

# PNG villagers battle loggers to save their lifestyle

In February this year, radio and television broadcaster Julie McCrossin had a life-changing experience, travelling to a remote village in Papua New Guinea with Oxfam Community Aid Abroad. There Julie learned just how important the forest is to Papua New Guineans' social, spiritual and physical life. Here she tells her story.

Uiaku village is the most isolated place I have ever been. To get there, we flew from Port Moresby over incredibly high mountains to a small town on the coast. From there it was two and a half hours by boat across the most beautiful reef. Uiaku's twelve hundred residents live a complete subsistence lifestyle. There are no shops. Everything they need they get from the forest, as they've done for generations. Yet that forest – and the people's rich traditional lifestyle – are now under threat. During four days in the village, I learned about how the community is struggling to stop commercial logging in the forests that are their life.

The contrast between Uiaku and Port Moresby couldn't have been greater. Papua New Guinea's capital is a higgledy-piggledy, over-developed place whose residents suffer enormous problems, particularly in the area of law and order. Those who suffer most from the breakdown of law are young men who have come from their villages in a desperate search for work. There they find themselves without the social support and structures that life in the village gave them.

The lifestyle in Uiaku, however, was really idyllic. The elders, both men and

women, know that they have something extremely valuable: they have their culture, spirituality, and daily life intact. The need to live off the land – the women work in the gardens while the men fish and hunt – mean that they are always busy, and mostly amazingly healthy. I saw just how much they could lose if large-scale commercial logging suddenly hits.

We travelled to Uiaku with Uma, a solicitor who works for the Environmental Law Centre in Port Moresby. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad is a primary funder of the Environmental Law Centre. Uma was meeting Uiaku villagers to discuss supporting their legal battle to stop commercial logging. The villagers are under pressure from the government to agree to logging – 85 percent of Papua New Guineans do not pay tax because they are not in paid work, instead living a subsistence lifestyle. The government needs tax to provide services, and commercial logging provides those taxes. But for Uiaku village the cost is too high, so it is resisting the pressure from above.

## FOREST'S SURVIVAL

The number one issue for everyone in that community is the forest's survival. The villagers are particularly worried about the impact losing the forest would have on the women and the young men, who would lose their community role of hunting and working in the forest. The elders are acutely aware that if commercial logging comes, their young men could end up lost on the outskirts of Port Moresby.

Their second biggest concern is about health. Women in Uiaku are very afraid for their personal safety, and afraid that HIV/AIDS will come to their community. This fear is quite realistic.



Julie McCrossin arrives at Uiaku village.

Workers are often brought in from outside the community with the logging companies. These workers often bring HIV infection, a growing concern for Papua New Guinea. The women fear sexual assault, prostitution, and loggers who come in and marry local women, stay for the two or three years until the logging finishes, then return to former wives in other parts of PNG.

The risk of death in childbirth is another huge issue. They have no access to any kind of motorboat that could get them across the water quickly to an ante-natal clinic. Commercial logging would bring cash money into the community, enabling them to buy a boat. Yet the women still see the risks to their health from the social breakdown that would inevitably follow commercial



logging as much greater than the risk of death in childbirth. It's a difficult decision for them because cash money from logging could potentially fulfill a number of their needs. One is getting fresh water into the village. Right now they can't afford to lay pipe from one of the clean streams in their forest to the village. Commercial logging would give them enough money to lay the pipe, yet it is also likely to destroy the creek, as the forests are essential water catchment.

Another issue is their children's education. The children in Uiaku can only complete primary school in the village. The community takes schooling very seriously – they know education will help their children's individual futures but also the community as a whole. They realise social change is on the horizon, and right now they can't afford to send their children to high school.

