

Many Small Islands, One Big Voice

The fact that a conference with delegates from all over of the globe was held on a speck of land that doesn't even appear on many maps — the seven-square-mile Grenadine island of Bequia, population 6,000 — underscored the meeting's purpose: to continue an inter-regional initiative focusing on sustainable living on small islands. Continents need not apply!

The inter-regional conference, drawing together delegates from the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean, was hosted by St. Vincent & the Grenadines' UNESCO National Commission, through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, in collaboration with UNESCO's Coastal and Small Islands Platform, which is headquartered in Paris.

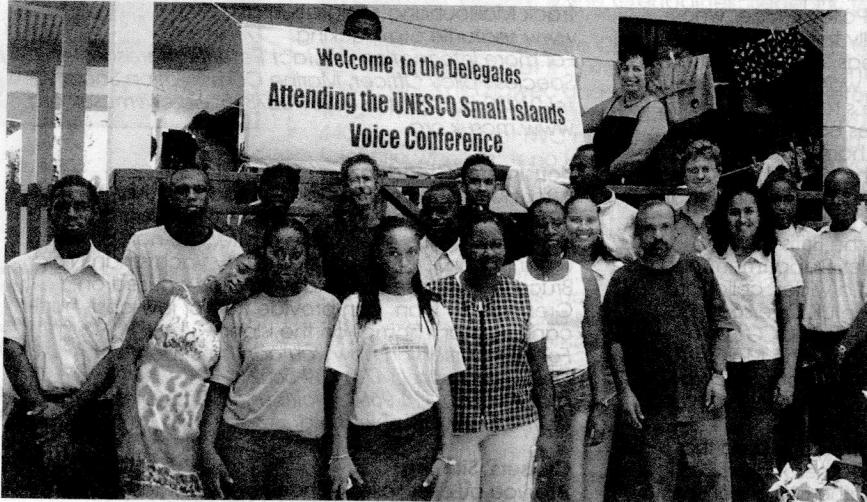
UNESCO is the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It works as a laboratory of ideas and a clearinghouse that shares information and knowledge among its 190 member states, while helping them build their human and institutional capacities in the fields of education, science, culture and communication. One of UNESCO's initiatives, which was foremost at the conference, is Small Islands Voice (SIV), which focuses on community-based sustainable development activities in small islands.

Opening Remarks

At the conference's opening ceremony, held at the Bequia Rotary Club's Skills Training Centre at Lower Bay, Hon. Clayton Burgin, SVG's Minister of Education and Chairman of the National Commission for UNESCO, emphasized the importance of education in small islands' development, and Hon. Dr. Douglas Slater, Minister of Health and the Environment highlighted the critical balance between development and protection of the environment. Slater admitted, "We are replete with ideas, but sometimes it is difficult to implement them."

Dr. Gillian Cambers, Small Islands Voice Global Coordinator, thanked Bequia for welcoming the meeting but asked, "Can I say that, despite all that's been

done, that Bequia is a shining example of sustainable development? I can't. When I sail in on the ferry, I see muddy water running off land cleared for cultivation and housing, I see some coastal erosion, I see littering with plastic bottles and cups. So I can't say with all my



Delegates from small islands in the Caribbean, Pacific and Indian Ocean gathered at De Reef Apartments after Hurricane Emily damaged the conference's original venue. Small islands' vulnerability to natural disaster was discussed

heart that Bequia is a model of sustainable development. But because of what I see happening now, I can say that it is a model for a better way of thinking, caring and planning for the future."

Education, implementation of ideas, and better ways of thinking and planning for the future of small islands, were to be main themes of the conference.

Common Concerns

Herman Belmar, SVG's National Coordinator of the SIV Youth Programme, has written, "Bequia, like most Caribbean territories, has problems with coastal management. It seems we have inherited our colonial masters' mentality where our beaches are concerned — strip them bare, take their wealth, absorb their productivity, then leave them empty and useless. While we play on our golden sands and share our island's beauty with the tourists we welcome, while we play cricket and soccer in the surf and watch our picnic fires burn, we do not see the changing contours of the beach line; we do not note the slow march inland. We hop over the piles of litter and flotsam. We take little notice of the species vanishing from the reefs, or the dying coral, until they are long gone."

"This may be so because priorities in the minds of the government and people of small-island developing states are economic advancement and technological development. While we would all agree that these are of paramount importance, we should also agree that along with these developments should be placed measures to preserve our precious few resources. We are virtually coastal inhabitants from one end of our seven square miles to the other; therefore, protection and preservation of this environment should be a privilege. Our people, our land, our waters and our marine environment should be next to our heart."

At the July 11 to 16 conference, officially named "Mauritius Strategy Implementation: Small Island Voice Planning Meeting", it was noted that the development-related issues faced by Bequia were shared by many other small islands. Delegates from 13 small islands or archipelagos involved in SIV — the Bahamas,...

