

The Fiji Tourism Forum 2005: A Report

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The Fiji Tourism Forum is an annual gathering of stakeholders in the tourism industry. In 2005, it was held from 6–8 July at the Sheraton Hotel. The Vice-President of Fiji, Ratu Joni Madraiwiwi, delivered the keynote address.

The Vice-President advised tourist operators not to remain complacent, especially against the background of the declining sugar industry. He emphasised that tourism had the potential to facilitate political stability and stimulate indigenous participation. He warned that the presence of a marginalised Fijian community was not in the long-term interest of Fiji's tourism. He implored traditional landowners to play a greater role in the economic life of Fiji by investing in tourism projects. He requested the tourist stakeholders to show greater understanding of the proposed 'qoliqoli' bill, whose aim is to give the indigenous community ownership over traditional fishing grounds. Unless this issue was resolved, he warned, Fijian resentment might remain latent and later erupt in another form.

With reference to the critical shortage of human skills faced by the tourist industry, the Vice-President suggested that secondary schools should form partnership with established tertiary institutions in order to produce skilled personnel for the tourist industry. He recognised the need for further financial assistance to the Fiji Visitors Bureau for marketing, and mooted the introduction of some type of industry tax to meet the increasing cost of marketing activities by the bureau. He emphasised the importance of a clean environment to the development of tourism and advocated an industrial relations climate in which the operators and the workers worked harmoniously. He urged the industry 'to find practical ways of implementing the quality required to maintain, and even improve, its position'.

The Director of Tourism, Keresoni Baleidrokadroka, updated the gathering on practical measures undertaken to address the problems high-

lighted in the form of resolutions passed at the 2004 Forum. These resolutions focused on strengthening the linkage between domestic supplies and tourism; enabling tourism to play a role in alleviating poverty; developing a backpackers' quality assurance programme; developing a new tourism development plan; implementation of a training plan as required under NLTB leases and the Fiji Trades and Investment Board; expansion of runaways at secondary airports; additional incentives to woo investment to outer regions; government commitment for a budget for researching human resource development in the tourism sector; enactment of a national building code; establishment of a national Council for Tourism Natural Resource Owners, which is to act as a one stop shop; education on environment awareness campaigns; translation of the first verse of the national anthem in the Fijian language; and infrastructure development for Savusavu area. He told the delegates that a number of discussions had taken place between various parties to address these issues and there were developments over incentives and on training and education.

The Fiji Visitors Bureau marketing manager, Josefa Tuamoto, highlighted the contributions of tourism to Fiji's economy. He stated that tourism contributed 48% to Fiji's gross domestic product, followed by garment and footwear (19%), sugar (18%), gold (6%), fish (5%), and timber (3%) industries. The number of visitor arrivals to Fiji in 2000 was 294,070, but in 2004 this figure had risen to 504,000; it was expected to reach approximately 532,000 in 2005. He attributed this phenomenal growth to a partnership between airlines and industry players and also to timely responsiveness to market needs. A large percentage (about 80%) of the visitors cited 'rest and relaxation' as their prime motive for holidaying in Fiji, while the 'people' (70%) provided the most favourable impression. The most unfavourable impression was provided by 'shop-keeper/traders' (13%). The current growth, he argued, would enable Fiji to earn a billion dollars in foreign exchange by 2007. Tuamoto projected that Fiji would have 506 rooms (6.5% increase) in 2005, 1159 rooms (14% increase) in 2006, and 780 rooms (8.2% increase) in 2007.

Simon Bernardi of Qantas Holidays (QH) said Fiji was ranked 4th amongst its destinations, and that QH annually sent approximately 45,000 tourists to Fiji. To sustain growth, Fiji had to overcome room shortages, particularly in the middle level categories. Regrettably, sometimes QH had to cancel advertising campaigns because rooms were not available.