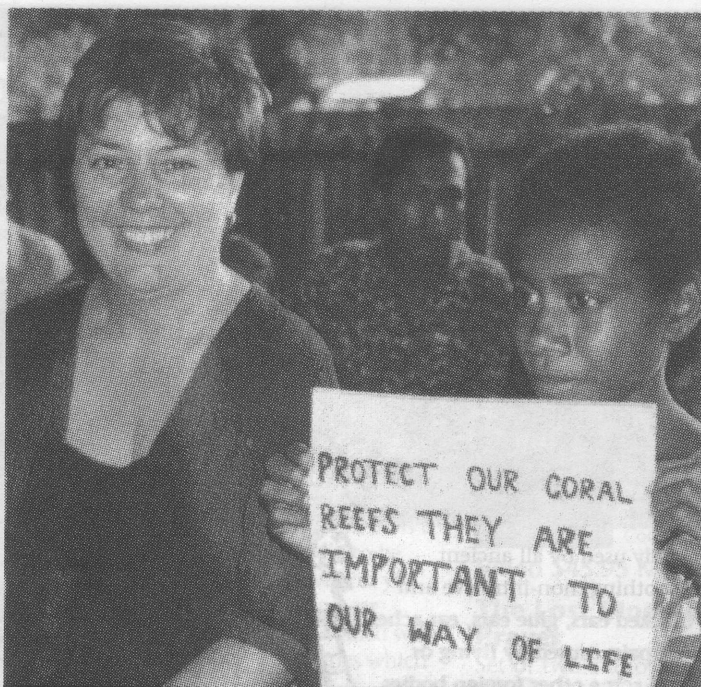
Despite the pressures they are under, the people I met in Uiaku seemed to have fulfilling and happy lives. My visit there made me face what we have lost in our own lives. Most of my friends in urban Australia seem to have a constant

## The villagers are aware of what they can lose through urbanisation

struggle to balance work and private life. So many feel that they don't see their kids and families enough. Everyone is worried about their spiritual health and the health of the planet. In Uiaku the environment is a glorious jewel they cherish and are at peace with, and they have a very rich community life. These people know how much they have to lose, having seen what urbanisation has brought to other communities in Papua New Guinea.

The strong community culture in Uiaku means it is virtually a crime-free place – I walked a long way to the toilet at 3am and felt perfectly safe. When I was in Port Moresby, I had to leave the razor wire compound with a security guard just to go out for a Chinese meal. In Uiaku at 3am I honestly felt safer than I do in my own inner western home in Sydney, where I have bars on the doors because of the high rate of theft. We have as much or more to learn from people in places like Uiaku as they may have to learn from us.

Every person I spoke to in Uiaku was very aware of the problems that a western lifestyle can bring. The villagers



Julie McCrossin with a village child at a protest meeting.

are not running away from the future, but are also acutely aware of what they can lose through urbanisation and development. There was the sense of a community under siege – they fear that the government may pass laws forcing them to have their forest logged, which would devastate the community. As a journalist, I've travelled to a number of isolated communities in central Australia. I can see that the Uiaku villagers' fears of what sudden development can do to an Indigenous community are well-founded.

## CASH ECONOMY

I've heard the phrase sustainable development for years, but in PNG I actually learnt what it means. It means villagers get the opportunity to engage with the cash economy to bring benefits to their community at the pace they want. They want money they control, not a sudden influx through commercial logging.

An example of sustainable development would be for Uiaku to have a reliable boat ready supply of petrol for taking pregnant women and sick people to health care services. Another would be giving these communities access

to markets for their tapa cloth. Another option might be to encourage sustainable, ethical eco-tourism, so that people who really value the lifestyle and forest can come and experience a place with no litter, no plastic – where there is no ugliness or visual pollution. These are some ways the villagers could earn money, get their kids educated, get better health care and sustain their culture – that is sustainable development.

One of the things I remember most about my visit was when a 21-year-old woman showed me her new baby. She showed me how to place the baby in a bilum basket made from tree-bark, and how to wear the basket on my head. The birth in the village had gone well, yet there was a real risk she could have died, because her community did not have money to buy a boat. I saw how terribly tempting it would be to say yes to logging.

Another thing I remember was when a young boy of twelve ran into the village with a huge pig on his back – all the kids ran and celebrated that he had killed this pig. The teenage boys hunted this pig in the forest, and with it they made a feast to say thank you to Oxfam Community Aid Abroad for visiting, and for providing legal aid to fight for their forest. I saw the incredible role these young men play in the community and what a tragedy it would be if they lost their forest. I remember the joy of the baby and the joy of the pig. My time in PNG was an amazing, life-changing experience.

Edited from an interview with Julie McCrossin by Caroline Green. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad provides long-term support to thousands of villages like Uiaku around the world. You can help us support these programs that tackle the causes of poverty and injustice head on. AWARE is Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's monthly pledge program. By pledging \$20 a month, you can make a real difference. Donations go to Oxfam Community Aid Abroad's long-term work with poor communities in 30 countries around the world, including Indigenous Australia.

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