

Sun, Sand, and Beach Fale: Benefiting from Backpackers—the Samoan Way

Regina Scheyvens

To cite this article: Regina Scheyvens (2006) Sun, Sand, and Beach Fale: Benefiting from Backpackers—the Samoan Way, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 31:3, 75-86, DOI: [10.1080/02508281.2006.11081507](https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2006.11081507)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2006.11081507>



Published online: 12 Jan 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 68



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 3 View citing articles [↗](#)

Sun, Sand, and Beach *Fale*: Benefiting from Backpackers — the Samoan Way

REGINA SCHEYVENS

In Samoa, the development of large hotels and resorts has often been thwarted by landowners who refuse to let control of their communally-held resources slip out of their hands. As an alternative livelihood strategy local families have built low-cost beach *fale* accommodation (consisting of thatched, open-sided beach huts) in prime beach side locations. These beach *fale* have proven to be popular with backpackers who, contrary to dominant discourses on contemporary backpacker culture, are generally considered by their hosts to be courteous and culturally-sensitive. Although, beach *fale* tourism attracts backpackers and domestic tourists rather than high-spending tourists, it contributes greatly to development because most economic benefits are retained locally, it is based upon local skills and resources, it involves cultural education of guests, and it does this all in the context of high levels of local ownership and participation. An important implication of this research is that government planners should not be indifferent to the potential value of budget-style tourism, as in certain circumstances backpackers can play a significant role in supporting locally controlled forms of tourism which meet social and economic development objectives.

Keywords: backpackers, budget tourism, local development, Samoa, beach *fale*, culture.

Introduction

Over the past few years there has been an explosion of writing about backpacker travel, much of it painting a negative picture about a form of travel which has become increasingly institutionalized. It is variously claimed that backpackers in certain locales are culturally insensitive, self-obsessed, and overly budget-conscious (Aziz 1999; Bradt 1995; Hutnyk 1996; Kontogeorgopoulos 2003). Some assert that backpacking is now merely a variant of mass tourism, rather than an alternative to it (Noy 2004). Instead of being characterized by their spatial spread and search for difference, it appears that backpackers increasingly find themselves in the same places doing the same types of things (Cohen 2004), as depicted in discussions of backpacker enclaves and the 'backpacker bubble' (Aziz 1999; Westerhausen and Macbeth 2003). Butcher (2003: 42), thus, argues that many writers now perceive backpacking as 'destructive mainstream tourism in disguise'.

These conceptualizations seemingly confirm the concerns long expressed by Third World governments about backpacker tourism (Cohen 1973; Erb 2000; Hall 1997; Hampton 1998), whereby 'much credence has been given to the stereotypical image of the backpacker as an unkempt, immoral, drug-taking individual' (Scheyvens 2002a: 145). Thus, these governments do not choose to make development of the backpacker sector a priority, focusing instead on more

high cost developments. For example, when the South African government post-apartheid identified tourism as a key economic sector, it invested in tourism infrastructure which served mainly higher-end tourists. Scant attention has been paid, meanwhile, to the budget tourism sector, despite the proliferation and growth of backpacker tourism in South Africa (Visser 2004). This is similar to the situation in Goa where the Director of Tourism once asserted: 'Luxury tourism is the way forward. Hippies and backpackers do not bring in enough money' (cited in Wilson 1997: 68).

In part, these governments have been influenced by the view that promoting up-market tourism presents a 'win-win scenario' based on the assumption that tourism earnings will remain high, while attracting smaller numbers of tourists, leading to fewer negative social and environmental impacts. As Ioannides and Holcomb (2003: 39) assert, however, such a viewpoint is erroneous in that it fails to recognize that luxury tourism requires facilities and accommodation that are 'environmentally taxing'; for example, air conditioning, heated swimming pools, and golf courses which require large amounts of chemicals and place enormous pressure on local water sources. The economic arguments for aiming 'high' are also flawed because luxury tourism often requires foreign investment and profits are subsequently repatriated; it is heavily reliant on imported goods, thus minimizing multiplier effects, and luxury tourists only make up a small

REGINA SCHEYVENS is Senior Lecturer in Geography and Development Studies at school of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University, P.O. Box: 11222, Palmerston North, New Zealand. e-mail: r.a.scheyvens@massey.ac.nz

©2006 Tourism Recreation Research

proportion of the overall tourism market (Ioannides and Holcomb 2003).

While certain criticisms of backpacker culture and impacts are valid, it will be argued here that a blanket backlash against backpackers travelling in the Third World is of little value. Post-structuralist analysis can help us move beyond simplistic understandings of phenomena such as global backpacking whereby it is all too easy to represent backpackers as narcissistic, cheap, and insensitive, in opposition to poor, powerless and exploited locals. Local actors do have agency, and for a variety of reasons they often find the backpackers an attractive market to pursue. As Malam (2005) has shown, even in destinations where backpackers have seemingly 'taken over' local spaces and where monthly activities are organized around backpacker party schedules (such as the renowned Full Moon Parties in southern Thailand), local actors in fact exert considerable control over local spaces and the backpacker tourists occupying those spaces. Similarly, Westerhausen and Macbeth (2003), make a strong argument that in the popular, unique town of Bryon Bay, Australia, rather than the local community being pawns in a tourism development game controlled largely by outsiders, they have taken an active role in determining their town's development path. Furthermore, it is backpackers who have aided them in this endeavour: 'backpackers' search for authenticity might make them natural allies in the local communities' struggle to maintain their identity and preserve their social and cultural environment' (Westerhausen and Macbeth 2003: 75 – emphasis added).

An alternative view, thus, recognizes that backpackers are not universally self-obsessed and party-oriented, and suggests that catering for backpacker tourists can contribute to achieving a broad range of development objectives, both economic and non-economic (Hampton 1998; Richards and Wilson 2004; Scheyvens 2002a; Visser 2004; Westerhausen and Macbeth 2003; Wilson 1997; Wunder 2000). Thus, local people may prefer to cater to the backpacker segment because they feel they can retain greater control over the way in which tourism develops and own more tourism products and services than if tourism moved up-scale. For example, the owner of a guesthouse in the Sri Lankan fishing village of Arugam where budget travellers can stay for less than US\$ 5 per night, recently spoke out against the government's proposed US\$ 80 million post-tsunami redevelopment of the bay which was being broadly opposed in his community: 'Arugam Bay is about simple tourism, mainly for surfers.... We don't want mass tourism with luxury hotels. We would rather promote community-based tourism' (Tourism Concern 2005). 'Simple' tourism, be it catering for

backpackers, domestic tourists, or surfers, can appeal essentially because it allows communities to retain greater management of the development occurring in their own area.

