Kiribati Fisheries Blog

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Kiribati – Introduction

Through a Global Challenges collaboration between my supervisor, Dr Lucas Ihlein and ANCORS Senior Fellow Quentin Hanich, I had the privilege of going on a field trip to Kiribati recently. This was a scoping trip for me, exploring the possibilities for a collaborative project with ANCORS (*Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security*, University of Wollongong) and how it ties in with my PhD practice and research.

In Kiribati I worked with Dr Aurelie Delisle, also from ANCORS. Dr Delisle, along with Brooke Campbell and Dr Hanich, do extensive fisheries management work in the Pacific Islands. Their Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) program in Kiribati has been developed and implemented in some of the Outer Islands of Kiribati since 2014.

While preparing for the trip, I was also asked to shoot video footage for the CBFM Program. Consequently, for a few days in the course of my stay in Kiribati I accompanied Dr Delisle and local CBFM staff (Tarateiti and Ben) and volunteers (Rutiana and Kiriua) to Buariki and Tabonibara in the Outer Islands of North Tarawa. The footage I took will contribute to a DVD which will demonstrate the benefits of CBFM to other communities in the Outer Islands through the stories of those who are already using it.

The visit to the Outer Islands also opened up an opportunity for further collaborative work with ANCORS. Plastic waste is an issue which the women in those communities are keen to do something about. This ties in with the CBFM program, which is about sustainable local fisheries self-management. I realised that there is scope to work with women in the Outer Islands to find ways of re-purposing plastic waste.

In Kiribati I had the good fortune to meet many wonderful people and experience first-hand the ways of life in this amazing place which so few of us know about. While it may be economically poor by Australian standards, the community has a social richness that is enviable. I went there with a preconception that Kiribati was a victim of global climate change, but what I learnt by being there is that

people are resilient and proud of their country. Many I-Kiribati are working to improve conditions there and ensure a future for the people of Kiribati on their own soil.

What follows in this blog is a series of diary entries which document my time there. It is a day to day narrative which I hope will give the reader some sense of Kiribati from the perspective of a short-term visitor from another culture. Aurelie and Brooke provided valuable fact-checking and misconception-busting services for which I'm grateful. Thanks to Lucas and Quentin for helping this project come into being and to grow through their ongoing involvement and input.

Any questions or comments are welcome.

23/11/2016 - Water and Earth

Today I am travelling from a large land mass (Australia), to a small landmass (Fiji), to an even smaller landmass (Kiribati). In Australia I have a sense of solid ground; the heft of ancient rock is a bulwark from which I view the ocean. It is a place where I can lightly step into the sea and savour the privilege of living by the coast. At present I am on the middle landmass, Fiji, which looks very small on a map and is dwarfed by the Pacific Ocean but has the comfort of seeming quite large when you are standing on the ground, with mountains in the background of the airport. Higher ground to run to if needed. I am yet to reach Kiribati, but from the images I've seen and the stories I've heard, the land is in a very tenuous relationship with the ocean.

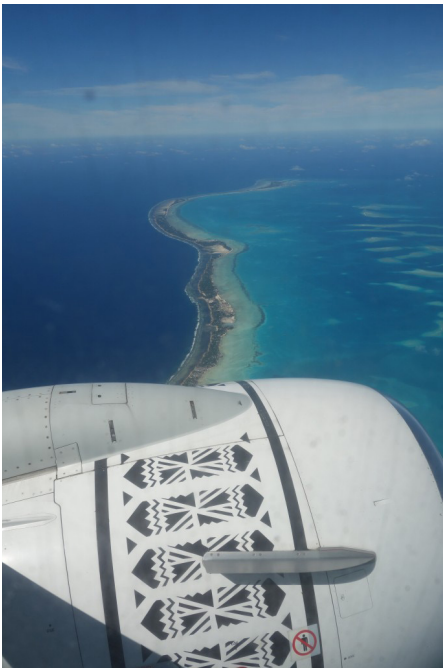
Wollongong, where I live, has a particular topography whereby the low-lying tracts of land near the sea make a fairly sudden upwards curve to the escarpment – a bit like the shape of a wave, in a craggy sort of way. A friend used to say that Wollongong would one day be swamped by a tsunami. I thought that the idea was preposterous. Presumably it's not entirely impossible, but in my ignorance I think it unlikely. I feel safe on the old continent, a vast land mass with a relatively stable geological structure which in my lifetime has been troubled by only one major earthquake. Sea level rise will nibble at Australia's edges, but most likely the damage will be slow and continuously fought against as sea walls and other barriers and fortifications become more widespread. Fiji is an unknown quantity, but it is quite mountainous, so I wouldn't have the perennial fear of water rushing into my hotel from a large wave.

Tomorrow morning I fly from Fiji to Kiribati, where there will be an entirely different set of circumstances. I will be interested to hear what people think about waves and rising water.

24/11/2016 – Touchdown

It turns out that Kiribati (the Gilbert Islands group, that is) is not as far west as I thought. It's north and slightly west of Fiji, pretty much on the equator. The Republic of Kiribati is made up of the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands, spread over a huge ocean territory. Flying from the south towards Tarawa, Kiribati's capital island (situated in the Gilbert group) you see a number of coral atolls before Tarawa. The whole group of islands looks astonishing from the air, thin bands or curves or even rings of land surrounding internal lagoons. At this point it struck me that these islands are probably the tops of volcanos, active millions of years ago. Tarawa has by far the greatest chunk of the Kiribati population, but from the air even Tarawa looks deserted. All that I could see were coral reefs, barely prominent filaments of vegetated land surrounded by sand flats, channels between the islands in the Tarawa group and the most stunning array of blues, from turquoise to rich ultramarine.

The plane flew north of the airport and slowly banked around to land. As the runway is short, the pilot had to brake very quickly and fully as soon as the wheels touched the tarmac. Getting out of the plane was like walking into an oven. Bonriki Airport is a small drab terminal, crowded with people stepping over each other to greet and to retrieve



Flying over South Tarawa on the approach to Kiribati

Keeping the sun off, Bonriki airport

Sea and land, Tarawa

baggage. San from Fema Lodge was there to pick me up in the Fema minibus. As we drove the half hour or so to the lodge, I had my first glimpses of this place. What I saw from the air – the sense that these islands are deserted – couldn't have been more wrong. South Tarawa is a bustling, crowded urban strip. After arriving at Fema, I put my bags in my small room and didn't quite know what to do. The rooms are very basic by Australian standards, but there is aircon. My environmental ethics have gone straight out the window, along with the hot air.

Eventually I went down to the restaurant for lunch, chancing chicken with vegetables and rice. Aurelie had assured me that the food was safe to eat here, so I went hesitantly with this advice. Afterwards I went for a walk in the heat of the day, which was quite overwhelming along with the noise and dust and speeding cars (despite the huge 40km an hour speed limit signs and the speed humps). Japan donates a lot of used cars – Toyotas and Subarus – so it looks at first glance surprisingly affluent until you see that many of the cars and vans are dented and in poor repair. There are quite a lot of cheap Chinese motorbikes. A lot of people use public transport, dented minivans which frequently pass by playing loud music.

25/11/2016 – Settling in

Here I am, day two. I just paid $20 for 24 usable hours' worth of internet access, so I'll share that with Aurelie. It's pretty challenging for me here. Fema Lodge is fine though, aside from the large population of rats living in the wall cavities and ceilings and generally creating a din day and night. The staff are lovely and so far I've had curried chicken and omelette and corn flakes with UHT milk and I'm fine). Bottled and filtered water are the only safe options here in Kiribati and I'm drinking heaps of water as it is so relentlessly hot. The airconditioning in our rooms is the only respite from the heat. Aurelie and I have the top floor of Fema to ourselves at present. It's basic but upmarket by Kiribati standards. There's even an elderly security guard (no weapons, just a sleepy old dog named Watchman) at the front who just sits there all day looking out at the lagoon.

