

Moments in Vanuatu: Changing the way we tell stories

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Moments in Vanuatu

Changing the way we tell stories

Kerrie Foxwell-Norton, Monique Pueblos, Kriti Gupta, Kate Styles, Cathy Ross and Emilie Ledwidge

A note from Kerrie Foxwell-Norton

IN LATE 2018, fifteen Griffith University communication and journalism students travelled to Vanuatu to participate in a climate change communication study tour funded by the New Colombo Plan. The tour was built around planning and adaptation projects being undertaken by the Griffith Climate Change Response Program, and was initiated in partnership with the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme and the University of the South Pacific.

The group spent time in Port Vila before travelling to the remote island of Tanna to stay at White Grass and Port Resolution. They participated in a range of activities, including meeting student peers and visiting media organisations, government and cultural centres, and various local communities. They also experienced both the might of an active volcano and the calming effects of drinking kava.

For just under three weeks, we Griffith travellers could immerse ourselves in Vanuatu. The overarching aim was introducing our students to their nearest neighbours, informing and alerting them of the impacts of climate change already being felt in the region – and exposing them to the peerless experience of listening to the stories of local people and their communities.

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS LIVE in the South Pacific and yet so much of Australia's scholarship, and the daily deluge of our news and media, points us to places that are far distant – often Europe or North America. This study tour aimed to disrupt these flows of information and ideas from the north, and place our students here, where we all live, in the south.

Climate change has changed and will continue to change the stories we tell about our places, our region, our country. And it will fall to this next generation of journalists and communicators, working across diverse roles and contexts, to tell those stories. Therein lies both challenge and opportunity. But the first step must be to show them the significance of the writing they produce – why it matters enormously who they write about, and how they frame their stories. This communication is a difficult science, traversing people and politics, communities and country: how do we communicate climate change in ways that are just and helpful in various contexts, to different audiences?

Such stories are not for the dispassionate; they speak to neither distant nor shallow thinking. They are stories that require passionate, thoughtful, intelligent writers – those capable of grasping the complexity of climate and ecological crises and their impacts on people and places, near and far. As emerging journalists and communication professionals, these students will have the opportunity to help their readers steer a course towards a future where people and planet might flourish. Study trips such as this one encourage young people to think deeply and broadly about what that future might look

like and the roles they might play in its space.

These images – these stories – are small moments that demonstrate some of that work.

Associate Professor Kerrie Foxwell-Norton is the Program Director of the Bachelor of Communication and Journalism at Griffith University. She is an environmental communication scholar, and her work aims to amplify the connections between community, communication and environmental issues to secure positive social and environmental futures.

Blue Lagoon, Efate

Image credit: Monique Pueblos

Image credit: Monique Pueblos

AN APPRECIATION OF nature's own vibrant pool of water – fresh at low tide; salt at high tide. The platform and ropes are man-made features, distinct here, but not so invasive. As in the image, they add to the overall experience. The Blue Lagoon is one of the most popular tourist hotspots on Efate, and is also an example of nature's finest work. Swim to the end and you can see where it meets the rest of the ocean – my devil's advocate chimes in now: *sea level rise*. The people of Vanuatu, and now we too, understand this paradise may be but a

memory in the future if we do not work together to become proactive agents of climate justice. When your natural environment is under threat from the forces of nature and the actions of humankind, it becomes a place where ecotopia may seem out of sight – but it is not out of my mind.

Port Resolution, Tanna

Image credit: Monique Pueblos

Image credit: Monique Pueblos

WE MET WITH a group of Ni-Vanuatu women and their children in a village in Port Resolution. Soon after this image was taken, two women introduced themselves to us as our ‘mums’. Their self-assignment as our mothers means that when we return, we will return to a roof over our heads, food on our plates, and family. This was not merely a gesture of hospitality; it was a response to our purpose and intentions for coming into their lives and exploring the land they call home. It is a reminder that though we may live very different lives, separated by culture, language and the sea, we want the same things: to live in a world where we care for our environment and care for each other.

Monique Pueblos is studying a Bachelor of Communication and Journalism and hopes to pursue a career in environmental or broadcast journalism.