Utilizing a case study of budget beach *fale* tourism in the Pacific Island state of Samoa, this paper presents the argument that backpacker tourism should be valued¹. Specifically, it proposes that in locales where local people have retained strong control over tourism services, the benefits they gain from backpacker tourism are likely to be high and they are less likely to experience significant negative social and cultural impacts often associated with this form of tourism (Scheyvens 2003).

Tourism Development in Samoa

The small Pacific island country of Samoa offers the archetypical sun, sand, and sea experience for tourists, yet it is unique among its Pacific neighbours. Rather than following the Fijian or Rarotongan model of medium-large scale resorts catering for medium to high spending tourists, in Samoa the tourism industry has come to be dominated by small-scale, locally-owned and operated initiatives. High levels of Samoan ownership have resulted from a customary land tenure system which dictates that Samoan people have communal ownership of 81 per cent of the land, including most prime coastal sites, coupled with the lack of landowner interest in land deals with large outside corporations. Interestingly, the largest growth in tourism in recent years has been experienced in the budget beach *fale* accommodation sector.

Beach *fale* range from basic, open-sided huts with thatched roofs and traditional woven blinds in the place of walls, to walled bungalows with small verandas. Beach *fale* are an indigenous, home-grown initiative (Figure 1). The first beach *fale* were built in response to the leisure needs of local



Figure 1. A Typical Beach *fale*.

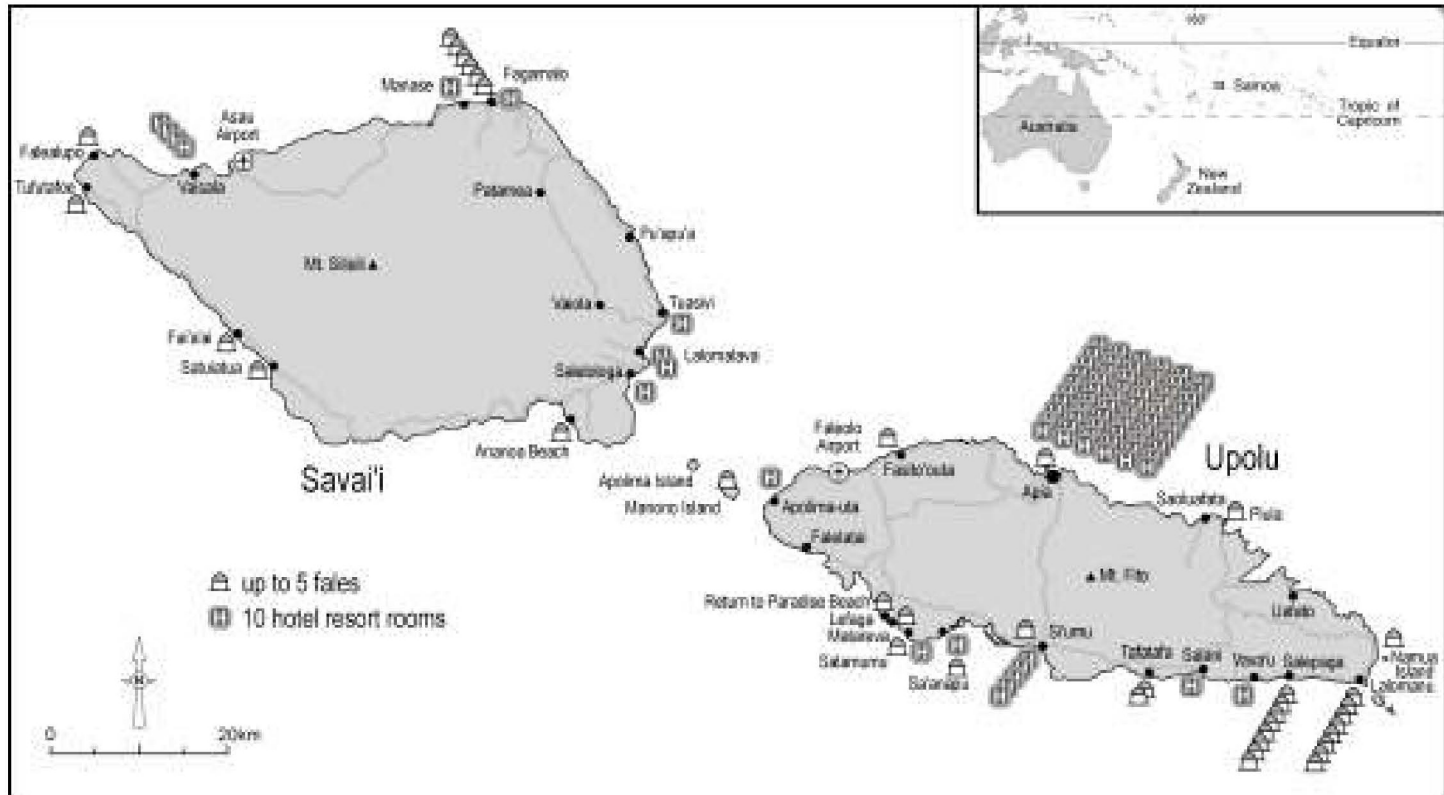


Figure 2. Map of Samoa Showing Locations of Hotels and Beach *Fale* Accommodation

people in Samoa, and the concept has since been adapted and expanded to meet the needs of domestic and foreign tourists. Families wishing to establish a beach *fale* venture require permission from their *matai* (chief) but they do not require large amounts of capital; thus, numbers have grown from one or two beach *fale* enterprises in the 1970s, to over 40 enterprises (each with between 3 and 30 *fale* available) post-2000. The Samoan coastline is now dotted with beach *fale* which dominate accommodation options outside of the capital, Apia (Figure 2). No other Pacific island destination has such a well-established network of low cost accommodation for tourists.

Many constraints to the development of more up-market tourism ventures in Samoa are either not problematic to the budget sector, or seen as an advantage. Importantly, because beach *fale* are owned by local families there are no concerns about leasing land or negotiating joint ventures. The fact that beach *fale* cannot offer every modern convenience is turned into a benefit. Some beach *fale*, for instance, promote themselves on the Internet under titles such as 'Your Own Grass Hut', where they note guests will have peace and quiet when they come to stay with them because they are in a remote location with no telecommunications

linkages. They trade on not being 5-star resorts, yet say they will deliver 5 star service and hospitality:

I call these [beach fale] 'luxury 5-star hotels the Samoan way'. They suit the needs of visitors...and it's cost effective. It helps tourists learn about the culture – the simplicity of this whole place (Pers. comm., Sione, Pastor, June 2003).