I moved rooms this morning after a night of fairly good sleep interspersed with scratching the small bugs that were walking across my skin. The staff were very apologetic. So now instead of a double bed in a small room I'm in a bigger room with two single beds, which is much better as there's more room to move. It could be tempting to stay in this room for the entire sixteen days and remain cool, only appearing for meals, but of course that can't happen.

I've had a couple of not very long walks along the main road, here, which runs alongside the 'lagoon', a huge shallowish body of water that is cradled by the "V" shaped ribbon of land that is North and South Tarawa. Until recently the main road was a treacherous, potholed dirt strip that took forever to drive the 30 km or so from one end of South Tarawa to

the other. Last year a world-class road was made in place of the potholed track, largely with Australian aid money. It has been a boon for everyone and has of course encouraged faster driving, despite the large speed limit signs and the children and dogs constantly crossing the road.

Fema Lodge, Banreaba, South Tarawa

Dr Aurelie Delisle, Research Fellow in the Fisheries Governance Programme (ANCORS, University of Wollongong). Aurelie manages the Kiribati CBFM program and enjoys sipping on fresh coconut juice

The lagoon would be the obvious place to cool off. It looks so inviting for swimming but it's used as a latrine. There is very little sanitation here, and hardly any vacant land, so the conventional way to do your business is to walk into the water. As the population grows there's increasing recognition that this is unsustainable. Here and in the villages of the Outer Islands there are programs educating people about sanitation and measures are being taken to address the problem. There's a lot of poverty, a lot of shanties, a lot of skinny dogs wandering around, pigs, chooks, noise, overcrowding. It reminds me of the urban parts of Laos.

There are many different aid projects from many different countries, with a lot of the input coming from Australian and New Zealand. There are two NZ police staying here who have been back and forth many times over the past few years, trying to train and establish a police force here. I was speaking to one of them yesterday who said that domestic violence and child sexual assault are really common, fuelled by alcohol abuse. Sigh. These are such universal issues.

There's hardly any drinking water (aside from imported bottled and filtered water) because of the prolonged drought. People have wells in the ground to get water, but by now it must be really grotty and saline. Walking in the area near Fema, it looks pretty abject. There's a big church influence – Catholic, Mormon, Seventh Day Adventist, Protestant, Uniting, Jehovahs, you name it. The church buildings are the most solid intact structures in this place, as is the University of the South Pacific campus just down the road.

So far I've done very little, as Aurelie has been busy with meetings, but she'll

Smoked fish stall on the main road, South Tarawa

return at lunchtime and take me out to see some sights. There are 55,000 people, half of the entire population of Kiribati, living in South Tarawa alone. South Tarawa is 30km long and if you averaged it out, perhaps 300 metres wide. Betio, the island at the western end of the chain of islands that forms South Tarawa, apparently has a population density greater than Manhattan. South Tarawa is the urban part of Kiribati. North Tarawa is known as the Outer Islands, where the villages are more isolated and much smaller.

Map of Tarawa, Kiribati's capital island in the Gilbert Islands group. South Tarawa is the urban district, while North Tarawa has more traditional villages and is sparsely populated. The map also indicates the lagoon.

It's amazing that there is any settlement here at all. The land is unbelievably narrow when you see it from the air – seemingly a stone's throw between the lagoon on one side and the ocean on the other. The sea and lagoon meet in many places, forming islands in the chain of land. Out to sea you see large fishing vessels from many different countries

who pay for fishing rights, mainly for tuna. These licences are a major source of revenue for the Government of Kiribati. Of course the most striking thing about Kiribati is the topography – the land is barely above sea level and dead flat. This is what is making Kiribati so vulnerable to sea level rise through climate change.

After Aurelie returned we headed off to the Coastal Fisheries Division, where the Community Based Fisheries Management program has its offices. While Aurelie was briefing some of the staff, I met Erietera, a young man who is quite inspiring in his determination to make Kiribati a better place. He is one of the founding members of the Kiribati Islands Conservation Society, along with Ben. He told me that his epiphany was reading the book 'A Pattern of Islands' by Arthur Grimble. Tera showed me the aquaculture ponds at the back of the offices, where they are breeding 'sandfish', a type of sea cucumber, which is apparently very appealing to Chinese tastebuds.

We went for a walk to the ocean, through a ramshackle village with a great deal of rubbish, much like everywhere else I've seen so far. I say 'mauri' (hello) to everyone and most people respond in a friendly manner. We hitched up our shorts and crossed a lagoon to get closer to the ocean, where Tera told me about his life and his hopes for the future. He is an excellent communicator, so I can see how he is valued in the CBFM program.

Aurelie has been very busy organising our trip to the outer islands. This takes quite a bit of doing, as equipment and people can be unreliable. She has a huge job on her hands, but the CBFM program has been adopted in certain villages and now she is consolidating this and the team are trying to spread the word about the value of the program throughout the islands. There is a mind-numbing array of acronyms in this Fisheries world – I get very confused about who is what and who does what and has which relationship with whom.

Fishing boat in the lagoon

Urban shack

Erietera wading across lagoon

One of the many denominations of churches in Kiribati. Half the population is Catholic

Well and bucket

Erietera in the sea cucumber hatchery at Fisheries, Tanaea

Friday evening 25/11/2016 – A Christmas party

We went to the Australian High Commission Christmas party in Bairiki. There were lots of people there, mainly Australians though not exclusively. It was held under a marquee on the tennis court. So far it's the only place I've seen that has a swimming pool for staff use. The place is right on the water, though it's not hard to be right on the water here. Some of the housing in Kiribati – which appears very makeshift but is no doubt built with the best resources available – is only a couple of metres from the water. There are houses made out of all sorts of materials, but the traditional houses (buia) are made from local materials. They don't have walls or windows, just a platform raised from the ground with a roof that is made from leaf thatching. This type of structure is very similar in many Pacific islands and allows for the circulation of air, and includes a sophisticated system of weaved thatched panels to protect against the elements when needed.

People are living cheek by jowl in South Tarawa. The land, bounded by lagoon on one side and ocean on the other, is barely 50 metres wide in places, but people are living everywhere. You see people fast asleep under their shelters only a couple of metres from the major road. Aurelie told me that the houses are situated where the owners traditionally own that piece of land. Here and there are fences, but mostly dwellings are dotted everywhere amongst the trees. Thin dogs roam in packs, while chooks, cats and rats circulate around the settlements. Pigs are tethered by the hind leg with a short rope – they are valuable meat for first birthday feasts.

