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Beyond technology

JONATHAN SEAGAL (Saturday, February 02, 2008)

I've always tended to be more interested in the impact of technology on people rather than the actual technology itself.

In other words, the changes to our culture through inventions like the internet can be more fascinating than just the internet itself. Although we can make pretty accurate assumptions about what kinds of technology we'll have available to us in the future, it's much harder to determine how that technology will actually alter our future. When the internet first started grabbing hold, no one could have predicted the impact it would have on so many aspects of our lives. It seems as if it's only just beginning to.

Tribewanted has been in the news worldwide these past few weeks. For those unaware, it is an eco-tourism and sustainability project happening on the island of Vorovoro, just off Labasa's coast. The project is notable more for the way it has developed rather than where it has developed.

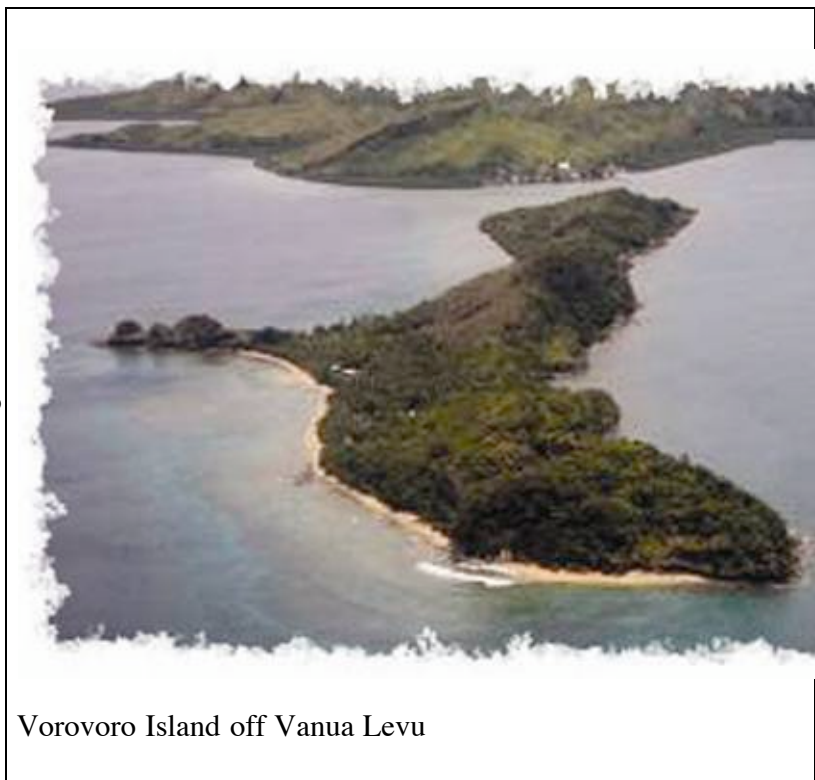
Unlike traditional tourism initiatives, Tribewanted has an online counterpart in www.tribewanted.com where virtual discussions guide the evolution and development of the project itself.

For Fiji, the residual attention Tribewanted is receiving from around the world is immeasurable.

That attention focuses entirely upon an unspoilt, beautiful part of the country and with a five-hour BBC documentary beginning last week, Fiji will be on the TV screens of millions of British households on a weekly basis.

To call Tribewanted a case study for tourism would be like calling kava a beverage. It runs much deeper than that. The community being built on Vorovoro is much more than just a place to travel to. It's a confluence of environmental sustainability, personal responsibility, travel, cultural immersion, exploration and collaboration. That's just on the off-line side, too. The online side of the project has its own growing culture. There, tribe members from around the world gather virtually to discuss and debate the issues facing the off-line development effort on Vorovoro as well as to vote on the direction in which development should go.

At least, that was the initial idea. One of the ongoing project challenges is a tighter integration between the off-line and online tribe, continually made difficult by the lack of a broadband internet service.



Vorovoro Island off Vanua Levu

What really differentiates Tribewanted from most other tourism initiatives is the way in which many of the tribe members work to positively impact things going on around them. That impact is not necessarily limited to just Vorovoro, either. Last month, one of the tribe members successfully negotiated an anti-litter campaign with the two biggest bus companies in Labasa. The transport companies agreed to print stickers to place on the backs of each seat asking their riders to "Bin It!" and not throw trash out the windows. The Labasa-based Parmod and Waiqele Bus companies also agreed to make rubbish bags available on the bus. Those businesses should be commended for this action, something that every bus company in the country could certainly copy. Back on the island and online, this "win" is highlighted, discussed and celebrated.

In November last year, the tribe published their first sustainability report on the project's impact on Vorovoro. In it, they list the weight of all the food and materials transported to the island as well as the weight of all the waste that leaves the island. Again, this information is made available online for discussion and analysis. By determining that 12 per cent of Tribewanted's waste ends up in a landfill, they can better plan for ways of reducing that amount next year.

Interestingly, last year's report included the fact that 22 per cent of the project's waste is recycled on-site and 66 per cent is recycled off-site. These are already very impressive figures against any tourism project. As the tribe grows and more people visit Vorovoro, how can they still maintain these percentages or better yet, improve upon them? With the heads and experience of over 1300 members, all with access to the website and a desire to see the project succeed, the answers are in there somewhere.

They've already built eco-friendly toilets, grown food and herbs with soil made from compost bins and constructed a grand bure. They're supplying themselves with power through wind turbines and they've made rainwater catchments. They've wired nearby Mali Primary School and created it's first library with donated books by tribe members visiting from around the world. On Fridays, tribe members guest-teach and have introduced the children of Mali to the importance of conservation.

This is clearly not a typical tourist stop.

In my own visit to Vorovoro last year, I remember a grog session with Tui Mali, the chief of the Yavusa tribe and landowner of Vorovoro. A wonderfully open man who seems genuinely pleased with the effort happening around him, Tui Mali spent years working on a ship laying the Southern Cross Cable in the Pacific. The irony that he was indirectly involved with the eventual establishment of internet services in Fiji shouldn't be lost on anyone. We had just completed the set up of a laptop and GPRS connection donated by Vodafone Fiji and had sent the first ever message using the internet from Vorovoro. Elated over the event, we all sat down with Tui Mali around the tanoa to announce the breakthrough. Tui Mali listened to the news with interest, sat up straight, nodded his head and said "That's great. What's next?" He couldn't have nailed the moment any better.

Vorovoro is a collection of activities all leading to "what's next". As a project, Fiji should be proud that it's happening on its shores because there's nothing else in the world like it and appropriately so, it's attracting attention. As a destination, it's one more place in the friendly north being developed. As a lifestyle, it is having an impact on the community well beyond just the island. As a socially-responsible initiative, it is something continually in a state of "what's next" flux, held back by nothing other than a person's inability to imagine where it's able to go.

This is the kind of stuff no one could have imagined when the internet was developed. It's what the world needs more of, too. Here's hoping Fiji can help set the standard for this innovative model and always be remembered as the place where it happened first.

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