While Samoa could be presented as yet another perfect island paradise embracing the tourism wave, it is important to note that Samoans have a long history of resistance to outside interference. Thus, in the past they have been reluctant to trade on their country's natural beauty and cultural features by encouraging tourism development. Even though Samoa faced 60 years of political rule by outsiders, the colonial period failed to undermine the people's cultural independence or *fa'a Samoa* – the Samoan way of life (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998). Respect for *fa'a Samoa* is a key reason why Samoa has taken a cautious attitude towards tourism (Fairburn-Dunlop 1994): there is 'concern that this may have adverse consequences upon the dignity, self-reliance, traditional customs, authority structure and morals of rural people' (Meleisea and Meleisea 1980: 42). There was, thus, very little marketing of tourism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Active promotion of tourism by the government did not begin until the 1990s when they were spurred on to find development alternatives after the devastation caused by two cyclones (in 1990 and 1991) and taro leaf blight (in 1993) which destroyed almost the entire crop of this staple – and main foreign exchange earner – on both main islands. Tourism has, since, rapidly grown to become Samoa's main industry, contributing four times more to the economy than agriculture (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998). Arrivals grew from less than 48,000 in 1990 to over 92,000 by 2003 (Page and Lawton 1996: 297; South Pacific Tourism Organisation 2005).

Tourism Planning and the Beach *Fale* Sector

As indicated above, the most notable tourism growth area in Samoa over the past decade has been the beach *fale* sector. This runs contrary to the intentions dictated in recent tourism plans for the country. In the plans, to date, the budget tourism sector has been ignored or under valued, while suggesting that 'higher value' tourists should be sought. For example, the 1992-2001 Tourism Development Plan (TDP) had a marketing strategy which 'entails seeking out higher spending leisure tourists...in main source markets' (cited in Pearce 2000: 196). This TDP stressed that 'tourism in Samoa needs to ...follow a policy of 'low volume, high yield', and attract discerning and environmentally aware visitors' (Government of Western Samoa and Tourism Council of the South Pacific 1992, cited in Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998: 263). It is unlikely that the constant stream of backpackers who hang out in beach *fale* today would be seen as either 'high yield' or 'discerning'.

The TDP for 2002-2006 pays more attention to beach *fale*, but it tends to underrate their significance. For example, it suggests that there is already an over supply of beach *fale* leading to low occupancy rates, and projects that it is at the high-end level of 'quality accommodation' that more investment needs to be made (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002: 73). It predicts that between 260 and 600 additional staff will be required in hotels by 2006 (compared with 1998), whereas only 5-10 new staff will be required by beach *fale* (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002: 78): '...there are sufficient *fale* to well and truly cater for current and projected demand' (Tourism Resource Consultants 2002: 61). It will be interesting to see whether, as in the past, actual growth differs from these projections. Thus, as Park (2003: 83) notes, 'rather than considering the current path of tourism development to be of merit, both [tourism development] plans attempt to send Samoa down a different path'.

Despite official rhetoric that tourism growth should be in areas which would attract higher spending tourists, there

have been some very good initiatives to support beach *fale* in practice. Staff of the Samoan Tourism Authority (STA) generally recognizes the value of beach *fale* as a unique tourism product, and they have been supported by NZAID (the New Zealand Agency for International Development) in providing training and financial support to beach *fale* owners over the past few years. Training in areas such as financial management, health and safety, and service skills is helping to address areas of weakness which exist in the beach *fale* sector, where many of the owners have limited business experience. Workshops for beach *fale* owners have been offered, and a *Samoa Beach Fale Owners' Manual* published in both Samoan and English languages. NZAID also established a Tourism Support Fund (TSF) in 1999 to provide advice and financial grants for capital development to tourism operators. Several beach *fale* operations have benefited from this scheme. In addition, the Small Business Enterprise Centre in Apia offers free one-on-one business advice to people setting up any kind of small business.

STA has made an effort to actively market beach *fale*, listing links to some beach *fale* on their website and stocking brochures for beach *fale* in their Information *Fale* in Apia. This is an important endorsement of the beach *fale* sector given that, in many parts of the world, a key factor constraining the success of community-based tourism initiatives is a lack of publicity (Moscardo and Pearce 2003). While some larger beach *fale* initiatives have websites and/or have been listed in key guidebooks (specifically Lonely Planet's *Samoa Islands* (Bennett *et al.* 2003) and *South Pacific Handbook* published by Moon Travel (Stanley 2000)), the majority of businesses do no marketing of their own apart from a hand-painted billboard along the road and perhaps producing a small number of brochures.

Overall while STA officials with NZAID backing have provided good support to beach *fale* operations, at higher levels of tourism planning there has been a continuing tendency to overlook the budget sector while endeavouring to promote major investment in large-scale tourism ventures.

Backpackers in Samoa

The growth in low cost beach *fale* located on some of the best beaches in the country just a few metres from the sea, has provided an attractive accommodation option for a wide range of backpackers including the following: British/European travellers on long term sojourns to Asia, Australasia and the Pacific; expatriates, voluntary workers based in Samoa and their families taking a short break; surfers; and New Zealand and Australian individuals and couples of all ages who are seeking a reasonably priced, adventuresome and 'less touristy' holiday option during

their 2-3 week vacation. As one explained, 'I used to be a travel agent but now these are the only sorts of holidays we go for - we avoid resorts' (Pers. comm., New Zealand woman, 40s, June 2003).

Samoa, therefore, appears to confirm a broader trend whereby backpackers are increasingly heterogeneous in that they cannot be confined to one particular 'type' of tourist, their backgrounds and motivations vary considerably; however, they continue to exhibit similar travel forms (Uriely *et al.* 2002; Sørensen 2003). Thus, in this paper the term 'backpackers' will be used broadly to include those tourists engaged in independent travel with flexible schedules choosing to use mainly budget forms of accommodation. Rather than rejecting that short term travellers, such as some of the groups identified above, could be considered 'backpackers', Sørensen (2003) argues that this is an emerging variant of backpacker travel popular with those with previous backpacker experience but who now have short time frames for vacationing.

While this research did not set out to explicitly examine the personalities or motivations of those engaging in backpacker travel in Samoa, there are indications that a country like Samoa, which is isolated from major travel routes and can be expensive to reach, may attract different types of backpackers than those who congregate into backpacker enclaves such as the southern islands of Thailand, Goa (India), or Dahab. Certainly, there were many middle-aged people staying in beach *fale* in Samoa, and there was no known 'party centre' where backpackers congregated mainly to socialize with each other. Thus, while Welk (2004) argues that an anti-tourist attitude defines the backpacker subculture, in Samoa a number of people who are considered backpackers under the broad definition above had self-proclaimed 'anti-backpacker' attitudes. Some stated that they specifically avoided the institutionalized backpacking scene: 'The backpacker term conjures up images of budget, grungy travel' (Pers. comm., Australian man, 32, June 2003). One commented on the notion of a 'backpacker bubble' whereby you see '...the same guys all over the world doing the same thing and making the same mess' (Pers. comm., Australian man, 28, June 2003).

