

NAURU:

Known or Unknown

An Environmental Damage by Mankind

BY: PRABIR DATTA

INTRODUCTION

This tiny Commonwealth country was the wealthiest place on the planet for years, with the highest GDP per capita in the world, until the fortune was squandered, leaving the country “bankrupt”. In the past one hundred years, her people have been brought close to extinction; they have had to contend with three colonial powers and devastation of 80 percent of their island through mining of their rich phosphate reserves. When people hear about Nauru they are either unaware of the country or may think of little more than refugees and riots.



Map of the Anglo-German Agreement 1886.

Nauru is a small, uplifted limestone coral atoll, about eight square miles (about 21 sq. km) in area; 4km across and 5km in length with extensive deposit of phosphate from centuries of bird droppings. Nauru was unknown to the western world until John Fern on the ship *Hunter* found it on November 8, 1798. His New Zealand ship was en route to China. He named it “Pleasant Island” because of the nature of the inhabitants who rowed out to the ship.

DISCOVERY AND MINING OF PHOSPHATE

The island was allocated to Germany under the 1886 Anglo-German Convention. Phosphate was discovered later in



Discovery of Nauru by John Fern.

1899, when a young chemist, Albert Ellis, in the service of Pacific Islands Company, conducted a chemical test of a piece of Nauruan rock that had been used as a door stopper in its



Pinnaced formed by bird dropping.

Sydney office. It had been brought there by an official who visited Nauru some years earlier. This discovery increased the economic importance of Nauru. The Pacific Phosphate Company (PPC) started to exploit the reserves in 1906, by agreement with Germany.

The island was captured by Australian forces in 1914 and administered by Britain. In 1920 the League of Nations gave Britain, Australia and New Zealand a Trustee Mandate over the territory. In reality the island was administered by Australia. The three governments bought out the Pacific Phosphate Company and established the British Phosphate Commissioners (BPC), who took over the rights to phosphate mining. The Phosphate Commission operations were a great commercial success. On July 6, 1907, the ship *Fide* first exported phosphate ore.



Albert Ellis discovered phosphate in Nauru.

SOCIO-CULTURAL EFFECT OF MINING

When mining began in 1906, the Nauruan population was less than 1,000 people and continued to maintain their tradi-



Excavation of Phosphate.



Transportation of phosphate to Plant.



Processing and loading phosphate by cantilever.



First shipment of Phosphate.

tional structure of leadership of tribes, districts and family mobility. In 1952, Nauruan's established a less hierarchical structure of themselves in the form of Nauru Local Government Council which gave a voice to United Nations Visiting Missions to whom they expressed their growing list of concerns. This built their case for independence. Thereafter, Hammer DeRoburt became President and ruled the country for most of its twenty years of independence, intermittently from 1970 onwards until his death.

DEMOGRAPHIC IMBALANCE

Nauruans were concerned that their small numbers, amounting to 1,084 in 1921, contributed to their lack of voice with Australian administrators. They were vastly outnumbered by the mining contractor labor and administration force. Reproduction of their tribal group has been an

"Angam Day" when population reached 1500 in 1933. Still being celebrated.



ongoing concern for Nauruans. A young woman's fertility was preciously guarded and socially supported so that she had the best chance to produce a healthy offspring. A target population goal of 1,500 was finally reached in 1933. Thus, the birth of the 1500th Nauruan in October 1933 was a major event which is still celebrated annually to this day, known as Angam Day.

RETARDED DEVELOPMENT

The gap between the rich and poor started widening and the island's community's environment was more than just commercial property for others. Increased productivity that phosphate brought to Australian and New Zealand farmers, was more than the realities that Nauruan's were experiencing from outsiders.



H.E Hammer DeRoburt raised concern to UN & fought for Independence.

HUMANITARIAN CONCERNS

Nauruans were very aware of their loss of autonomy as BPC took control of their island and began expressing it through pressure on Australian administration officials. Autonomy had been snatched from them and compensation was necessary. Hence, after independence, Hammer DeRoburt and his government began to seek international support for compensation claims and the Rehabilitation exercise.

