



Tourism flaws Jewels of

By Frank Cranston

Just a few hours' flight from Australia lies a group of island countries which in many ways are still the much-romanticised 'Jewels of the Pacific'.

They once comprised a military 'strategic barrier' across the South-West Pacific approaches to Australia and some were the scene of bitter and bloody World War II fighting.

Today, those Pacific nations are as strategically important to us as ever they were — in a new form of warfare. The new enemy is the international narcotics cartels.

Detective Sergeant John Rixon, of the AFP Training College, Barton, recently returned from a tour of the islands with new views on the extent of the problems of the region. He travelled with US Drug Enforcement Agency Special Agent Bill Cornell and Detective Inspector Paul Nichols, of the New Zealand Police.

The group visited eight countries which, although they do not yet have a major narcotics problem, recognise that the potential is there. They visited Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Cook Islands, Western Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

Sergeant Rixon believes the once-distant island nations have changed from a strategic "barrier" into stepping stones to our back door.

"In Western Samoa, the people are being affected by influences from American Samoa," he said. "They now are beginning to have cannabis, heroin and cocaine use problems, together with solvent sniffing.

"The transit of drugs from American Samoa to Western Samoa has the potential to be a major problem. We were lucky in that the Western Samoan authorities invited some American Samoa people across for our talks. We had possibly half a dozen of their Customs and police people listening to us. They were very much aware of what is going on because of the training and information they get from the FBI, DEA and other sources," Sergeant Rixon said.

Tourism income

"Their problems are similar to those experienced in the Micronesian islands through the American influence. It's filtering down into the Commonwealth South Pacific countries."



Kiribati police officers listen keenly to information on drug identification, how to detect symptoms and users, and details which will help them in their fight against drugs.

He was told soft drugs were sold freely in those countries, stimulated by the tourist trade.

"Tourism is becoming one of their major sources of income, and may offer them some financial independence in their future," he said. "They are improving airport and accommodation facilities but added security facilities may be a bit slower coming. They have to generate the income first."

Speaking to some of the island authorities he learnt that the lengthening of landing strips was high on the list of priorities.

"This will enable direct flights to come in from Thailand, Malaysia and other Asian countries from where a steady supply of drugs emanates," he said.

This also is the case with Tuvalu and Kiribati, and will be shortly in Vanuatu.

"The danger for us is that the cartels might put to greater use the Pacific islands as staging points in their supply line to Australia and New Zealand," he said.

"When we here in Australia or New Zealand profile people and organisations, we tend to look at the source countries. So if they are coming from places like Thailand, Malaysia or Cambodia we look more closely at them. But some operators are starting to make detours through the South Pacific to try to throw us off their track.

Cannabis in schools

"Only this year we found 2.4 kg of heroin in the Cook Islands and we inter-

cepted another 80 kg which had come through Vanuatu last year.

"There have been cannabis sticks found in Tonga and a substantial haul of hashish, both of which came in from India, together with other finds primarily of cannabis. A haul of 4050 kg of baled cannabis was found buried in the sand on one of the Solomon Islands.

"In Fiji, there is some evidence of cannabis being used in, and sold through, the schools. They don't have a major drug problem, by anybody's standards, but the potential obviously is there.

"Here we make a great play of our intelligence network, and we certainly need it, but in those countries they can still rely heavily on the grapevine through their village chiefs and elders. And it works.

"Some of the nations are building intelligence networks to cater for the influx of tourists," he said.

"The police on most of the islands know everybody, so if anyone starts misbehaving — whether it be drugs or anything else — the law gets to hear about it very quickly.

"But of course, life over there is changing as well. They don't have television yet but they do have videos. Just about every house with a power supply has a machine.

"The fact that the RAAF now operates surveillance flights over the area may help us find out a lot more about what is moving around the region. Australia has given naval patrol boats as well to a number of countries.

the Pacific

"But you are talking about a vast area and a huge problem. For instance in the Solomons there are about 1,000 islands. People live on perhaps a couple of hundred of them; and of these, some have only a handful of residents.

Transit points

"But there are so many uninhabited islands it's just too easy for people to sail through in their boats, drop narcotics and go back home. Then someone from Australia or New Zealand sails up through the area to make a connection.

"We, as police, or Customs, might not in the past have looked at these very closely because they had not been into an area where they are likely to have picked up narcotics."

Sergeant Rixon said there was no major problem in the islands themselves but they could act as transit points.

"And that's of considerable importance to both them and us," he said.

"On Kiribati and Tuvalu, for instance, they are keen on getting the young men trained as sailors at their naval schools," he said. "They then find employment with the shipping lines, which brings back good money to their families in the islands. But not only do they go back home with a bag full of money; they also take back Western influences.

"It's not serious at this stage. Maybe they do sneak in a bit of cannabis or other illicit drugs, but it hasn't yet become a problem on the islands. All we have to do to recognise the threat is to think back to our Australia of only 20 years ago.

"All the island authorities were extremely keen on listening to what we had to tell them. They realise only too well that if drugs start passing through their territories, some are going to stop there.

"Our tour was more like a drug awareness program. We had only two or three days in each country to present our program, and in that time we gave them drug identification, common symptoms of users, concealment methods and smuggling techniques, and other profiling material.

"Mostly the area is too small to have produced any local cannabis plantations, although in Fiji, the Solomons and Tonga they have found isolated cases of cannabis-growing.

Shore up barriers

"One thing we did discover is that the



Tuvalu... drugs threaten the very extinction of the entire social fabric of many once remote Pacific islands.

island nations are working under old narcotics laws, such as Dangerous Drugs Regulation 1939, and Narcotics Act 1965 (NZ law). Although there is evidence that some of the countries have upgraded the penalty sections and others have the legislation under review, there is a strong need to reexamine their drug legislation to cover the new designer drugs and to come into line with new offences as legislated in Australia and New Zealand," he said.

"By helping these countries we are assisting to shore up barriers to try to stem their problem as well as our own."

Holiday boats

Dealing with Australian efforts he suggested that reports concerned primarily with what was being detected in the South Pacific might not necessarily reflect the true situation. South Pacific nations had thousands of islands and none had the facilities to police all of them.

"You see 17 to 20m. holiday boats

floating around all over the place. And why not? It's a great place to holiday," he said.

"But we have to recognise there are major problems with communications and other basic infrastructure. Generally their police don't carry firearms except perhaps when running down an escaped prisoner. They do have batons but most find they don't need to carry handcuffs.

"What I can see happening on the islands is that whereas respect is still strong for the elders, the young ones are being influenced by videos and the sex and violence they see in them.

"We are trying to battle against narcotics and to maintain law and order to sustain a reasonable way of life, but what they are threatened with is the extinction of their entire social fabric.

They are gravely concerned at the narcotics threat to their whole basis of tradition and culture.

"In many ways they have even more at stake than we have."



Western Samoa.... problems beginning to become apparent in the use of cannabis.