Backpackers in Samoa tend to stay in beach *fale*, which are mostly owned and operated by Samoan families, for most if not all of their time in the country. They typically base themselves at one beach *fale* establishment for three or four nights rather than moving on to a new place every morning, relishing the chance to relax and perhaps to get to know other tourists and the family running their beach *fale*. For approximately US\$ 20 per night patrons get their own *fale*, bedding, light and mosquito net, access to shared bathroom

facilities, and two meals. A guidebook to Samoa accurately captures the motivations of many backpackers when it notes that beach *fale* provide visitors with

an excellent way to combine hiking, snorkeling, swimming, surfing, and just plain relaxing with a sampling of Samoan life...As well as being great shoestring places to stay, they're a wonderful introduction to Samoan culture (Stanley 2000: 470,495).

Samoa's lack of mass tourism, particularly being 'less touristy' than Fiji, is what attracted many backpackers to visit:

I think it's the fact that it's not a [well-known] tourism destination is what appealed.... There's resorts squirreled away here [in Samoa] but it's not like Fiji where you have the [tourism] industry in your face all the time (Pers. comm., New Zealand man, 43, June 2003).

It's away from high rises on the beach. It's relaxed and easy going (Pers. comm., Australian woman, 22, June 2003).

A Swedish tourist who had spent the previous six months travelling in Indo-china, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand explained why Samoa had appealed to her:

On the round-the-world ticket we could choose Fiji, Samoa or Tahiti. I heard that Samoa was the best - more quiet and unique, not so developed as in Fiji...we really like that, not the touristy places (Pers. comm., Swedish woman, 24, June 2003).

A young surfer backpacking his way around the world was simply interested in going a little off the beaten track:

I just sort of - read about all these countries, and [chose Samoa because it] balanced the culture and the surf. Like in Tahiti there's better waves there but it's just really popular - I wanted somewhere a bit less popular. And you always read about the friendly [Samoan] people' (Pers. comm., British man, 22, July 2003).

A New Zealand medical student said that she had chosen Samoa out of other Pacific island options for her practical placement because she wanted somewhere affordable, but also because she had worked at Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland with large numbers of Polynesian patients: 'I only got a taste of Samoan culture at Middlemore - I wanted to understand more' (Pers. comm., New Zealand woman, 22, June 2003).

The majority of tourists interviewed in this research were extremely positive about beach *fale* tourism, and it was clear from their comments that the opportunities beach *fale* provided for experience of Samoan culture/people was central to their experience. Samoa is not perceived by backpackers as simply a 'cheap destination' or a place in

the sun. As one said, '...if we just wanted sun and a beach we would have chosen Fiji'.

The interest in Samoan culture was reflected in backpackers' comments on beach *fale* accommodation. A number of those interviewed felt that beach *fale* were a great place to stay because they 'blend with the culture', there is 'a certain alignment with culture', or are 'culturally harmonious'.

'You get a sense of belonging, of fitting in with the culture, when staying in a beach fale' (Pers. comm., New Zealand man, 44, June 2003).

Sinalei [an exclusive resort] is luxurious and it's great for people who just want to party and get laid, but it's so separate from the culture. Staying in beach fale you are in the culture; you can't help but be a part of it (Pers. comm., Netherlands man, 27, June 2003).

When asked, 'has staying in a beach *fale* enhanced your experience of Samoa?', one man replied thus:

Absolutely. Especially when we went to Namua [Island], because it's run by a Samoan family, you eat their food and learn about their culture. If we'd stayed somewhere else I'd have brought the laptop, checked my cell phone, etc! (Pers. comm., New Zealand man, 44, June 2003).

Comments from two 'anti-backpacker' backpackers – young doctors – on why they had chosen to stay in a beach *fale* demonstrated that the beach party style of backpacker culture was of no interest to them: 'For us it's an in-between... between the backpacker scum and hotels. It can still be just the two of us – you don't have this backpacker scene' (Pers. comm., Australian man, 32, and woman, 28, June 2003).

Many backpackers had made the effort to learn a few greetings in Samoan, and enjoyed travelling on local buses and talking with families running their beach *fale* in order to gain insights into their way of life. They put a high value on opportunities for personal interaction with local people. It is not surprising then that many of the best memories overseas tourists had of their time in Samoa derived from the interactions they had with Samoan people, often while staying in beach *fale* accommodation. For one it was 'going fishing with the boys', and for another, 'tasting coconut fresh from the shell'.

Two young Australian men commented separately that there was a direct benefit for the tourists' home countries if through their travels they learned to understand and value another culture, thus breaking down negative stereotypes about Pacific Islanders which exist in countries like New Zealand and Australia.

A strong interest in the host culture was also reflected

in relationships between backpackers and beach *fale* staff. Rather than speaking of their hosts as 'cordial' or 'efficient', guests would enthuse that the staff were 'lovely', 'like family', or had made them feel 'like part of the family':

Because we were at [named beach fale] a bit longer, that was really great. We were playing volleyball with the boys. One of them took us into the village and into the shop to buy beer – all his mates gave us a hard time [in a joking sense]. Everybody waved – 'hello Palagi' [Palagi is a term used for white-skinned people] (Pers. comm., New Zealand male, 44, June 2003).

Such friendly relations between beach *fale* operators and tourists led some guests to assist their hosts (for example, one tourist had helped to repair broken plumbing), or to spend time engaging in leisure activities with them. One European tourist relayed how at the end of a *fiafia* (cultural performance) night, during which she had been encouraged to try Samoan-style dancing, she had stayed up late with some of the young female performers who asked her to teach them how to do some Western-style dancing. She was happy to oblige and they all had a lot of fun comparing moves. Meanwhile, a group of three Australians explained that they always introduce themselves by name when they meet locals, who in turn do the same. They felt this gesture led to mutual respect and friendliness which may have explained why the operator of their beach *fale* freely offered to give them a ride into town earlier in the week, when they had planned on taking a taxi. Overall, there was, thus, a genuine sharing of stories, skills and fun between some hosts and guests: this was not simply a unidimensional, commercial relationship; rather, there were opportunities for two-way learning and interaction.