People make their living in a number of ways – some by fishing, some by running businesses and shops, some by working in the service industry, some in public works, some in the schools and health, some in government departments and some, particularly in the outer islands, by producing copra. Unemployment is high though many people, especially in the Outer Islands, still lead a subsistence lifestyle. Fishing is a highly visible activity. In South Tarawa, local fishers bring in their catch and sell it on the street side. I'm terrified of eating most fish as I'm not yet accustomed to the provenance of each species. The only thing I know is that the tuna is caught further out to sea and therefore safe to eat (as long as it's not been baking in the sun for hours). There is the risk of ciguatera, a microalgae present in some reef fish which causes severe gastric illness. Ciguatera is not exclusive to Kiribati – here is an explainer from Wikipedia:

"Due to the limited habitats of ciguatoxin-producing microorganisms, ciguatera is common only in subtropical and tropical waters, particularly the Pacific and Caribbean, and usually is associated with fish caught in tropical reef waters. Exportation of reef fish, as well as tourism, often account for cases that develop in other regions. Ciguatoxin is found in over 400 species of reef fish. Avoiding consumption of all reef fish is the only sure way to avoid exposure. Imported fish served in restaurants may contain the toxin and produce illness which often goes unexplained by physicians unfamiliar with the symptoms of a tropical toxin. Ciguatoxin can also occur in farm-raised salmon. Furthermore, species substitution, labeling a reef fish as a non-reef fish at restaurants and retail, can complicate efforts by consumers to avoid ciguatera." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciguatera>

A traditional Kiribati house (buia)

Many fish are caught in the lagoon, which is polluted with sewerage. Nevertheless children and young people swim and play freely in the lagoon. It has calm water and a sandy bottom and is much more accessible than the ocean side of the islands, which have fringing reefs and a surf break at the edge of the reefs.

Back to the Christmas party. Aurelie and I sat with an Australian prosthetist, volunteering at the hospital. His name was AJ and he said that the equipment available was surprisingly good, so he feels like he is really helping people. There are many amputations here due to a very high rate of diabetes. AJ spends his spare time surfing in the small waves on the ocean side. Apparently there is even a surfing association here, with four members. The other fellow was a Fijian pilot, who is clocking up his flying hours here in Kiribati, hoping to one day become a commercial pilot for an airline like Etihad. It's a social challenge, being thrown together with people from all walks of life and having to make conversation for hours, but there are many people here, paid and unpaid, doing interesting and impressive things. There are lots of volunteers offering their skills to the community, sometimes for weeks, months, even years.

Prices that pack bunches

Street fish seller

Kiribati 26/11/2016 – Sightseeing and a fancy dinner

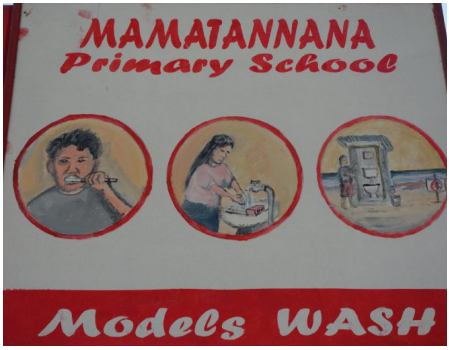
Being the weekend, it was an opportunity for Aurelie to take me out to see the sights in a borrowed car. We headed west along the South Tarawa road in the same direction as the High Commission, and across the long causeway (about to be rebuilt by the Japanese) which joins Bairiki with the district of Betio, the last island in the chain. The causeway looks like it may contribute to the lagoon's pollution problems, as it blocks the flow through from the ocean on the south side, which could give the lagoon much-needed flushing. The major reason though is the population pressure – 55,000 people living on a thin blade of land. Three ocean outfall sewerage pipes have been installed, but apparently the infrastructure leading to the outfall pipes is poorly maintained.

Bairiki has a town square, a department store (Kiribati-style) and a telco and bank and many other businesses. It is so jarring when you realise that this impossible chain of islands, which look deserted from the air, is a bustling mass of people who like anywhere else, have imposed structures and systems, however haphazard. Families are generally big and life expectancy is short by Western standards. People are beginning to talk about family planning here.

We bought a few supplies for the trip to the outer islands and then cruised through the 'hood of Betio. Crowded shacks are interspersed with better houses like other villages, just more densely. We then drove back east along the road through South Tarawa to have lunch at a pleasant place called Tebon te Kee Kee Eco resort in North Tarawa. This involved driving as far as we could, then catching a motorized outrigger canoe across the channel from one island to the next.

It is a very outdoor-style resort, the accommodation being the traditional open huts (buia), including one perched on stilts out on the water. We drank coconut juice from the shell, then I walked out along the rickety footbridge to the buia on the water, where I accidentally dropped my camera case in the lagoon. The wind was blowing offshore, so I helplessly watched my floating case drift out to sea. I gathered my wits (the case had the USB lead in it, so it was worth rescuing) and spoke to the young woman running the kitchen. She calmly walked off to another hut, fetched a young boy of about ten who climbed into the water and walked then swam out to retrieve the case. After consulting with Aurelie on protocol, I gave him $1.50 for his effort. Normally I would happily do a water rescue myself, but wasn't prepared to swim in the lagoon after hearing the health warnings.

After lunch, I went for a walk in search of a swim at Broken Bridge, with the advice



School sign

of the staff. I walked the length of the island, through a more traditional village with a good well (and the ubiquitous rubbish, though more contained). At the end of the island I managed a very quick dip in the warm waters of the channel between this island and the next. Modesty is the order of the day – women must cover their bodies when swimming in the company of men.

The garbage in Kiribati is confronting. It's everywhere. There are a couple of landfill sites more recently put in place and one of them is right on the lagoon at the Nanikai causeway. Apparently the garbage situation isn't as bad as it used to be because people can put rubbish in green plastic bags, which are collected regularly. Nevertheless, it's all-pervasive. Plastic packaging is dotted or piled wherever you go, the legacy of packaged imported food. It's all over the beaches and shore and you see it drifting in the water. The amount of rubbish generated here is of course a fraction of what we produce in Australia; it's just that in Australia the rubbish is more easily disposed of and hidden away in landfill.

We had to return to Fema Lodge in good time to prepare for dinner at the Australian High Commissioner's house in Bairiki. This was a very pleasant occasion with about 12 guests and great food. Six of the guests were volunteers from Interplast, an organisation which does voluntary plastic surgery in developing countries. A surgeon, two anaesthetists, a couple of nurses and an educator made up this year's cohort. Interplast comes to Kiribati every 12 to 18 months.

There was an intensive care doctor there as well, who said that sadly many of the people who are brought to him die because they come too late. Life expectancy is something like 58 for men and 62 for women. There was also a yachtsman – he sails yachts for their owners all over the world – who has come to help a friend who builds boats and who has a charitable business growing clams. He establishes the baby clams, then gives them to villages in the outer islands who grow them. The fellow then buys them back to sell on the popular international aquarium market. This way he has a viable business and the villages get their cut of the take.

The Betio causeway

The Bairiki Supermall

Airy accommodation at Tebon te Kee Kee

Urban Scene

A lovely dinner with the Australian High Commissioner

Young hero swims to rescue my camera case

Video still – ubiquitous plastic rubbish

27/11/2016 – Preparations for the Outer Islands

Today was an 'at home' day, preparing for our trip to Buariki. We're leaving in the wee hours of Monday morning, so we have to be on the ball. Aurelie has put all of the preparations in place, but she is only too aware that any of these arrangements could fall apart and throw the whole trip into chaos. There is a bus, a boat, a boat driver, fuel and several other people involved, so it could all come unstuck. I've been warned to expect delays and when we reach the village, to expect a complete lack of privacy, local food which we are obliged to eat, and sweltering heat with no respite. Fun! Meantime I've hit on an idea and asked some of the staff here at Fema if I could interview them on video, with them talking about their lives, fishing and their ideas about climate change.

