



## CLEANING UP TONGA

The tiny Pacific Island country of Tonga is known for, among many things, its stunning beaches, friendly people and breathtaking coastal cliffs. There is however a silent enemy threatening that pristine image – rubbish.

Poor waste management has become an issue of national concern for the South Pacific country of Tonga. In fact, a report recently conducted into the issue found that solid and liquid waste is the biggest environmental issue facing the country. (Priority Environmental Concerns, 2002)



Tonga's youth helping out on the Clean Up the World Weekend

Tonga's 100,000 residents live on 36 of the country's 170 low-lying islands. This relative isolation makes for obvious waste transport difficulties and, as a result, waste has traditionally either been burnt, buried in people's backyards or dumped in surrounding mangrove areas.

The mountains of rubbish have not only become a blight on the country's beautiful landscape, but they're also costing the community financially through lost tourism opportunities. The burning of particular waste products has the potential to lead to serious adverse health risks and this has been creating concern among locals.

Inter-island and foreign migration has also added to environmental concerns. The population of Tonga has more than doubled in the past 50 years and this has placed extra strain on the country's natural resources.

Clean Up the World member organisation, the Tonga Solid Waste Management Project - an Australian Government funded AusAID venture run in conjunction with the Tongan Government - are, however, out solve these problems. The project was originally put in place to build a new modern sanitary landfill on the island of Tongatapu on which about two-thirds of the

population of Tonga live.



Prime Ministerial staff lending a hand on Clean Up the World Weekend

The initial landfill development was completed in January 2007 with extraordinary results and the team have now moved onto developing waste collection and transfer systems, and establishing recycling businesses and public awareness campaigns around the country.

"We want to highlight to the people of Tonga the importance of living in a clean environment," Talita Maile Helu, spokesperson for the project, said.

"Having a clean, healthy environment is completely

# Clean up the world

dependent on us as a community – it's in our hands," she said.

"Tonga has a problem with waste – people don't know what to do with their rubbish so it just ends up in our environment."



*Children lend a hand to Clean Up Tonga*

One of the key ways in which they're raising awareness and gaining community support is by getting the whole country involved in the Clean Up the World Weekend.

The Clean Up the World Weekend is run in conjunction with a number of departments and national organisations including the Department of Health, the Department of Tourism, the Department of Education, the Department of Environment, the National Youth Congress, Maa Lahi and members of the media.

More than 4000 people hit the streets, parks, waterways and beaches of Tonga in a nationwide clean up in 2007, making it one of the country's largest community events.

"The Clean Up the World Weekend is a great time to get the whole country involved. It's great to see so many people working together," Talita Maile Helu said.

"Not only is the event great for Tonga's environment, but it's also a fantastic community event.

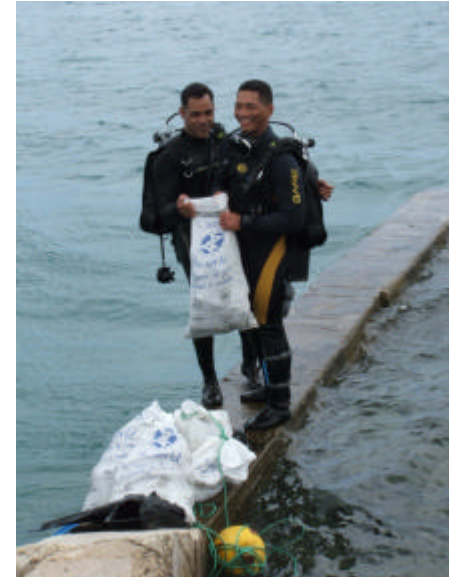
"The whole community really gets behind the event. It's so rewarding to see the benefits of everyone's hard work at the end of it."

Along with greening their environment, raising community morale is also a driving force behind the Tonga Solid Waste Management Group's work.

"Our country wants to be recognised for all the hard work we're doing to protect what we believe is one of the most beautiful countries in the world," Talita Maile Helu said.

"We want to show the world just how much the people of Tonga really care about the environment we live in.

"The project, especially the Clean Up the World Weekend, really raises the spirits of the community. It gives us all something to be really proud of."



*Divers helping Clean Up Tonga's waterways*

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