Matai (chiefs) play a key role in terms of leadership and decision-making in rural communities. Beach *fale* tourism is overseen by the *fono* (council of *matai*) of each village, which sets rules to ensure that village life is not adversely affected by beach *fale* operations, and that visitors feel welcome and safe. Thus, for example, beach *fale* operators are expected to instruct their guests in cultural protocol with respect to how they must dress when entering a village, how to wait quietly during evening prayer time rather than wandering around the village, and at what time noise from the beach *fale* should stop in the evenings. Under the influence of village pastors, they may also choose to institute restrictions on tourists' activities on Sunday, the Christian day of rest, as Samoan society is very religious.

Most backpackers were accepting of basic restrictions on their behaviour associated with culture – for example, dressing decently when entering a village or a church, and not walking through villages during evening prayers. In a

beach *fale* establishment on Upolu, there was a bar area with pool tables and a sign clearly stated that there should be no pool played on Sundays. Return to Paradise beach is closed on Sundays, and while beach *fale* operations still run in Manono Island on Sundays, no swimming, kayaking or other such activities are allowed. Most tourists seemed to tolerate these restrictions. As one said, 'Each village makes its own rules – for example, you can't play pool on Sundays, so you've got to relax the whole day'; his friend continued: 'With the religious thing here...if you can't respect it you shouldn't come here, y'know?' (Pers. comm., Australian man, 22, June 2003). These views were reflected by a surfer who felt Samoans had held on to values that used to make Sundays special in his home country:

Back home, Sunday is never Sunday any more – you know, in the days when no one was working, and no one phoned.... It used to be a lazy day. You had a nice meal and spent Sunday with your family. And it's still like that here (Pers. comm., British man, 22, July 2003).

These backpackers did not, therefore, conform with the increasingly common stereotype of the boorish backpacker interested only in mingling with other travellers, partying up large, bargaining excessively and showing minimal cultural sensitivity.

Samoan Impressions of Backpacker Behaviour

While tourism writers commonly draw attention to culturally insensitive and inappropriate behaviour by tourists seeking hedonistic experiences in tropical locales, it is clear that local people can exert some control over tourists' behaviour and experiences. In her thesis on beach *fale* tourism, Park (2003: 61) thus, turns around Urry's (1990) concept of the 'tourist gaze' and asserts that 'by bringing tourists 'home' into the villages, it is the tourists that are really under the gaze of Samoans and this suits Samoans perfectly'.

Given the control over the behaviour of those staying in beach *fale* discussed above, it is not surprising that owners expressed few, if any, concerns about the behaviour of backpackers they accommodated. They were seen as well-behaved, particularly in relation to Samoan clientele who are reportedly far more likely to get drunk and rowdy when staying in beach *fale*. Local residents only occasionally voice concerns about the skimpy/casual dress of backpackers or what may be seen as public displays of intimacy.

There were, however, two persons involved with beach *fale* tourism who were annoyed when backpackers – particularly those who had travelled through Asia and were used to bargaining for every product and service – tried to beat down the price of a night's accommodation:

There's always some that come and ask you if they can stay for such and such an amount of money, and when you think of all your service, food, and staff etc. it's not worth it (Pers. comm., Maria, Beach *fale* operator, July 2003).

There is the cheap tourist who comes here [to Samoa] and has budgeted ST\$ 10 [approximately US\$ 3.50] a day and expects us to pay for their holiday. I give them a piece of my mind – I tell them if you can't afford it, you may as well stay at home. I say to them that I can't go into a hotel in Germany and say 'This is too expensive for me, I'll only pay \$10'.... I ask them 'why should we pay for your holiday? ...if I don't have enough money [to travel] I don't get on that plane' (Pers. comm., Moelagi Jackson, Safua Hotel and Tours, June 2003).

Overall, however, these 'cheap' tourists were a small minority.

Perhaps the most blatant abuse of hospitality was said to occur when backpackers purposely sought out accommodation in family homes in order to save money:

The worst thing is you'll hear them bragging about it [saving money]: 'we stayed with one family and didn't pay anything'. Oh that makes me so mad....These people could really ruin the hospitality of Samoa (Pers. comm., Moelagi Jackson, Safua Hotel and Tours, June 2003).

However, of the few tourists interviewed who had stayed with Samoan families, all had compensated their hosts, mostly with cash or a combination of food and cash. One said he asked around shop owners to see what would be a fair amount to give for one day of food and accommodation – he was told ST\$ 25-30, so he gave his hosts ST\$ 25.

Benefits of Budget Tourism Through Beach *Fale*

Beach *fale* offer budget accommodation and, as such, it would be easy to overlook the significance of the revenue they generate compared to, for example, an exclusive beach resort. In fact, however, the beach *fale* industry has contributed greatly to the development of a number of Samoan villages². One reason for this is that backpackers typically stay longer than other groups of tourists; thus, while their daily expenditure may not be high, the total amount of money they spend can be considerable.

Backpackers interviewed generally spent between US\$ 35 and US\$ 50 per day, per person. This was based upon the US\$ 18-30 per person which it cost to stay in a beach *fale* for one night, with breakfast and dinner included, but it also allowed some 'luxuries', such as 'Vailimas' (the local beer) and going diving or hiring a motorbike for one or two days. A minority of backpackers (less than 10 per cent of those who were interviewed) preferred being as self-sufficient as possible and/or were on a tight budget, staying in very basic

beach *fale* (which cost US\$ 4 to US\$ 8 per night) and cooking their own meals, thus spending on average US\$ 18 per day. Most backpackers stayed in Samoa for periods of between 10 days and 4 weeks, a considerable time recognizing the size of the country: one can comfortably drive around either of the two main islands in a single day. On average then over a two week visit a backpacker would spend around US\$ 600.

The value of backpacker spending cannot, however, be measured simply by the total amount of their spend: rather, it is magnified due to the fact that much of the money they spend stays within rural communities. Backpackers in Samoa and elsewhere tend to spend more on locally-produced goods and services, thus minimizing the 'leakages' commonly associated with resorts whereby most goods are imported and profits are sent overseas (Scheyvens 2002a). While some materials for beach *fale* need to be imported or brought in from a larger centre (for example, pipes for plumbing, bathroom and kitchen fittings, cement, electrical wiring, linen and mattresses), there is a far heavier reliance on local materials than in other tourism businesses. Timber can usually be sourced locally, as can stones, thatch, *pandanus*, and coconut leaves that make up the basis of the beach *fale*. There have been widespread multiplier effects for village communities due to the fact that *fale* are constructed using mainly local materials and expertise, their owners often purchase food and furnishings from other villagers, and they may hire village labour during busy periods. The following examples show that there are ranges of ways in which villagers can earn revenue from beach *fale* enterprises even when they are not part of a family which owns a beach *fale* business:

- sale of fruit, vegetables, chickens, pigs, and seafood (when the beach *fale* operators and their families cannot keep up with demand for these items themselves);
- sale of twine (made from coconut fibre), sawn timber, woven blinds (made from coconut leaves), mats (made of *pandanus*), table cloths, cushions, and other materials used in construction and furnishing of beach *fale* and eating houses;
- contract work for village carpenters, electricians, and plumbers, regarding construction and maintenance of beach *fale* and associated facilities;
- employment as entertainers or as casual waiting staff and cleaners during busy periods;
- sale of handicraft items to tourists;
- added custom for the village store from tourists purchasing drinks and snacks;

- use of the local bus service;
- contributions to the collection plate from backpackers who attend a church service as part of their 'cultural experience'.

