

"Is All As It Seems in Paradise?" Small Island Youth Answer Back

MAURITIUS, AFRICA—White beaches, perfect weather, endless relaxation—these are some of the visions that come to mind when we think of Caribbean and Pacific islands. Life there, we imagine, resembles paradise.

But for many of the youth who call these small islands home, everything is not as it seems in paradise. Schools and hospitals need repair. Environmental pollution goes mainly unchecked. Foreigners arrive constantly, seeming to buy up the most scenic plots of land. Western cultures and the tourist industry squeeze local traditions. Amid breathtaking natural beauty, dire poverty persists.

Rather than sit back and watch their governments debate these issues, the teens involved in [Youth Visioning for Island Living](#), an interregional initiative supported by [UNESCO](#), are speaking up. With participants in over 35 small island nations around the world, Island Youth brings the concerns of small island teenagers—and their home pride—to the global stage.

Most recently, 96 members of Island Youth gathered for five days in Mauritius (an island 500 miles off the eastern coast of Madagascar) where they hammered out a cohesive plan of action. At one point, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan joined their deliberations.



Later, they presented their declaration, "Youth Visioning for Island Living," to world leaders at a concurrent U.N. conference.

Their recommendations were breathtaking in scope—a testimony both to the urgent needs of small island communities and to the strength of these young people's idealism. Whether the topic was HIV/AIDS education or protecting coastal beaches, small business loans or the social impact of unemployment, the youth called upon adult leaders to include them in their planning and decisions.

On December 26, 2004, just two weeks before the Mauritius conference, the Indonesian earthquake and tsunami had underscored for the whole world the acute vulnerability of small islands, just as terrorist bombs in Bali had demonstrated two years earlier the far reach of international unrest. Not surprisingly, the last recommendation in Island Youth's U.N. declaration calls for "providing youth with the skills and knowledge necessary to plan for and respond to the dangers posed to their societies by both natural disasters and modern security threats."

Back at home, these young people are working just as hard on specific projects tailored to their island's unique needs. The Barbados team, for example, is developing youth-led micro-enterprises, while in Kiribati another group creates plans and education outreach around waste sanitation. Grenada youth are reforesting their island in the wake of Hurricane Ivan, and Island Youth crew in Micronesia are breathing life back into their State Youth Congress.

Below we present excerpts from "Small Islands Voice," an online discussion where Island Youth debated issues during the year leading up to the Mauritius conference. We offer WKCD interviews with two Island Youth participants. And we have assembled an annotated directory of resources related to small island concerns and international youth understanding and action.



WKCD Interviews with Island Youth

WKCD conducted these interviews via email and phone conversations.

Janelle Iechad, Palau

My name is Janelle Iechad. I am 19 years old and I'm a sophomore at Palau Community College (PCC). Palau has a population of 20,000. About 60 percent of Palau's population is Palauan. The second biggest population is Filipino, and the third biggest population is Caucasian. Then we have a mixture of Southeast Asians and Middle Eastern people.

Every island is different, and Palau is no exception. We are the only place in the whole world that has a lake full of sting-less jellyfish. In addition, we are the only Pacific island culture that is matrilineal. Women are not only the homemakers and caretakers, they are the decision makers and voice of the people.

I am currently majoring in Liberal Arts and I work as a part-time English and Math tutor at the student service center. A regular day for me starts at about 6:00 a.m. I wake up and help get my little brother and sister ready for school. Then my mom drops us all off by 7:30. I work from 8:00 till noon, sometimes working through lunch. Then I attend classes from 1:00-5:00. After school, I usually go to the lab or library to study a bit or hang out with my cousins. Every Tuesday afternoon I have PCC Environmental Club meetings. I'm the president of the club. One of our big projects at the moment is helping plan Earth Day. We are also trying to implement a recycling program here at the school which we hope to kick off with an aluminum can drive on April 1, PCC's Charter Day.