Tarateiti Uriam, Fisheries employee, makes last minute arrangements for the Outer Islands trip

28/11/2016 – Journey to the Outer Islands

We got up at 4.30am, just at the time when sleep is most precious, in order to be ready for our minibus pickup at 5am to meet the boat at 6am in Tanaea. Aurelie's carefully laid plans came unstuck at the very outset when the bus driver failed to arrive. We gave up waiting after an hour or so and instead piled our large volume of gear on to a public bus. We met the others – Tarateiti, Rutiana, Kiriua and Ben – at Fisheries and all grumbled about the unreliable driver and the fact that we could all still be in bed asleep. The tide had gone out too far, so we had to wait until the afternoon high tide for the boat to be able to navigate through the shallow waters of the lagoon.

A few of us decided to have a swim to pass the time, so we floated around chatting (I carefully kept my head out of the water), then washed ourselves clean at the well. We walked to the airport for breakfast at the Kiribati version of Starbuck's – an outdoor café which prepared local food which was quite delicious. On our way past the runway a large plane came in to land. It was very impressive, watching the giant metal bird wobble in to hit the tarmac and then immediately slam on the brakes to cope with the short runway. Returning to Fisheries, we waited for high tide. Our boatman, a reliable fellow, arrived around 2pm and after loading up we headed off in to the lagoon, towards the top end of North Tarawa, a journey of maybe one and a half hours. It was really pleasant being out on the open water with the wind on our skin.

Arriving at Buariki, it was immediately obvious that life here is much more traditional than in the urban districts of South Tarawa. The buildings are mostly made of local materials such as coconut wood for structural timbers and pandanus leaves for thatching.

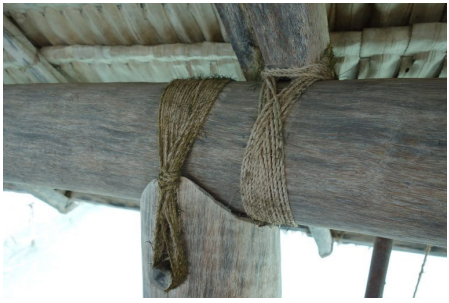
We made our way to the maneaba, where we would be conducting our business and sleeping. All of the maneabas I've seen so far have raised concrete floors and this one was no exception. It was quite a magnificent piece of construction, with the very long timbers joined by nothing other than twine made from coconut husk.

A maneaba is the traditional meeting hut and is usually the largest and most prominent building in a village. It is treated with great respect and watched over by village members.We piled our gear into the maneaba and were served lunch on mats on the floor, including a fresh young coconut each to drink and eat. This is a delicious and healthy thirst quencher. Much of the food, besides fish, is quite starchy – rice, bread, breadfruit, noodles, and the odd tin of Spam. Our hosts made us feel very welcome and made sure we had plenty to eat.

To my eyes there are many issues in this country, not the least being sanitation and lack of clean water. Like everywhere else, Buariki is not spared from the scourge of rubbish. There is so much plastic detritus everywhere, including on the shore, that it's alarming to imagine how much of it gets into the marine food chain. There is no rubbish collection service in the Outer Islands, so all rubbish including plastics go on the ground and in the water. It's a vicious circle: plastic is cheap to produce and keeps food fresh.

Fisherman at low tide, Buariki

Traditional house (buia) in Buariki



Joinery with coconut string

The CBFM team (with me as photographer) leaving for the Outer Islands

Most of this plastic-packaged food imported into Kiribati is calorie-rich and nutrition-poor and is surely exacerbating the huge rate of diabetes here. Local foods are coconuts, bananas, taro, breadfruit and fish (ciguatera in reef fish being the main health risk). There are also a few places that grow cabbages and cherry tomatoes.

I went for a short stroll before dark to the northern beach around the point at Buariki. In front of me on the dirt path was a newborn kitten, vainly crawling by millimetres to some destination of survival. It was heartbreaking to watch. I immediately wanted to rescue the kitten, but knew that it would not survive the night and would have only the most marginal existence anyway. Cats and dogs aren't given the status here that we give them in Australia as household pets.

Our formal meeting with the village executive committee began very late in the evening, somewhere between 8 and 9pm. I had no idea what was going on before the meeting. People from the committee would arrive and sit down in what seemed like specific places. As guests, we sat opposite. We would wait for endless amounts of time and then someone else would turn up and sit down. Eventually the head person (the chairman?) stood and delivered a formal greeting. Ben responded formally. There are distinct protocols of which I could only guess about. After the speeches, the women and men broke into separate groups, with Tarateiti facilitating the women's meeting and Ben the men's. Rutiana and Kiriua assisted by taking notes and drawing up the plans of action generated by the meetings. I had been given permission to film the proceedings, so I did my best in the dim evening light.

After what seemed like an eternity, the meetings closed and we prepared for bed on the floor of the maneaba. Aurelie and I set up our inflatable camping mats and mosquito nets, while our colleagues slept on woven mats with a mosquito coil. I was impressed with their ability to sleep soundly on a concrete floor. We had asked that the generator which was powering the fluorescent lights in the maneaba be switched off for the night, but somehow that request wasn't acted upon, so we attempted to sleep under the bright lights and loud chugging of the nearby generator. At 3.41am (according to Aurelie, who clearly had trouble sleeping too), the generator mercifully ran out of fuel and sputtered to a stop, taking the lights out with it. Bliss! It rained during the night, making the air feel a bit less oppressive.

Drying goatfish

Lunch in the maneaba

Traditional maneaba (meeting hut), Buariki

Grandmothers in the maneaba

Camera-shy kids

29/11/2016 – Buariki

This morning Rutiana, Kiriua and I went for a walk up to the beach I had visited last night at dusk. There was the kitten, dead and already beginning to decay in the sun. I had to take a deep breath and keep walking. The tide was receding, but the water looked inviting so Rutiana and I cooled off in the shallows before returning to the maneaba.

Children, Tabonibara

After breakfast I followed three men who were heading out to sea at low tide with a fishing net. I asked if I could follow them out and film them fishing. They consented, so I marched out towards the water, keeping behind them. It was probably a kilometre before we reached the water. This low tide point is where their family fish traps are set up. The traps are actually old lumps of coral placed in elegant lines in a design which will trap the fish inside the low rock walls as the tide recedes. They had gone out there to rebuild the walls where the rocks had collapsed with the tidal movements, so I filmed them doing that then headed back on the long march to shore. It was very hot, but I didn't have time for a swim as I was going to film some interviews.

Ready to cook

There seem to be clearly gendered divisions of much of the labour. The men do the fishing, while the women do the gleaning for shellfish and the preparation and cooking of the fish.

I was able to film interviews with two of the men and Ben. After we had packed up, we were picked up by truck in the afternoon and taken to Tabonibara, which took perhaps one and a half hours with a couple of stops. There was a mixup in communication – they were only expecting three people instead of six of us to arrive, so there was some embarrassment but it all eventually

Cleaning the fresh catch, Buariki

resolved and we settled in. Food arrived and we sat on the floor in our place while the chairman of the village executive committee and some of the councillors sat opposite and quietly waited while we ate. After the plates and food were cleared to the other side of the maneaba there were speeches and introductions. The plan was to meet the following morning for an 8am breakfast then a CBFM meeting. We girls went for a swim in a bay on the ocean side of the island. In the Tabonibara maneaba, the fluorescents lights and generator were not so invasive, in fact they were eventually switched off, but one of the villagers staying in the maneaba played loud music most of the night. It was hard to sleep. I woke in the middle of the night to hear Dolly Parton's "Wings of a Dove".