Interestingly, as some beach *fale* establishments are upgrading their facilities and targeting higher spending clientele, their use of local resources is declining slightly while their demand for imported goods has risen. One operator explained: 'As the cooking is getting more up market, we have to go further afield to buy imported products' (Pers. comm., Maria, July 2003). For example, tomatoes, celery, red peppers and lettuce have to be purchased in Apia, and some of these products are imported. There is then a positive relationship between remaining 'low scale' (i.e., catering for backpackers) and maximizing the use of local goods and services.

Beach *fale* tourism has contributed significantly to the economies of some remote areas through diversifying the livelihood options available to them. This is largely due to the adventuresome nature of many backpackers visiting Samoa and their interest in culture, which means they seek out places where other tourists do not go (Twining-Ward and Twining-Ward 1998), thus, spreading their money over a wider geographical area. While not all economically-deprived regions have sufficient natural or cultural attractions to make tourism a viable option, certainly for those that do, tourism has added a significant boost to the local economy. Through starting a beach *fale*, a family can spread their economic risk. Thus, if the price for bananas goes down or an Aunt who had been remitting cash loses her job in Auckland, economic prospects for the family are still promising if they own a beach *fale* enterprise. Beach *fale* also fit in well with other rural livelihood strategies, so that whether a family member works on the plantation or in the beach *fale* kitchen that day can depend on bookings.

Another benefit of beach *fale* tourism which receives little official acknowledgement is that it has restored the pride of many villagers in their home environment. Several people interviewed commented that communities with successful beach *fale* ventures were now more vibrant and attractive places to live in, with more jobs on offer. The economic rejuvenation of some villages through beach *fale* tourism has reduced rural-urban migration as young people feel they can now stay in their home village and have a viable future. Thus, one backpacker felt that, rather than eroding culture, beach *fale* tourism could be helping to support Samoan culture because it had revived some rural villages:

[Beach fale tourism] could be a disruption to the traditional way of life...but what is this? And they could help the

traditional way of life to survive because beach fale keep people in the villages (Pers. comm., New Zealand male, 44, June 2003).

Many Samoans feel genuinely honoured when people from all over the world come to visit their village and learn about their culture, and consequently community members contribute enthusiastically to village beautification efforts. A pastor who had recently returned to Samoa after 24 years in the United States commented on the changes he had noticed in rural areas, many of them associated with beach *fale* development:

Beach fale tourism has helped to boost the morale of communities and helped people to cater for their day-to-day needs.... It's also helped them to improve their surroundings, their gardens, etc. (Pers. comm., Sione, Pastor, June 2003).

Backpackers' interest in culture was noted by a number of beach *fale* operators, which led to a genuine sharing of ideas, stories, and skills between some 'hosts' and 'guests'. Villagers in general felt proud about their villages and culture when visitors showed an interest in talking with them, visiting their churches and homes:

Some Palagi like very much to learn about Samoa. One Swedish boy had the whole tatu, and would only wear a lavalava. Others learn just a little – they're here for a short time. My mother and I demonstrate weaving if they [guests] are interested.... We like to show our culture and our life (Pers. comm., Luisa, Beach *Fale* operator, June 2003).

Because of the proximity of beach *fale* tourism to villages and the obvious interest of tourists to Samoa in culture, a number of traditions that were declining have been revived. In this light, STA-run awareness-raising campaigns for Samoan people which actively encourage them to see how tourism can work in their interests, and to demonstrate how *fa'a Samoa* can be seen as something of value to both the people of Samoa and something which attracts visitors:

We use our culture as one of our marketing strategies.... We encourage the villagers to have the fa'a Samoa, and to make it stronger and stronger. Visitors feel very safe when they come here because of our culture. You know some of the cultural factors have been revived because we pushed the villagers to revive them – for instance, making traditional foods. Some villages will neglect meetings – we ask them to have at least monthly meetings of matai where they start with an 'ava ceremony which they can encourage visitors to come and watch. It's not a put up thing – they then go on to discuss normal village matters after the tourists leave (Pers. comm., Chin Ete, Manager of Training and Cultural Affairs, STA, June 2003).

In addition to the economic and social benefits of beach *fale* tourism, beach *fale* also contribute to development in a political sense in that they are controlled by local families and traditional community management structures (that is,

the *matani* discussed earlier), and this means that prime beach sites remain under the management and ownership of local people: 'The beach *fale* industry is about Samoan people owning and manipulating tourism to fit in with their practices and traditions, not the other way around' (Park 2003: 44). This challenges foreign domination of the tourism sector, which is characteristic of tourism in many small island states (Scheyvens 2003). This local control is possible because of the communal land tenure system described earlier in this paper, because of the strength of *fa'a Samoa* and people's support for ensuring protection of their culture and land.

Negative Perceptions of Budget Tourism in Samoa

Despite the significant growth of the beach *fale* sector and the benefits this has brought to rural communities, it has often been overlooked or disregarded in official reports. For example, estimates of the number of beds available for tourists in Samoa almost always exclude beach *fale* accommodation. Thus, when Pearce (1999: 145) stated that in 1996 there were 740 rooms in 36 establishments not one beach *fale* enterprise was counted. Similarly, the report, *Samoa 2000* (Asian Development Bank 2000), which is purported to 'provide a comprehensive analysis of current economic and key sector developments in Samoa' has an entire chapter devoted to tourism but beach *fale* are not discussed at all.

Other commentators have overlooked the value of beach *fale* because they are more interested in development of high-class tourist facilities, which they feel, will earn the country more foreign exchange (see ADB 2000; Pearce 2000), and would enhance the country's reputation as a provider of quality tourism. Often, they are not happy to see beach *fale* occupying prime beach side locations. For example, some private sector stakeholders felt that there were too many beach *fale* around the two main islands now, many of which were 'eyesores':

Since beach fale came up in Samoa we've had a sort of unchecked rush of huts [develop] all over the place. A perfect example is Aleipata: that whole strip used to be a beautiful place but now it's just littered with beach fale (Pers. comm., Tour company owner, June 2003).