Efate

Image credit: Kriti Gupta

Image credit: Kriti Gupta

WALKING ONTO A university campus where you don't know the language, the culture or anyone from the country is akin to walking into a new school, but ten times more terrifying. As a group of Griffith University students, this was where we were. Our first full day on the island of Efate asked us, as young media professionals, to put aside our Western perspectives and take a local and empathetic approach. This required a great deal of listening and learning: immersion in the local culture, issues and challenges.

Quite often, colonialism sends 'the white man' into another country to tell that country's people what is right and wrong. In some ways, it felt this was the case with our visit: we were visiting from Australia for a short period of time to provide the solutions to problems – we were similar to missionaries. This was not the image we wanted to portray, and so we had to humble ourselves and listen more than we might have back home. In many cases, we thought we knew what the problems were and their effective solutions. But through the process of listening, we realised things were different in a number of ways, specifically in terms of how the residents of the country saw themselves and the topic of climate change. While Vanuatu is not the biggest contributor to climate change in terms of emissions, it is one of the most adaptable.

Port Resolution

Image credit: Kriti Gupta

Image credit: Kriti Gupta

IT WAS CONFRONTING to be accommodated in a home that I felt might not withstand a strong gust of wind. My initial reaction was this: *no way am I going to sleep here*. But living in the place gave me one of the most humbling, exhilarating and culturally rich experiences of my life. Living in a home no Australian building code would deem structurally sound was an experience that forced me to question both my needs and my wants. This community welcomed us with open arms, treated us like family. This made it all the more clear that these people are our neighbours, and it is our job to listen to them and help them in the way they wish to be helped.

Kriti Gupta is studying a Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations and Politics and International Relations at Griffith University.

Louinio, Tanna

Image credit: Kate Styles

Image credit: Kate Styles

TO WATCH THE women of Louinio weave bags of dried pandan leaves was to watch each woman create something from nature. There was no mass

production, no excess – nothing that wasn't necessary was used. To me, this shows an incredible respect for nature and an important lesson in sustainability – a lesson we should all learn. Now that I'm home, it also evokes a sense of determination from me: determination to continue learning from the people of Vanuatu; determination to maintain a sustainable lifestyle; determination to care for our planet.

Mount Yasur, Tanna

Image credit: Kate Styles

Image credit: Kate Styles

THE GLOW OF Mount Yasur could be seen for kilometres and the smell of sulfur lingered in the air. The volcano's power and ferocity evoked an incredible respect for nature and a sense of humility. As we waited for the dark rumble that would precede a beautiful burst of lava, it was impossible not to feel small, overwhelmed, and insignificant. I often see this feeling of insignificance mirrored in our fight against climate change: what difference can our individual actions make? The consistent steps taken by Vanuatuan people to combat the many factors impacting climate change – including bans on single-use plastic bags, plastic straws and styrofoam containers – show how one can become many, and how every individual can truly make a difference in the continuous fight to protect our Earth.

Kate Styles is studying a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) at Griffith University.

Port Vila, Efate

Image credit: Cathy Ross

Image credit: Cathy Ross

WE MET KETTY Napwatt (right) at the University of the South Pacific in Port Vila on the island of Efate in Vanuatu. A language facilitator now retired from her role as Vanuatu's first female secretary general, Napwatt spoke to us about how fortunate she felt to have a strong traditional background and about the power women wield when given the chance to lead. Listening in as Isabella Cheng (left) interviewed Napwatt encouraged me to focus on the strength of Ni-Vanuatu women instead of their perceived vulnerability as those most affected by climate change.

Cathy Ross recently graduated from Griffith University with a Bachelor of Photography.

Tanna

Image credit: Emilie Ledwidge

Image credit: Emilie Ledwidge

I AM A well-travelled individual, but I still felt the sensation of culture shock when I visited extremely remote villages within Vanuatu. In local Ni-Vanuatu villages outside of the city hub of Port Vila, people live a traditional lifestyle, following their cultural *kastom*. I felt welcomed with open arms wherever I went – and so did the other Griffith University students on this trip. We were given leis and were led into villages as the locals shared their knowledge and stories with us. Their hospitality was more than enough, despite the hardships that they faced: the people of Vanuatu have endured harsh storms, the loss of local reefs and food scarcity – all part of the price of climate change. The land is their life. If the land cannot provide resources, it would be near impossible for the people of Vanuatu to survive.

Emilie Ledwidge recently graduated from Griffith University with a Bachelor of Photography.