LOSS OF AUTONOMY

The Nauru Island Agreement (1919) did not include Nauruans, rather it set out the powers of the three governments, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand as the British Phosphate Commissioners. Nauruans' rights to their island were totally set aside. All Phosphate deposits, land, building, plant and equipment were vested in the commissioners. In 1952, after World War II, Nauruans established the Nauru Local Government Council. This was an attempt to regain some control over their own affairs, lives and establish less hierarchical leadership channels.

WELFARE ISSUES

The Australian administration established a hospital. Roads and other amenities were set up with the Nauruan Administrative funds. BPC bore the cost of a rail system, storage for phosphate and cantilever. By 1966, Nauruans were strongly pushing for independence. Administration cost represented 20% of the value of phosphate

exports at that time. Temporary residents on the island saw few advantages of modernization.

REHABILITATION OF THE ISLAND

Nauruans' concern for the future of their island began in the 1920s and 1930s, which was expressed in poetry. However, after independence in 1970, Nauruans purchased the mining assets for \$21 million. Further consideration was given to the feasibility of cutting down the pinnacles to re-construct a flat surface on Top side, relocation of the airport and other amenities to the flattened area and consider future residential development on the coastal area.

As a result of the hearing of Nauru's case by the International Court of Justice in The Hague, Nauru was awarded compensation of A\$210 million and further A\$12 million each from New Zealand and United Kingdom. Australian payment was spread over five years. Nauru's future without phosphate, and no viable means of support other than the money, provides a new dimension to consider for their future.

CONCLUSION

The Nauruan case of the impact of phosphate mining on the lives of a small island people in the mid Pacific presents a striking example of the natural resource curse thesis. Nauru has one



Present look of pinnacles on topside with no vegetation. Looks like moon craters.

of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in the world, for example, after the traditional island lifestyle and diet was abandoned in favour of imported food. Nauruans cling to their island as their homeland while seeking advice that is acceptable to their own values. Nauru today is exhausted of her phosphate reserves. The land remains in devastated condition, which is due to mining with only a few trees along the coastal line. Its wealth has also plummeted, meaning it is now among the poorest countries, and, according to the New York Post, some locals believe the Gods were so angered by the environmental destruction of Nauru they curse locals to experience poverty and hardship for ever. ☒

REFERENCES:

- *Ocean Island and Nauru their story* by Albert Ellis
- *Paradise for Sale* by Carl McDaniel and John Gowdy
- *Nauru 1915 to 1923* by Keith Buckingham

ADVANTAGES OF CLUBS BEING CHAPTER MEMBERS OF THE ROYAL PHILATELIC SOCIETY OF CANADA

- Access to RPSC insurance plan
- Opportunity to order sales circuit books
- Chapter copy of *The Canadian Philatelist* (TCP)
- Access to network of certified exhibit judges
- Access to inventory of slide programmes
- Publication of club's meeting and contact details in *TCP*
- Networking opportunities with neighbouring chapters
- Link to RPSC website, with website development support
- Eligibility to hold a national exhibition and convention
- Access to all member services of our national office

AVANTAGES D'UN CLUB D'ÊTRE MEMBRE CHAPÎTRE DE LA SOCIÉTÉ ROYALE DE PHILATÉLIE DU CANADA

- Accès au régime d'assurance de La SRPC
- Possibilité de commander les carnets du circuit des ventes
- Un exemplaire du *Philatéliste canadien* (LPC)
- Accès à un réseau de juges d'exposition agréés
- Accès à un répertoire de programmes de diapositives
- Publication dans LPC des réunions des clubs et des coordonnées des personnes à contacter
- Possibilité de réseautage avec les sections régionales voisines
- Lien vers le site Web de La SRPC et aide au développement de site Web
- Admissibilité à la tenue de l'exposition-congrès national
- Accès à tous les services aux membres offerts par le Bureau national