The person cited above was particularly concerned about the *image* of Samoa because they did not think the country should be projecting itself as a backpacker destination: 'it shouldn't be [a backpacker destination] because it is such a beautiful place... Having all these beach *fale* all over the coastline...it's just giving that wrong impression' (Pers. comm., Tour company owner, June 2003).

Negative feelings towards beach *fale* operations from operators of mid-range motels and hotels have grown in

direct proportion to the growing popularity of beach *fale*. That is, hotel owners feel slighted when their potential guests choose to stay in beach *fale*. There was what one respondent called an 'outcry' from hotel and motel owners who were particularly offended that beach *fale* had become a desired option not just for backpackers, but for their former clientele such as government agencies taking their staff on overnight workshops and retreats (Pers. comm., Moelagi Jackson, Safua Hotel and Tours, June 2003).

Overall the efforts of beach *fale* operators and their contribution to the tourism product in Samoa has not been recognized by all parties, perhaps because, unlike resort-style tourism, the budget tourism sector will never be associated with luxury and glamour. As its clientele draws in large numbers of backpackers and domestic tourists, two groups whose significance is commonly overlooked or underrated by tourism planners around the globe (Scheyvens 2002b: Chapter 9).

Of concern is the fact that negative perceptions sometimes from influential tourism industry players may be informing the direction of policy making, with significant implications for the budget tourism sector. For example, an Amendment Bill was passed in Parliament on June 26, 2003, to encourage more foreign investment in higher class resorts. This effectively supports the intentions of the 2002-2006 Tourism Development Plan, discussed earlier. The Bill specifies that government should play a stronger role in assisting investors to lease land, and gives tax breaks to new hotel/resort developments, with the size of the tax relief being proportional to the size of the hotel/resort. Specifically, hotels with capital investment between ST\$ 1-3 million would receive a tax exemption for 5 years; those with a capital investment of ST\$ 3-20 million would receive a 10-year exemption; and those with a capital investment of over ST\$ 20 million would receive an exemption for 15 years. Already, one new resort has been completed (the 140 room Aggie Grey's Resort and Spa) and others are underway or are in the planning stages. While it makes good economic sense to provide tourism products for a diverse range of clients, of concern is that such initiatives may see more land moving out of community hands in the future, as per the concerns expressed by the Sri Lankan bungalow owner earlier in this paper, and it may also signal a new direction in tourism planning whereby there is less government support for the small-scale beach *fale* initiatives in future.

Conclusion

While tourism development plans for Samoa have consistently advocated a focus on attracting 'high value' tourists and providing services to match, there has been

significant growth in both the number and popularity of budget beach *fale* accommodation. Beach *fale* operators are providing a much-desired product and associated services at a price which is very affordable. Perhaps, more importantly, staying in a beach *fale* is perceived as an important part of the cultural experience of visiting Samoa, and this is a key drawcard for foreign backpackers.

Developing country governments and the donors, multilateral organizations and various consultants who may advise them at times, need to move beyond simplistic assumptions that backpackers are undesirable clientele or that cultural interaction between 'hosts' and 'guests' is a bad thing. As Westerhausen and Macbeth (2003) have shown, local people and backpackers can be allies in the struggle for a locally-determined form of tourism development which has social and economic benefits. Certainly, in Samoa backpackers effectively support beach *fale* enterprises that are locally owned and operated, and meaningful cultural exchange often results from their experiences of staying in beach *fale*. The backpackers interviewed for this research did not conform with the stereotype of the boorish, self-interested party animals commonly promoted by the press. Rather, many had a strong interest in cross-cultural interaction and in learning about *fa'a Samoa*, and others just wanted a quiet break in a beautiful 'natural' setting.

Samoa's location, isolated as it is from well-worn international backpacker routes, also contributes to the favourable way in which backpacker tourism has evolved here. Many of the backpackers staying in Samoa were middle aged and/or professionals and/or on short-stay vacations, supporting the notion set forth by Sørensen (2003) that we need to move beyond our traditional definitions of backpackers as young people, often students, travelling for extended periods of time. This paper, thus, supports the notion of differentiation among backpacker 'types', demonstrating that when one moves off the most well-trodden 'banana pancake' trails popular with backpackers, concerns about the social impacts and cultural insensitivity of this group of travellers wanes. A low-cost form of travel centred around interaction with local people and sensitivity to culture still characterizes backpacking in certain locales, especially locales which are somewhat isolated.

Advocates of beach *fale* tourism in Samoa need to ensure that the negative perceptions of the beach *fale* themselves or of backpackers utilizing them do not impede beach *fale* operators from getting the support they need in the future, be it access to networks of tourism providers, training or credit. Simultaneously, they should guard against a situation whereby the up-scale forms of tourism promoted in the latest Tourism Development Plan for Samoa absorb an unfair amount of the time and energy of STA staff.

Large-scale development of up-market hotels and resorts based on foreign investment need not be the key objective of Third World governments that wish to maximize their gains from tourism. Samoa demonstrates that a country with strong indigenous control of the tourism sector and small to medium-sized enterprises can be economically successful as well as having social and political benefits. Although beach *fale* tourism attracts backpackers and domestic tourists rather than high-spending tourists, it contributes greatly to development because most economic benefits are retained locally, it is based upon local skills and resources, it involves cultural education of guests, and it does this all in the context of high levels of local ownership, participation and control.

Endnotes

1. The author conducted research in Samoa utilizing qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured

interviews, during June-July 2003. The research assistance of Bronwyn Tavita Sesega and the advice of Louise Twining-Ward contributed greatly to the value of the material collected. The author also wishes to thank all of those who generously gave up time to participate in interviews including staff of the Samoan Tourism Authority, beach *fale* operators, villagers, and beach *fale* patrons.

2. The more successful beach *fale* enterprises also contribute directly to government coffers through tax revenue. Any business earning a net profit of over ST\$ 8,000 (approximately US\$ 3000) has to pay tax, and those earning over ST\$ 52,000 (approximately US\$ 19,000) net profit have to be VGST registered (Value-Added Goods and Services Tax is a 10 per cent levy on the value of goods and services sold) (Twining-Ward 1999: 40).