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...Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica, Fiji, the Maldives, Mauritius, Palau, San Andres, Seychelles, St. Kitts & Nevis, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, and Zanzibar — shared methods of tackling common concerns, including health, culture and technology, as well as environment.

United We Stand...

As UNESCO's Chief of Coasts and Small Islands Platform, Dirk Troost, noted in Bequia, "Global governance needs to disproportionately take into consideration small islands' concerns — but to be heard, small islands' voices must be loud, coherent and clear."

In 1994, the UN Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States was held in Barbados. That meeting resulted in recommended actions and policies to be implemented over the short, medium and long terms. Just over ten years later, a follow-up meeting was held in Mauritius, which was attended by nearly 2,000 people interested in the future of small islands, including 18 heads of state or their deputies. Out of this meeting came the Mauritius Declaration and Strategy, which reaffirmed the Barbados conference's blueprint for sustainable development in the world's small island developing states, and elaborated on actions dealing with themes such as sea-level rise, natural disasters, management of waste, coastal and marine resources, tourism, and education for sustainable development, among others.

The Bequia meeting was designed for inter-regional delegates to exchange information about ongoing Small Islands Voice activities, such as the Sandwatch beach monitoring project; discuss exchanges with related UNESCO programs and projects, and those of other organizations; and plan SIV work for the future within the framework of the Mauritius Strategy for Sustainable Development of Small Island States.

Forging Connections

During the week-long conference, each delegate reported on SIV activities within their island or archipelago, and then discussions were held on plans for future actions. The idea of an exchange of visits between high-school students from different islands, and the development of subsequent cooperative projects (such as the Seychelles-Maldives students' waste-management project), was well received. The example of adult exchange visits, such as those between San Andres and Cuba to build beach-monitoring capacity,

was also an inspiration. Elizabeth Taylor from San Andres, a group of islands off the Nicaraguan coast belonging to Colombia, noted that "Aside from learning about better beach monitoring tools, trips such as this are an opportunity for international exposure, friendships, and experiencing life under other types of government. And by developing our own capacity, we gain the opportunity to 'export' expertise to other countries."

During the conference, field trips were also taken, to Bequia's Old Hegg Turtle Sanctuary, where endangered sea turtles are raised and released; and to the windward coast of St. Vincent where sand mining has



On a field trip to St. Vincent, SIV National Coordinator Herman Belmar, center, describes to delegates the damaging effects of sand mining on the island's coast

contributed to devastating coastal erosion. The major disappointment of the conference was that a much-anticipated trip by local sailing schooner to the Tobago Cays on July 13 had to be canceled due to the approach of Tropical Storm Emily. Delegates had looked forward to seeing this beauty spot and discussing with stakeholders the various forms of management proposed for the Tobago Cays Marine Park. Emily added "injury to insult" when later that night part of the roof of the Rotary Centre, where the meetings had been taking place, blew off! The conference participants quickly shifted gears and rearranged the

furniture in the Fiji delegate's spacious livingroom and terrace at De Reef Apartments to accommodate the remainder of the meetings.

Delegates agreed that while the Small Islands Voice global internet forum (www.sivglobal.org) was an excellent vehicle for the exchange of information and ideas, this week's face-to-face experience generated an impressive amount of enthusiasm to strengthen existing programs and launch new ones. Joeli Veitayaki, a professor at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, asked, "This is the first time I've been with representatives of small island developing states from all oceans — WHAT SHALL WE DO?"

He answered himself by saying, "This conference has given me new knowledge about what we, the people, can do to promote sustainable living on our islands. I will go back to the South Pacific and challenge my students to take up some of the activities I've learned about this week."

Vernessa Hilton, an elementary school teacher from Dominica, was excited about SIV's Sandwatch, an inter-disciplinary program ranging from biology to math, which involves students in the wise management of their beaches. "I will take home an expanded view of what Sandwatch is and can do in my community," she said.

Gaynor Kydd and Joanna Stowe, both secondary school teachers from Bequia, agreed, "It was educational — we learned that we have so much in common with people from other small island developing states, and we can all help one another by sharing solutions. The conference gave us the motivation to spread the concept of SIV to the whole island. We also enjoyed making new friendships, and we look forward to maintaining them and getting together with more people from other small islands."

Fatimah Ghina, a Maldivian working at the Paris UNESCO headquarters summed it up: "What I will take away from this conference is inspiration and motivation. To meet and hear what others are doing in Small Island Voice makes you realize that you don't need thousands of Euros or huge resources to do important things."

For more information on UNESCO visit www.unesco.org; for more information on Small Islands Voice, visit www.smallislandsvoice.org.