



One Small Bag for Tourists Brings Big Benefit

Villagers in Tanoliu, Vanuatu, celebrate the launch of Wan Smolbag's new sea turtle education project. © WAN SMOLBAG

How do you inspire people to protect sea turtles? In Vanuatu, just try asking them if they want to do so.

Wan Smolbag, a community theater group, has been bringing topical issues to the people of Vanuatu since 1989 in a medium that is accessible to everyone regardless of their age, language, or education. All the tools the group needs for its work are kept in “one small bag”—hence its name in the local dialect—and the Wan Smolbag troupe has successfully used those tools in participatory drama to educate the public on issues such as good governance, health, and the environment.

In response to the 1995 Year of the Sea Turtle, Wan Smolbag researched, created, and toured with the drama *I'm a Turtle*. At the end of each performance, members of the group asked the communities if they wanted to help protect sea turtles. The result was the formation of a nationwide network of turtle monitors, the Vanua-Tai, who began to educate their communities about sea turtle conservation and institute bans on harvest.

Eleven years later, the 200-plus-member network is still going strong. One member of that network is showing that, together with the turtles, the local community benefits as well. Donald has been educating ni-Vanuatu, the people of his country, about sea turtles for years, but he felt there was also a need to educate the visiting tourists. The challenge was gaining access to those tourists. In early 2006, however, a grant from the Australian High Commission enabled Donald to build a small turtle education project in the village of Tanoliu.

In the past, tourists would pass Tanoliu on their way to other destinations along the island road; now, Tanoliu monthly receives some 50 vehicles full of visitors, who stop to learn about the project. If you visit on a day when a cruise ship is in port, chances are you'll see Donald



Educational signs help tourists and local community members understand the importance of sea turtle conservation. © WAN SMOLBAG

surrounded by a crowd of tourists as he tells them about the lifecycle of the sea turtle, the cultural significance of turtles in Vanuatu society, and how his community is helping to protect the turtles for its children.

Best of all, the community is seeing a tangible benefit from the project. The tourists make donations to the project, a portion of which goes directly back to the community. They also shop at the craft stalls across from the education project, preventing many of the village women from needing to travel to the capital to sell their goods.

What does the future hold for the project? Guided canoe and snorkeling trips to the turtle foraging grounds are in the immediate plans. Donald is also considering whether tourists could sponsor the protection of turtles through a conservation adoption program. Perhaps he'll just need to ask them if they want to do so.

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