Repairing the family fish trap at low tide, Buariki

Fish trap repairs in progress

30/11/2016 – Tabonibara

Aurelie, Rutiana and I went for a walk at about 7am. We were idly strolling along the dirt path that cleaves the island when I remembered that perhaps there was some fishing going on that I could be filming. We changed course and headed to the lagoon beach, where three young men were walking out at low tide to cast their nets. We followed them, wading out to sea through the shallow water for several hundred metres in pursuit. It was a bit disappointing, as I couldn't get close enough to get footage of them scaring the fish and casting the net – they went too far out for me to close in with my video camera. By the time we got back, it was late and breakfast was ready. Tarateiti and Kiriua were at a meeting, so we ate and the scheduled CBFM meeting was put back a while.

Group photo, Tabonibara

CBFM men's meeting in the maneaba, Tabonibara, facilitated by Ben and scribed by Rutiana

Eventually everyone gathered for the meeting. There were perhaps ten women and twelve men. Tarateiti facilitated the women's meeting, helped by Kiriua, while Ben facilitated the men's meeting helped by Rutiana. I first set the children up with some good quality art paper and a big set of coloured Sharpies to draw with and then wandered around filming. Once again, it was difficult filming in the maneaba, as the light is quite dim under the low eaves, while the daylight outside is intense and creates high contrasting background light, throwing the subject into silhouette.

At one point I sat with the women. They were talking about the litter issues and wondering what could be done about it. Through Tarateiti's interpreting I explained that it would be good to at least gather plastics and move them away from the shore, where they end up in the sea, break up and end up in the bellies of marine animals. As rubbish collection is non-existent on the outer islands, what can people do with plastics? I mentioned that the villagers can only do so much themselves – in the bigger picture it would need a representation from the outer islands to the Ministry for Environment and Agriculture to ask the government to address waste management in the more remote areas. Plastic bottles are valued – they are reused for kerosene and toddy (homemade alcohol made with fermented coconut sap), while the plastic wrappers of junk food lay everywhere, along with tin cans.

We spoke about plastic shopping bags and the women said that these are also an issue. I happened to have a plastic shopping bag, so I got out my scissors and cut a few strips from the bag and started to make a rope using the simple rope-making technique I learned a

couple of years ago. I slowly and fairly clumsily demonstrated the technique and then one of the older women asked me to hand it to her – within half a minute she had used her own technique to complete a perfect piece of plastic rope. It was wonderful to watch her skillful hands fashioning a very strong piece of twine. This really got the conversation going about the potential for re-using plastic shopping bags. I suggested a number of things – string which could be used for tying things and even potentially to make; woven mats, bags. They wondered if they could make money from selling these items. I replied that perhaps the first place to concentrate on is their village: if what they make is found to be useful, then perhaps there could be a wider market for them, first by trying South Tarawa, then looking further afield.

I gather that the village of Tabonibara has really embraced CBFM; Aurelie is very pleased, since the program had an indifferent response when it was introduced in 2014. The overall mood was good enough for me to request a gathering outside of men women and children, so that I could film them saying "mauri" in chorus, with the intention of using this as an opening shot for the CBFM video. Straight after that, I filmed an interview with the chairman of the village executive committee, then one of the councillors, then a woman from the committee. I also interviewed Tarateiti, Rutiana and Kiriua about their CBFM work.

I'm very impressed with the CBFM team. Aurelie has done a great job training Ben and Tarateiti. In this patriarchal

Weaving

Repurposed plastic packaging. I bought this purse in a Catholic souvenir shop in South Tarawa.

Rutiana and Kiriua, volunteers with the CBFM program

CBFM women's meeting, Tabonibara, facilitated by Tarateiti and scribed by Kiriua

country, Ben gets to take the lead in the official meetings. Although I don't speak i-Kiribati, I get the impression that Ben is a very engaging speaker who uses humour to connect with our hosts. He has told me that this type of grass-roots work is his passion. Tarateiti, though shy, has a wonderful dignity and composure that I think serves her well in her role. Like Ben, she seems to be a skillful public speaker. According to Aurelie, Tarateiti has come a long way in the last two years. It's great to see Rutiana and Kiriua participating too. Although they are volunteers, both of them are very responsive and helpful.

The boat arrived at high tide in the afternoon to pick us up. We bid farewell to our gracious hosts. The lagoon was choppier this time, so it was a bumpy ride back to Tanaea. I was quite relieved to be back in the big smoke, not for the overcrowding and traffic and noise, but just to get some privacy in my own airconditioned room and to have a shower. Looking around, it seems that people don't get much privacy in this country. Housing is small and exposed and people live, work and play at close quarters.

1/12/2016 – Flora and fauna

Today was a 'rest' day, where I did some writing and washing and generally hung around. I tend to go for a walk first thing in the morning and last thing before dusk, as it's too hot and busy any other time. Unfortunately the only place to walk is on the side of the major road, as the rest of the land is taken up by dwellings. If you step off the main road, you are usually stepping into an area where people live. Nevertheless, walking gives me a chance to look around. As far as I can see, the main species of tree are coconut palms, pandanus and breadfruit trees. There are other palms too, which I can't identify, as well as some plantations of a species of she-oak. There are a number of other species of course, such as pawpaw, but the first three are dominant. Mangroves are dotted throughout the islands.

There are surprisingly few birds here. The white frigatebird is the most common bird here and is in fact on the national flag. I've seen a few egrets and some small wading birds too, but the diversity and population of birds is very small. On land there are geckos, which scamper through the guest house and chirrup at night. There are the hordes of 'domestic' dogs and some cats, come originally from foreign shores. You wouldn't want to be either animal in this country – life is cheap for either creature. Then there are the rats – hundreds of them live in the ceiling and wall cavities of Fema Lodge. They scrabble around constantly and being nocturnal are particularly active in the wee hours, often keeping us all awake.

I had a chat with Marou, one of the kitchen staff at Fema. She told me about the tsunami warning they had here in

2010. She was at school on that day, as the warning came in the daytime. All the children were very scared and cried and the principal gathered everyone together, including older folk who needed assistance. In the end the tsunami didn't come but the king tides are what do the damage. There are one or two king tides per year and these days the sea comes up and infiltrates the lowest lying areas on which there is dense housing. The king tides also cause coastal erosion and significant damage to infrastructure, particularly the water supply.

Nokia, the chef at Fema Lodge, gave me these photos he took of the king tide which inundated his village of Ambo in 2015. The entire village's water supply was ruined by the infiltration of seawater into the wells. Nokia said that the Mormon church came to their rescue and supplied the village with fresh water for the three months it took for the groundwater to be drinkable again.

A local drink called toddy is made from the sap of the coconut palm.

Housing near the road with lagoon in background. Coral atoll soil suits a fairly limited number of tree species.

A king tide floods the village of Ambo with seawater in 2015.

2/12/2016 – A chance encounter with dance

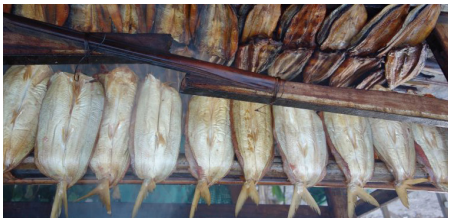
Will and John, the two New Zealand policemen also staying here at Fema gave me a lift down to Bairiki this morning, as I wanted to go to the Department of Lands to buy a map of Tarawa. I walked past the village square and eventually found the Department in a decrepit building with very basic facilities. I got the map then sat down with one of the mapping staff and chatted with him for about half an hour. He told me that in Bairiki and Betio, two large districts, some of the land is owned but many plots of land are leased from the government. I asked this fellow about climate change and king tides. In a roundabout way, he also confirmed that the king tides can swamp some of the settlements. The previous President was arguing for 'migration with dignity' – he bought land in Fiji for the people of Kiribati. This fellow told me that most people don't want to leave. It's their home. I was so absorbed in the conversation that I left without paying for the map, so I'll have to go back there next week and pay.

