

SOPAC Long Service Recognition – Dr. Russell Howorth Profile

Written by Administrator

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In the years leading up to 2010, the Pacific Island leaders decided to integrate the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (formerly known as CCOP/SOPAC) into the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. To implement this historical alignment of the two organisations, the leaders called to arms an internationally renowned geoscientist, who immediately left his well deserved retirement on Viti Levu's Coral Coast and reported to duty at Mead Road, Suva.

The then-incumbent, Dr. Russell Howorth, had been an integral part of SOPAC from its early years in the 70's, and still continues to be one of the main stalwarts of the organisation. Over the years, he has been instrumental in bringing about the prestige and recognition that SOPAC has in the region today.

A native of Yorkshire, Great Britain, Dr. Howorth did his PhD. in Geology from Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, after a brief stint as a mining geologist in Zambia. He first visited the fledgling CCOP/SOPAC while on secondment at the University of South Pacific (USP) in early 1979. CCOP/SOPAC was then a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Regional project with less than 10 staff members.

During his early years in the South Pacific, he was best known for his achievement in establishing the Certificate in Earth Science and Marine Geology. The Certificate brought three organizations -- CCOP/SOPAC, USP, and Victoria University of Wellington -- together in the early eighties to offer what was a unique opportunity for an academic course with a practical focus for geologists and technicians in the region.

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He was initially employed in CCOP/SOPAC as a Technical Advisor in 1979. “My favourite memories of my time in SOPAC are my earlier field work, especially the coastal erosion studies in Tarawa, Kiribati. We didn't have the computerised GIS, telecommunications and modern survey equipment of today, and had to make use limited surveying equipment and old charts, maps and aerial photos”, Dr. Howorth reminisced.

Dr. Howorth established the beach profile monitoring programme in Betio and Bariki in the early 80's, which is now widely recognised as perhaps the best such data set available for an atoll environment.

He was involved first hand when SOPAC was declared an independent regional organisation in 1985, and the CCOP/SOPAC as a UNDP Project closed. He closed the UNDP project handing over all the records, equipment and staff to SOPAC in 1991. He himself was also offered a contract with the new SOPAC.

Over the next few decades, Dr. Howorth had many roles with SOPAC, most notably as the first and only Programme Manager starting from 1998. From 2002 to 2005, he served as the Deputy Director. In September 2005 he retired.

He was later recalled to SOPAC in 2010 as Director, with the goal of seeing through the integration of SOPAC Commission into Secretariat of Pacific Community as one of its technical divisions. He handed over a securely funded SOPAC Division to Professor Michael Petterson in early 2013, with around 85 staff under its employ.

“Whilst the road has often been bumpy coping with issues such as long term security of funding, SOPAC has always been progressive and proactive over the course of its existence. When new member countries came on board, it brought new requests and new work. To better service the countries, SOPAC also incorporated other UN projects, such as a Regional Disaster Reduction Project and a Regional Water and Sanitation Project in the 1990's.”, Dr. Howorth said.

In 2012 Dr. Howorth was nominated by Fiji on behalf of other Pacific island countries and subsequently elected on to the Legal and Technical Commission at the International Seabed Authority in Kingston, Jamaica. He was also appointed Chair of the Commission, a position he continues to hold. The Authority is responsible for the seabed of the world's oceans beyond those areas under national jurisdiction (EEZs)

In his address at the opening of a High Level Regional Meeting on Deep Sea Minerals in Nadi in 2011 he commented, "In 1972, nearly forty years ago, it was clear recent interest in offshore deepsea mineral resources, was growing, At the time little or no national experience existed in the offshore activities that were being introduced and island countries were in serious need for guidance in all aspects of that field due to lack of human and institutional capacity. This was particularly crucial with the advent of the Law of the Sea and the coming of independence for many Pacific island countries.

"This initiative resulted in the establishment of SOPAC, initially as CCOP/SOPAC. Subsequently, and largely coordinated by SOPAC, marine scientific research and seabed

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mineral resource assessments within the region have located and identified a varied group of mineral occurrences on the seabed within many EEZs. In recent years the interest in some of these mineral deposits has moved or is moving from scientific resource assessment to commercial. This is due largely to the high grade of base and precious metals contained therein together with sustained high prices of key metallic minerals. This presents an opportunity for many states to address their economic vulnerability and expand their narrow resource base by capitalising on the size and extent of their EEZs and the mineral resource potential therein."

Dr. Howorth is the longest serving staff in SOPAC's history, and his expertise and dedication to the Pacific, over the course of 34 years, has undoubtedly shaped and improved many livelihoods through SOPAC's projects and its deliverables.

Dr. Howorth currently enjoys his time with his wife, Seni, and his grandchildren at his property on the Coral Coast. He still retains an interest and supports countries in the Pacific earth and coastal science scene through his company, Matadrevula Advisory Services.

Footnote: Dr. Howorth wrote a short paper in early 2010 - *Metamorphism of SOPAC: A short history of change in a Pacific regional organisation 1972-2009*

- which is available for download at

<http://ict.sopac.org/VirLib/MR0704.pdf>

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