Speaking on 'Current trends in Aviation – Oceania and the South Pacific', John Sharp of Air Pacific, cited 'consolidation and competition', 'distribution' and the relationship between 'airlines and accommodation' as the major emerging themes in aviation operation. He suggested that the

South Pacific airlines were struggling to survive in an environment of higher operational costs, shifting government priorities and needs, and competition and consolidation. Some airlines could not overcome these challenges and had folded up, such as Royal Tongan Airlines, Polynesian Air, Palau Air, Van Air and Air Kiribati. The current aviation climate in the Pacific region was driven by Air Services Agreements, open bilaterals and open skies. Pacific island countries that had introduced open skies policies had lost their national airlines. Fiji, he said, favoured liberalisation - but at its own pace. The recent arrival of 'no frills' airlines in the region focused on a 'different product, philosophy and distribution' to existing carriers; they had no interest in serving intra-Pacific flights. He revealed that Air Pacific was interested in serving domestic routes.

Speaking on integrated tourist development, Richard Naidu emphasized that for legal and commercial reasons, government should urgently introduce legislation to cater for the requirements of these types of development. The current laws, he added, were not sufficient to meet the needs of complex integrated tourist developments taking place in Fiji.

With reference to the backpacker market, Jeff Jarvis of Monash University, said that this segment produced high yield and reduced the leakage of tourism dollars. It also showed greater dispersal inclination to regional areas. He said that 490,000 international backpackers arrived in Australia up to September 2004. They spent an average 70 nights compared to 27 nights for all other visitors. Each backpacker spent an average of \$A5,469 and contributed approximately \$A2.67 billion to the Australian economy. Fiji, he said, had the potential to attract a substantial share of the international backpacker market.

The Fiji Tourism Resource Owners Association President, Ratu Osea Gavidi, made an emotional plea to players in the tourist industry to heed the voices of the indigenous people and to assist them in obtaining a larger share of the tourist dollar. Referring to the government's current plan to extend indigenous jurisdiction over traditional fishing grounds, he said this initiative would increase Fijian participation in tourism. He assured the hotel operators that they had nothing to worry about once this proposal became a law.

Jone Usumate, the Director General of Training and Productivity Authority of Fiji (TPAF) projected skill shortages in critical sectors up to 2008 and explained the plans TPAF had instituted to overcome these shortages. He advocated a National Qualifications Framework whose objectives were to reduce duplication of courses, encourage lifelong learning, and improve quality and standard.

Taito Waqa, the Chief Executive Officer, Ministry of Labour, noted a 'significant level of adversarial attitude' in Fiji's business environment. He warned of 'uncompromising stand' on illegal strikes, but also advised employers to be 'proactive' in resolving conflicts. Sharing the concerns of the Resources Owners Association of Fiji, Waqa said 'globalization and tourism have not met their [resource owners'] simple and legitimate aspirations for decent jobs and better future for their children'. He did not want mere 'tokenism', but an acceleration of 'the participation of resource owners into mainstream economic activities of our tourist industry in order to secure stable and harmonious industrial relations'.

Peter Drysdale ably covered the importance of a clean environment to the development of tourism. He said that existing laws were inadequate to regulate and control the environment and that good husbandry should be built in all native leases. 'Rubbishing Fiji', he claimed, had become a national sport. He advocated national conservation, litter prevention, and litter collection.

The General Manager of the Outrigger Hotel and Iliasa Cavu, an indigenous farmer, made a joint presentation on partnership arrangement between this hotel and the nearby Fijian community, by which the latter would use their unutilised land to grow fresh vegetables, root crops and fruits for the hotel industry, for local distribution, and for export. Once this group villagers started to earn revenue from this project, it was likely to create a 'ripple effect' that would encourage more indigenous farmers to foray into vegetable farming and agriculture thereby strengthening linkages between agriculture and farming.

Finally, a number of resolutions were passed that focused on human resources development, integrated resorts development, regional growth and the environment.

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