After leaving the office I walked aimlessly over to the Bairiki Mall, a large supermarket/department store. I could hear music and see some movement down the back of the shop, so I followed my ears and found two young women doing a traditional dance to contemporary techno-funk music. There was a small group of women gathered there – it turns out that the dancers were two i-Kiribati women, learning a Tuvaluan dance from two Tuvaluan women. They were practicing their moves for an upcoming dance competition that they're hoping to win. I asked if they wouldn't mind showing me a Kiribati dance, so there was a wait while they found the right song (more techno-funk), then they obliged. The traditional dance is quite particular – they told me that the arm movements are based on the frigate bird and the feet movements are based on the crab. After they finished, the women from Tuvalu obliged me with a traditional dance from their country.

That evening I met Shyam Pathak, a Nepalese doctor who is in Kiribati for a year, working with the UNFPA (United

Video still – two women from Tuvalu practise for the upcoming dance competition

Nations Population Fund). We were talking about the very young population here – high childbirth and short life-expectancy. He said that he has seen girls as young as eleven getting pregnant. The UNFPA is trying to work with the Catholic church to convince them of the benefits of encouraging their parishioners to delay pregnancy, so that the girls can finish school first and get a qualification. They're also trying to promote longer gaps between pregnancies.



Smoking fish

Video still – shop assistant practises her dancing in the clothing aisle

Local artefacts

3/12/2016 – Boiling frog

This morning was fairly quiet, uploading images to devices. This afternoon we went to Broken Bridge with Will and John. They have the use of a car, so we drove to Tanaea then walked the length of two islands, wading across the channels in between, to Broken Bridge. It's a channel with an old broken concrete bridge that is popular for swimming. The tide was slowly on its way in, which is the preferred time to swim as the lagoon gets a flushing from fresher seawater coming through the channels between islands from the ocean side of Tarawa. I still didn't feel safe enough about the water quality to put my head under. The seawater was lukewarm; I dog-paddled a short way up the channel toward the ocean, but the further I swam, the shallower it became and the hotter the water became, until it was uncomfortably hot. I was reminded of the Boiling Frog syndrome. Nevertheless it was good to have a walk and a dip, with an ice cream on the way home.

Being on the equator, there is a certain constancy to the daylight and temperatures in Tarawa. The sun rises just before 6am and sets around 6pm. Days are generally in the low to mid 30s (celsius) and nights somewhere between 26 and 28 degrees.

Freshly caught octopus ready to sell

Video still – Tongatapu, security guard at Fema Lodge

4/12/2016 – Behind the lens

It was a big day for filming today. Five staff members here at Fema Lodge had agreed to be interviewed. I had given everyone a hand-written list of questions several days in advance. The schedule went out the window immediately, as often happens with the locals here. San had gone to the airport, so I interviewed Tongatapu first and then it rolled along fairly spontaneously after that. I asked people to respond in both i-Kiribati and English. This was fine and some people were more comfortable in front of the camera than others. If I had the opportunity again, I'd interview differently, as I don't think the questions I asked necessarily flowed. It won't be clear till I begin editing.

While I was waiting between interviews Shyam, a Nepalese doctor who is living in Kiribati for a year, asked me a favour. He works for the UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and his organisation had had a formal meeting with the new President of Kiribati last week. He needed to write an official letter of thanks but wasn't confident in his English grammar, so I wrote the letter to the President for him!

One of the people I interviewed today is Nokia, the chef here at Fema Lodge. He gave me a big bunch of photos that he'd taken with his phone when the king tide swamped his village here last year (he thinks it was June or July 2015). It wrecked the water supply (most people get water from wells here) and the Mormons came to their rescue by fixing

Video still – San, administration staff at Fema

Video still – Tarere and Luisa

their water infrastructure and donating bottled drinking water for the three months it took for the water supply to come good again. The king tides, with a wind behind them, can make serious incursions over the land. The tides often damage the sea walls, of which there are many here. They're expecting another big king tide on the 15th December. I'm glad I won't be here for it but in a way I wish I was able to experience it to know just how scary it is for a country with such marginal land. Presumably climate change will increase the impact of king tides here.

The last interview for today was with Marou, a delightful young woman who is very funny and loves to talk to us to improve her English language skills. We began filming the interview and she was doing her best to answer my questions. After a time she asked me to stop the video. She said that she'd like to just say something herself instead of answering questions, so I just let the video roll. Marou told a very moving story about the day in 2010 when there was a tsunami warning. She was at school and the alarm went up for the tsunami to hit at midday. The principal gathered all the schoolchildren in the maneaba; many were afraid and crying. Fortunately the tsunami didn't hit them – I imagine Kiribati would have been devasted with very few survivors had it hit. Marou told her story clearly and slowly & powerfully.

To film each of these people, I asked them about a week in advance and gave each of them a copy of the sorts of things I wanted them to talk about. I then gave each of them a consent form and explained the reason for this and that if they agreed to be filmed, they could withdraw their consent afterwards at any time. The people I filmed were: San Ritieta, Tongatapu Puti, Luisa Teawe, Marou Taakente, Tarere Temariti and Nokia Moote.

Asking people how they feel about climate change and the future of Kiribati, there are mixed responses. There is clearly a great sense of pride for the I-Kiribati in their country and identity. Some of the people I spoke to express a determination to stay in Kiribati and make it a better place. Others, while proud of their country, are fearful for theirs and their children's future and are prepared to migrate. This would be a truly confronting proposition for anyone, anywhere in the world.

Tonight I watched the most astonishing sunset I have ever seen. Just before dark all the atmospheric conditions co-ordinated themselves to turn the sky and the sea into a dense, dusky, murky burnt pink red that pervaded the very air. I felt enveloped by this coloured air. It will have to remain a memory, as I didn't have the presence of mind to rush and get my video camera.

Video still – Nokia, chef at Fema

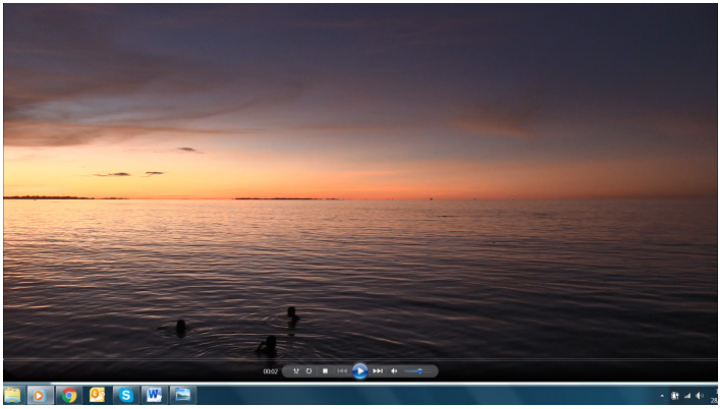
Video still – Marou, waitress at Fema Lodge

5/12/2016 – The minor expert

I took a public bus (minivans which are privately owned and usually pumping out very loud music) to the Department of Lands in Bairiki to pay for the map I forgot to pay for on Friday. I walked back the 6km or so to Banreaba, where Fema Lodge is. It seems a bit silly, walking in the middle of the day in the hot sun, but if it's not too humid it's tolerable. Once I get into a rhythm, it's quite pleasant passing through daily life. I have been asked probably at least twenty times now for money from quite young children. I don't think they are well practised in begging yet; it is asked hesitantly and with laughter, as if testing the waters. I usually ignore it, but yesterday responded strongly, saying "Who taught you to ask that?", as I wanted to discourage the children from begging. That may be futile and presumptuous on my part. As with any poor country, foreigners are by definition rich if they can visit, so I'm fair game.