Three of the biggest challenges to Palau are cultural preservation, sustainable development, and foreign labor. Culture is the root of our lives. It's what sets us apart from other people, and if we lose that, we lose who we were and are. [Meanwhile] foreign workers make up about 40 percent of our population. This is a major concern for natives because they are beginning to dominate the work force.

I got involved in Island Youth through the Dean of Students in my school. He suggested that I go because he said I always have something to say. This is the first time that I have been active like this, so it was a scary experience for me. I have to make sure that I can support what I say. In Palau, outspoken young adults are becoming a normal thing. Culturally though, we are not liked. Like most island cultures, there is a strong respect for elders. There is a way to be outspoken but with tact. Diplomacy and humility are necessary when speaking to others, especially adults. Young Palauans seem to forget that, from what I see.

Being part of the Island Youth meeting in Mauritius left a lasting mark on me. Because island nations are heavily dependent on their surrounding environment to provide a means of living and sustenance, because they have limited land and limited resources, they must balance development and conservation. If we work together on this, if we do not overly consume or develop, we can succeed, I believe. The conference gave me hope that island nations are not small and scattered about in the ocean, but well connected.

I was surprised by how diverse the participants were. I had no idea what to expect from people I met, and just learning about their histories was beyond words. This has also inspired me to begin more programs geared towards a stronger sense of culture. Going to the meeting made me see that culture is quickly dying out in our sister regions, and we need to make sure that our culture is strong, because it will make us strong. I'm starting with my family, spending more time with my siblings. In Palauan culture, the sisters always take care of their brothers. I want to make sure that I can take care of my brother when he needs me.



I'm also trying to get the recycling program together. The problem is not getting things started, but continuing things. It's very hard to find people who are willing to donate their time to help their country. Earth Day is coming up, and the theme is "Healthy Environment for Children." I'm trying to see if we can have the PCC Environmental Club present something on making healthy choices. I'm hoping to talk about abstinence, safe sex, and family planning.

A. Qadir Mahamoodally, Mauritius

My name is Qadir Mahamoodally. I am 22 years old and stay at Camp-Diable, which is found in the south of Mauritius. I completed my secondary education at Aleemaiah College, situated in Phoenix. In 2002, I joined Airports Of Mauritius Ltd. to work as an airport security officer.

My island, Mauritius, is a shining star in the Indian Ocean. Some call it paradise. Almost every culture that exists in the world, whether it is European, Western or Asian, can be found here. We don't live just like Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, but we live like a MAURITIAN family. That makes our island unique.

For many years, I've been interested in doing social work. I acted as a prefect and headboy at my college, and I've taken leadership courses at the Souillac Youth Centre. This has helped me to become more confident in life and has built leadership skills in me. Before that, I participated in small residential seminars organised by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and also by the National Agency for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Substance Abusers, known as NATRESA.

In my village, I formed a club call Rioters Sporting and Cultural Club. It has 26 members from the age of 16 to 25 and I am the executive director. Every year we organise different activities in our village and also for the surrounding region. Football [soccer] and cross country are the main sports and, for culture, we do elocution and debate. In this year's anniversary celebration, we are going to have a village treasure hunt for the children.

One of the biggest challenges facing my island is drugs. They are destroying our youngsters, and without our youngsters being healthy and hopeful, there can't be a bright future for our island. It begins with smoking, then drinking, then drugs, and soon this whole way of life, this bad way of life, starts to feel normal. We are poor. Drug trafficking puts money in the pocket and young people are easy targets.

I got the chance to participate in Island Youth through the Ministry of Youth and Sports. The January conference was my first international forum. The chance to bring the problems faced by my island to the attention of the world was one high point. Another was that our ideas were taken seriously by the adults. And the surprising thing is that we discovered how each and every small island throughout the world, no matter what ocean or sea it lies in, has more similarities than differences, especially when it comes to problems. We left the conference feeling responsible to one another.

Source: <http://www.whatkidscando.org/index.asp>