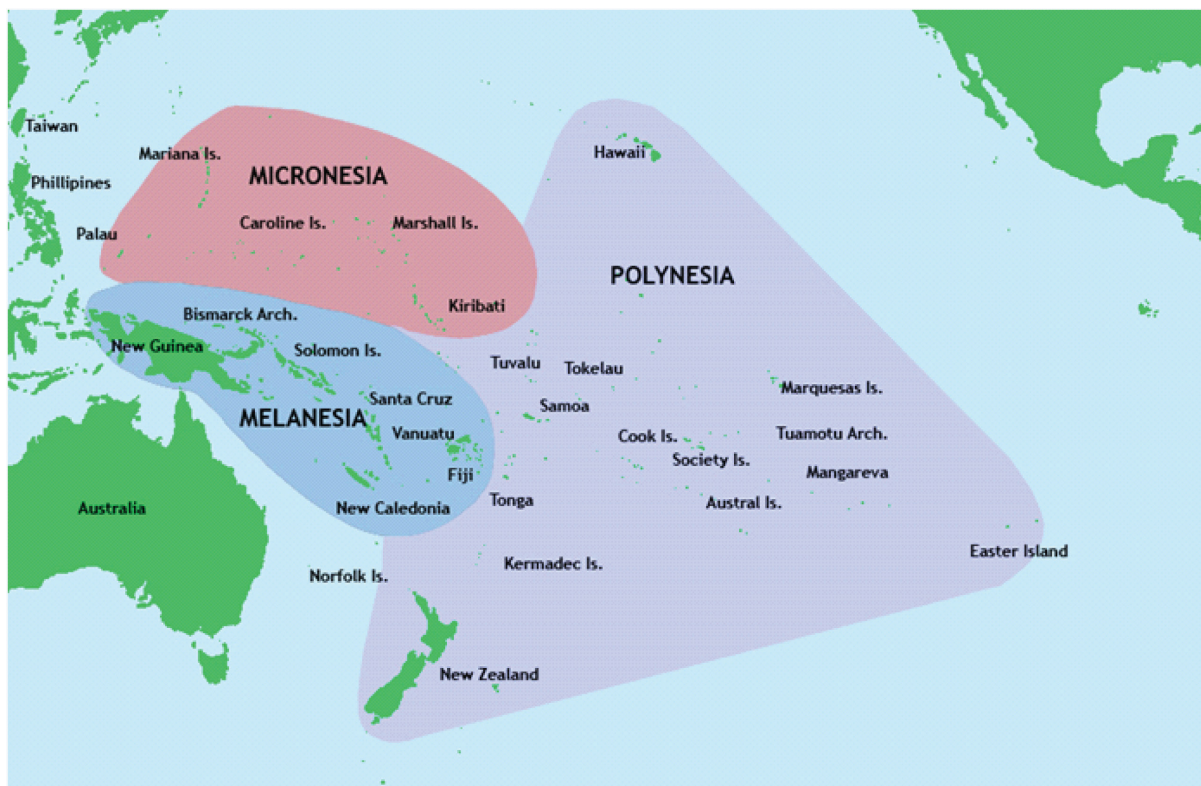
the Solomons, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. Fiji straddles the divide between Melanesia and Polynesia, with one foot in both camps. Polynesia proper, in the south-west and south-east Pacific, comprises a mix of low-lying coral atolls (e.g. Tuvalu) and volcanic islands (e.g. Samoa, Cook Islands). There are significant Polynesian nations both in the north Pacific (Hawaii), east Pacific (Rapa Nui / Easter Island), and far south-west Pacific (Aotearoa / New Zealand). Micronesia, in the north Pacific, is with few exceptions comprised of low-lying coral atolls, such as Kiribati, Nauru, and the Mariana Islands (see Figure 1).

In total, the 22 Pacific Island states and territories are scattered across an area of 30 million km², yet the total population of this region is now estimated to be 10 million inhabitants (SPC 2011). Over 7 million alone live in Papua New Guinea (Kenneth 2012). Papua New Guinea and the rest of Melanesia comprise 88 per cent of the region's total population (SPC 2011), which means that there are a good number of nations where the total population is measured in the tens of thousands; or less, such as Niue, with an estimated population of 1,647 (Niue 2010).

It was incredible acts of bravery and seamanship that first brought humans into the Pacific thousands of years ago. The challenges that those sea voyagers faced are no different today with most of the Pacific nations being characterised as remote and isolated, necessitating long sea journeys between islands even within the same country. Apart from Melanesia, populations are relatively small and the economy limited and limiting. And whilst living on a small tropical island may seem idyllic, the populations face significant challenges, for example: the constant threat of cyclones, particularly in the south-west

Figure 1. Australia and Pacific Islands. (Source: Wikipedia).

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