A couple of times I've been cast as an expert about things of which I only have amateur knowledge but have tried my best to respond to. Normally in Australia I'm accustomed to deferring to others, the 'experts' who are called upon to make pronouncements about things. It's kind of interesting to think about your self-perception when you're never the expert. Tarateiti asked me about composting, which I know a little about, having my own composting procedure at home and having learnt from others. I did my best to explain the basic chemistry and how to go about it, which Tarateiti found useful, I think.

The next issue I was asked to give input into was rubbish. What can be done about it? It is such an enormous issue here that I could only respond in broad terms: most plastics (certainly the ones in Kiribati) aren't biodegradable. Can they be burnt? No, they release toxic fumes when burnt. What can we do with them? The first thing you could do is move them away from the shore and gather them together and contain them so they can't get into the ocean. Of course if they weren't eating the processed food that the plastic comes in, it wouldn't be a problem, but that is not going to happen. These foods, such as two-minute noodles, are cheap and ubiquitous. In Australia we can flagrantly



Video still – sunset over the lagoon

consume these foods and just bury the plastic packaging in landfill through our waste collection services. It's not like that here. If plastics can be repurposed, that is at least one strategy. I found a Catholic souvenir shop yesterday in South Tarawa which had amongst other things purses and handbags made from woven plastics such as noodle packets. I purchased one to give to Tarateiti, who could show it as an example to the women in the outer islands.

This evening I was hoping for another apocalyptic sunset. It wasn't nearly as spectacular, but I filmed it nevertheless, setting up my camera near the sea wall. The best thing that came out of it was that three children swam into the frame. The girl was repeatedly singing the first verse and chorus of "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean". The boys chimed in here and there. I began singing it with them.

Bonito for sale

Bonefish

6/12/2016 – Out of gas but full of ideas

Petrol has run out in Kiribati, so there are fewer cars on the road today. Apparently this is not uncommon. We were able to take a bus to Tanaea to go to Fisheries this morning, as the minivans run on diesel and that hasn't run out yet. At Fisheries, I interviewed Ben Namakin and Erietera Aram for my own project. Hopefully I can interview Tarateiti tomorrow. Aside from their employment, Ben and Erietera are two of the founding members of the Kiribati Islands Conservation Society (KICS), an organisation of young people dedicated to the preservation and improvement of Kiribati. It is so impressive seeing these young people taking initiative and advocating for the conservation of their country, particularly at a time when Kiribati and its people are in the spotlight for being vulnerable to the effects of climate change – a problem not of their own making. They want to spread the word about KICS to the rest of the world and are looking for ways to do that.

In the interviews I've been filming I've found that young people in particular are saying: those countries whose practices have led to climate change and sea-level rise should take responsibility and do something about it. Kiribati is a country in the front line of climate change, a situation they have had little part in creating. Some people here are rightfully demanding action by wealthy countries to reduce emissions and offer help. It must be very frustrating to be a member of a small island nation on a big world stage.

Video still – Ben Namakin, CBFM employee

7/12/2016 – Rain and song

It was raining when I got up this morning. This is such a welcome relief, as it hasn't rained for months here in Kiribati, an uncommon situation. The staff at Fema were overjoyed. Wells have been getting low, and it seemed that the country was heading towards a critical shortage of water. The water table here is only one metre below the ground. I'm not sure what the consequence of this is, other than there must be a relationship between this and the land level, which is in places at sea level and in other areas not much more than a metre above sea level. Tarere told me that after it has rained they usually have to drain the wells, as the water can become dirty with the murk that runs into wells with rainwater (especially the wells which are just holes in the ground – other wells have a raised concrete lip). They wait till low tide, then bucket the water out of the well to drain it and allow the groundwater to replenish the well. Most families have a well; some wells are shared between a few families.

Before breakfast I had a short walk along the main road. I saw a chook being run over by a truck which was driving way too fast; then I saw someone dump a baby kitten on the footpath near the sea wall. The kitten was mewling and tried to follow the person but was too small to even climb over the kerb. My first instinct was to gather it up and take it back to the guesthouse. It watched me with its young eyes and I kept walking, knowing that I could do nothing to help it. I couldn't bear to go back later to see what had become of it.

After the rained eased, I took a bus up to Temaiku, the village which is on the large 'elbow' where South Tarawa turns northwards. I found Temaiku to be a pleasant district, much more peaceful and spacious than most of the rest of South Tarawa. The housing is dotted amongst the trees and the greenery is more extensive as the housing isn't as dense as other areas. It was an enjoyable walk, with the road skirting the ocean side of the island in many places. It gave me a sense of expansiveness

A maneaba being built with non-traditional framing, Temaiku


Parliament, right near the water's edge, South Tarawa

that I haven't otherwise felt in South Tarawa. People live at such close quarters and with so little privacy that it is striking for someone like me who mostly lives alone. At one point, a voice called my name and there was Luisa, one of the guest house staff where I stay, at home with her family. I turned off the main road to do a loop walk through the village of Tamoa and back to where I began.

In the afternoon, back at the guest house, I taught some of the female staff the Aboriginal children's song "Inanay" made known by Tiddas, the Aboriginal acappella group. Before long four of us were singing three-part harmony, someone else was filming us on their phone and then within an instant we were all over Facebook. It has been really touching, getting to know the staff here. They've been very kind and friendly and have made me feel part of the family. The sense of community here in Kiribati is very strong and there is a sense of connection here that I don't usually experience in Australia.

Video still – housing for some government employees

Children drawing with textas and paper I provided

8/12/2016 – A chance meeting

I have what is known as White Line Fever – the anxiety about whether my flight will actually leave Kiribati tomorrow. Now that the stay here is nearly over, I've shifted into that sense of being on the verge of leaving and now just wanting to go. This anxiety has some justification: flights here are notoriously delayed by hours and often cancelled altogether. Already I'm resigning myself to missing the connecting flight from Fiji to Sydney, which takes off only an hour and half after my flight is due to arrive in Fiji. I'm now expecting an unscheduled stopover in Fiji.

Aurelie and I headed for Fisheries this morning so that she could do some work and I could film the final two interviews, one with Rutiana for CBFM and one with Tarateiti for my own project (which I've named Kiribati Calling). Tarateiti asked if I had been able to record any traditional Kiribati music and I said that I hadn't come across any. She and Rutiana obliged by singing the bits they could remember of a traditional Kiribati song. This was important to them – it would be inconceivable to make a video about Kiribati without music, as music and dance are so important to this culture. Music is everywhere you go. The public minibuses are usually pumping out very loud pop-techno-funk, people sing in the street, occasionally you see people off the side of the road practising their moves.

