

Kiribati To End Beach Mining For Aggregates

Written by Administrator

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Quarrying for sand gravel in Kiribati's most populated atoll island South Tarawa will soon be replaced by a safer and a more sustainable alternative – lagoon dredging.

The Kiribati Government, through its European Union-funded Environmentally Safe Aggregates for Tarawa (ESAT) project, implemented by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community's SOPAC Division, hopes to phase out beach aggregate mining on South Tarawa. The mining has caused severe coastal erosion problems on the already vulnerable atoll island.

Beach aggregate is a combination of sand, gravel, pebbles and stones primarily used in making concrete, road maintenance, the building industry and most general construction.

Through its Oceans and Islands Programme, SOPAC has undertaken technical work on coastal vulnerability on South Tarawa for many years. During this time, a continuing stress highlighted since the 1980s has been the damaging impact of beach mining on shoreline systems, caused by intense and unsustainable extraction of aggregates.

The ESAT project, which was established to explore alternative sources of beach aggregates, has identified Tarawa's lagoon.

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‘Sustained research by SOPAC has revealed abundant aggregate deposits in the lagoon and further work has shown they can be safely exploited at low cost and, more importantly, with far lower environmental impacts than beach mining.’

‘In the case of South Tarawa, the resource area we’ve examined is estimated to have the potential to last for some 50 to 70 years,’ said Dr Arthur Webb, manager of SOPAC’s Oceans & Islands Programme.

To facilitate the dredging, a purpose-built dredge barge is being constructed in Indonesia and is expected to arrive in Kiribati late 2012.

Dr Webb said the ESAT project has several ongoing tasks including overseeing the barge construction; continuing community outreach to explain the ills of beach mining and why there is an urgent need to find an appropriate alternative; finalising the aggregates work depot and processing facility; and working with the Government of Kiribati to establish the new state-owned Atinmarawa aggregates company to sell the aggregates.

The project has also devoted considerable resources to producing an Environment Impact Assessment, including a collaborative effort with SPC’s Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems Division to produce a specific study on the impact of lagoon dredging on fisheries in this location.

‘Ultimately, there are always some impacts associated with development in urban areas,’ said Dr Webb.

‘There are no free rides, but in the case of this carefully designed aggregate dredging initiative, the impacts will be manageable, and certainly far less than the impacts of continued beach mining,’ he added.

PHOTO CAPTION: Beach mining causes severe coastal erosion problems for fragile atolls.

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