References

- ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK (2000). *Samoa 2000*. Manila. Asian Development Bank.
- AZIZ, H. (1999). Whose culture is it Anyway? *In Focus*. Spring: 14-15.
- BENNETT, M., TALBOT, D. and SWANEY, D. (2003). *Samoa Islands*. Melbourne. Lonely Planet.
- BRADT, H. (1995). Better to Travel Cheaply? *The Independent* on Sunday. 12 February: 49-50.
- BUTCHER, J. (2003). *The Moralisation of Tourism: sun, Sand and Saving the World?* Routledge. London.
- COHEN, E. (1973). Nomads from Affluence: Notes on the Phenomenon of Drifter-Tourism. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 14(1-2): 89-103.
- COHEN, E. (2004). Backpacking, Diversity and Change. In Richards, G. and Wilson, J. (eds) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Clevedon. Channel View Publications: 43-59.
- ERB, M. (2000). Understanding Tourists: Interpretations from Indonesia. *Annals of Tourism Research* 27(3): 709-736.
- FAIRBURN-DUNLOP, P. (1994). Gender, Culture and Tourism Development in Western Samoa. In Kinnaird, V. and Hall, D. (eds) *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*. Chichester. Wiley: 121-141.
- HALL, C. M. (1997). *Tourism in the Pacific Rim: Developments, Impacts and Markets*. Melbourne. Addison Wesley Longman.
- HAMPTON, M. (1998). Backpacker Tourism and Economic Development. *Annals of Tourism Research* 25(3): 639-660.
- HUTNYK, J. (1996). *The Rumour of Calcutta: Tourism, Charity and the Poverty of Representation*. London. Zed.
- IOANNIDES, D. and HOLCOMB, B. (2003). Misguided Policy Initiatives in Small-Island Destinations: Why do Up-market Tourism Policies Fail? *Tourism Geographies* 5(1): 39-48.
- KONTOGEOGROPOULOS, N. (2003). Keeping up with the Joneses: Tourists, Travellers, and the Quest for Cultural Authenticity in Southern Thailand. *Tourist Studies* 3(2): 171-203.
- MALAM, L. (2005). Encounters Across Difference on the Thai Beach Scene. PhD Thesis, Canberra. Australian National University.
- MELEISEA, M. and MELEISEA, P. S. (1980). The Best Kept Secret: Tourism in Western Samoa. In Rajotte, F. and Crocombe, R. (eds) *Pacific Tourism As Islanders See It*. Suva. Institute of Pacific Studies. University of the South Pacific: 35-46.
- MOSCARDO, G. and PEARCE, P. L. (2003). Presenting Destinations: Marketing Host Communities. In Singh, S., Timothy, D. J. and Dowling, R. K. (eds) *Tourism in Destination Communities*. Wallingford. CABI Publishing: 253-72.
- NOY, C. (2004). This Trip Really Changed Me: Backpackers Narratives of Self-change. *Annals of Tourism Research* 31(1): 78-102.
- PAGE, S. and LAWTON, G. (1996). The Pacific Islands: Markets, Development and Planning Issues. In Hall, C. M. and Page, S. J. (eds) *Tourism in the Pacific: Issues and Cases*. London. International Thomson Business Press: 273-302.
- PARK, K. M. (2003). Beach *Fale*: Indigenous Initiatives in Tourism and Development in Samoa. MA Thesis, Development Studies, Auckland University.
- PEARCE, D. (1999). Tourism Development and National Tourist Organizations in Small Developing Countries: The Case of Samoa. In Pearce, D. G. and Butler, R. W. (eds) *Contemporary Issues in Tourism Development*. London. Routledge: 143-57.
- PEARCE, D. (2000). Tourism Plan Reviews: Methodological Considerations and Issues from Samoa. *Tourism Management* 21: 191-203.
- RICHARDS, G. and WILSON, J. (eds) (2004). *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Channel View Publication. Clevedon.

- SAMOA EXPERIENCE (2005). *Newsletter from Samoa Experience* March 16 2005. http://www.samoa-experience.com/Stay_in_touch5.htm Accessed on 16 May 2005.
- SCHEYVENS, R. (2002a). Backpackers and Local Development in the Third World. *Annals of Tourism Research* 29(1): 144-164.
- SCHEYVENS, R. (2002b). *Tourism for Development: Empowering Communities*. Harlow. Prentice Hall.
- SCHEYVENS, R. (2003). Local Involvement in Managing Tourism. In Singh, S., Timothy, D. J. and Dowling, R. K. (eds) *Tourism in Destination Communities*. Wallingford. CABI Publishing: 229-52
- SØRENSEN, A. (2003). Backpacker Ethnography. *Annals of Tourism Research* 30(4): 847-867.
- SOUTH PACIFIC TOURISM ORGANISATION (2004). Tala Samoa Newsletter. February 2004. http://www.tcsp.com/spto/export/sites/SPTO/news/industry/samoa/samoa2004_02.shtml. Accessed on 16 May 2005.
- SOUTH PACIFIC TOURISM ORGANISATION (2005). Samoa. <http://www.tcsp.com/spto/cms/destinations/samoa/index.shtml>. Accessed on 16 May 2005.
- STANLEY, D. (2000). *South Pacific Handbook*. Emeryville, California. Moon Travel Handbooks.
- TOURISM CONCERN (2005). Post-Tsunami Reconstruction Criticised by Tourism Concern. www.tourismconcern.org.uk. Accessed on 14 October 2005.
- TOURISM RESOURCE CONSULTANTS (2002). *Samoa Tourism Development Plan 2002-2006: A Focused Future for Tourism in Samoa*. Wellington. Tourism Resource Consultants.
- TWINING-WARD, L. (1999). *Beach Fale Owner's Manual*. Apia. Samoa Visitors Bureau.
- TWINING-WARD, L. and TWINING-WARD, T. (1998). Tourism Development in Samoa: Context and Constraints. *Pacific Tourism Review* 2: 261-271.
- URIELY, N., YONAY, Y. and SIMCHAI, D. (2002). Backpacking Experiences: A Type and Form Analysis. *Annals of Tourism Research* 29(2): 520-538.
- URRY, J. (1990). *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. London. Sage.
- VISSER, G. (2004). The Developmental Impacts of Backpacker Tourism in South Africa. *GeoJournal* 60(3): 283-299.
- WELK, P. (2004). Anti-tourism as an Element of Backpacker Identity Construction. In Richards, G. and Wilson, J. (eds) *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*. Clevedon. Channel View.
- WESTERHAUSEN, K. and MACBETH, J. (2003). Backpackers and Empowered Local Communities: Natural Allies in the Struggle for Sustainability and Local Control? *Tourism Geographies* 5(1): 71-86.
- WILSON, D. (1997). Paradoxes of Tourism in Goa. *Annals of Tourism Research* 24(1): 52-75.
- WUNDER, S. (2000). Big Island, Green Forests and Backpackers: Land-use and Development Options on Ilha Grande, Rio de Janeiro State, Brazil. Working Paper No.4, Copenhagen. Centre for Development Research.

Submitted: October 17, 2005

Accepted: January 25, 2006