Video still – Rutiana Teibaba, CBFM volunteer

Video still – man preparing net, Tabonibara

After filming I went for a swim in the channel near the Buota Bridge. It's a wide channel and the tide was coming in so I risked it and dog-paddled out to the middle of the channel and enjoyed being in what was today cool clear water. I even put my head under briefly for the first time this trip. Aurelie has spooked me, saying she never puts her head under the water in Kiribati. Others are not quite so risk-averse – there are two young German women here on a teaching exchange for a year. They swim in the lagoon! One of them had open mosquito bites all over her lower legs, so she is temporarily refraining from swimming in the lagoon. The mosquitoes carry dengue fever and the delightfully named chikungunya here, so if she doesn't get sick it will be surprising. I decided to walk to the airport after swimming then chatting with Erietera for a while. I had barely gone two hundred metres when a car pulled up beside me and a white woman with a car full of Islanders asked if I'd like a lift. I jammed in and we got talking. Her name was Reese and she was a friendly bubbly Kiribati woman who grew up here, with an Australian father and a Kiribati mother. She has been living in

Melbourne for twenty years now, but comes back home to Kiribati every year to ground herself. She was going to drop me off somewhere near the hospital, but ended up offering to take me to her parents' house to meet them and to have a cold drink. Her dad is eighty now, a retired builder who established many buildings in Tarawa, including the Mormon school, in Kiribati. They have a pleasant two storey place in amongst the trees and Norman now spends his days in the hammock watching life go by. Reese's mother is seventy and a live-wire.

After our visit we were getting in the car to leave and Reese's mum asked her to buy some smoked fish from the roadside stalls near my guest house, so Reese drove me all the way home. In the course of our conversation, I spoke about my home town. It turned out that Danny Cross, an old friend of mine who I used to hang out with in a group as a teenager, is her cousin! Reese could even describe my primary school. We both kept marvelling at this coincidence. We took some photos to surprise Danny with.

Video still – Tuna Candy


Commuters heading to North Tarawa

The rain stopped and the sun came out in all its fierce glory. I had a walk and returned to the cool of my room. Tonight is my last night and there is a dinner with the CBFM crew and Nabuti from PIPA (Phoenix Islands Protected Area). After having dinner at the guest house, I went to the CBFM dinner briefly to say goodbye to everyone and to meet Nabuti and Kari. Kari is one of the three local fellows who made a short video for PIPA recently. Aurelie would like to get them on board to edit the proposed CBFM video for which I've been filming. This makes sense, as they speak I-Kiribati and would therefore be able to edit far more easily than I, as the interviewees in the video are all speaking in I-Kiribati. Also Kari and his colleagues are local, so it makes sense to be taking this approach.

Once again I had a strong sense of the social hierarchy here. It is a patriarchal culture and gender roles seem fairly defined (though I have seen young women playing in the social volleyball and soccer matches, so perhaps there is some fluidity amongst younger people). This doesn't mean that women can't be in responsible positions. In fact the educational outcomes in Kiribati are apparently far better for girls than boys. Nabuti is a former government minister and his wife has a prominent role in the current Ministry of Education. They were large and expansive in company, while Tarateiti and Rutiana were shy and quiet. Even Ben was unusually reserved. Nabuti focused his attention largely on me while I was there, perhaps because I am an older i-matang.

Goatfish drying in the sun

Video still – Aurelie being followed by a posse of children, Buariki

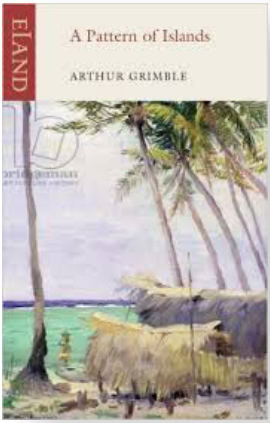
9/12/2016 – Heading home with a few delays

There has been an earthquake somewhere in the Solomon Islands and a tsunami warning has been issued. I'm wondering if that warning also applies to Kiribati. I got a lift to the airport with Rob and Peter, health expert and World Bank economist respectively, so that we could check in early and avoid the inevitable crush. That was a relatively smooth exercise, so we then headed back to Chatterbox to pass the time, a place which everyone had spoken about but to now I hadn't frequented. It's in Bikenibeu and is the place which most closely resembles a Western café, complete with coffee beans and the full coffee menu. It is also a travel agent and post office. All of the patrons were from countries other than Kiribati. I purchased a fresh new copy of Arthur Grimble's 1952 book about Kiribati, A Pattern of Islands, highly recommended by anyone who has read it.

By the time we went back to Bonriki to catch our flight, the tiny ramshackle airport was heaving with people. I had been warned of the legendary flight delays in Kiribati, so was bracing for a long day and a missed connection from Fiji to Sydney. Our plane had actually arrived almost on time, so things were looking promising. We boarded and then there was a 45 minute delay, while after much deliberation four small cardboard boxes of flammable material that didn't have the correct paperwork were jettisoned from the plane. I watched as the ground staff engaged in a slow choreography, picking up the boxes and putting them down again in various configurations, until finally they were removed. By this stage I was wondering if the tsunami was heading our way and prayed for the plane to get in the air – a selfish wish, given the plight of those left on the islands. All was well though, there was no tsunami and the plane finally took to the air, heading for Fiji.

Back to the airport

The connecting flight from Fiji to Sydney was also delayed, so I managed to get back to Sydney according to plan. I felt fortunate, having been primed with stories of delays of several days, missing baggage and general chaos. I managed to get through 16 days in Kiribati without any serious illness other than mild gastric sluggishness from the low-fibre, high starch foods. This also made me feel very lucky, as I had heard many chilling tales of dengue fever, chikungunya, diarrhoea, amoebic dysentery, ciguatera, and tuberculosis, among other things. It's enough to scare the wits out of any first-time visitor like me.



Over Tarawa – a channel between lagoon and ocean

10/12/2016 – Back home

There are many things to ponder post-Kiribati. I've had a meeting with Quentin and Brooke and told them briefly, almost incidentally, about the conversations I was having with Tarateiti and the women in Tabonibara about strategies to deal with plastic waste. As I said earlier, it was a strange experience, being cast in the role of minor expert in the fields of waste management and composting. I'm very glad to help where I can with my basic knowledge – the experience highlighted the realities of two different cultures. In Australia, there has been enough public awareness and education about plastics for me to be able to share at least some fundamentals with the women of Tabonibara. One obvious and very convenient way for them to get rid of the large amounts of plastic wrappers littering their land, foreshore and by inference their coastal territory would be to burn it. I responded to this suggestion by saying that burning plastics produces toxic fumes. People weren't aware of this. I couldn't be any more specific about this and it made me uncomfortably aware of my responsibilities as a foreigner from whom people who are wanting advice. I've since sent a website link to Tarateiti which may help her understand some of the issues with plastic waste.

A workshop series in the villages of the outer islands which demonstrates some of the possibilities for repurposing plastics is a good tie-in with the aims of CBFM. It is something that the women could take the lead in, by making useful products from plastic waste (such as rope, mats, bags, even nets which could contain plastic waste!) A workshop could also give participants some basic information about plastics: understanding the risks and consequences of burning plastics, understanding the life-cycle of plastics, understanding the consequences of plastics getting into the marine environment. The idea has traction with Quentin, Aurelie and Brooke, who have all seen the potential for incorporating these workshops into their CBFM program and thereby generating a genuine collaboration with artists.

I've been thinking quite a bit about whether this could provide an opportunity for a young Kiribati woman. Rutiana, who is a volunteer with CBFM and receives no income from her work, is someone who comes to mind. She was a wonderful guide for me on our trip to the outer islands. Tarateiti mentioned to me that Rutiana is looking for opportunities. I've wondered whether it would be somehow possible to find funding for her to come to Australia, learn some textiles techniques at the University and take them back to Kiribati. These techniques would focus on the reuse of plastics. She could be instrumental in working with me in the outer islands and eventually taking over the workshop program herself.

Whatever happens, I'd like to continue this work in Kiribati to see how it unfolds.

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