

IWRM in Samoa : an achievement story

By Sam Semisi



Building Capacity for IWRM Leads to Successful Catchment Protection



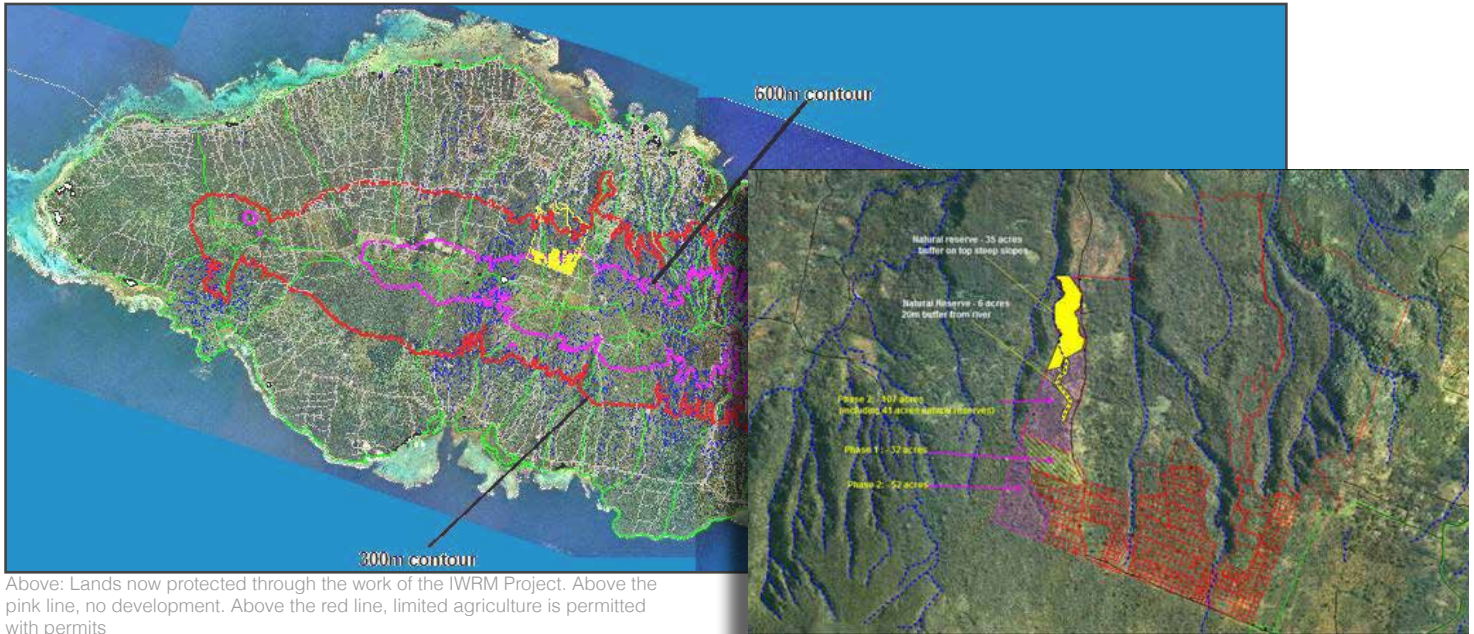
Above: Typical land degradation in the Upolu catchments. Sub-divisions and land clearing

At the summit of Gasegase catchment behind Apia, is an area of 2000 acres of native forest owned by the Catholic Church. This land is at the beginning of all the river sources in the catchment that flow to Apia providing water for the population. The Catholic Church Land Board (CCLB) had decided to sub-divide the land and sell to the public for housing and farming. When we learned of the plan we were concerned that the land would become degraded and impact on the water resources downstream if not carefully managed. We raised our concerns with the CCLB and through persistent engagement at all levels were able to negotiate the protection of over 400 hectares of the area.

The concern with the decision to sub-divide was that when people moved to the area they may inadvertently degrade the natural environment through development, farming, agriculture and deforestation, impacting on the quality and quantity of water downstream. The Ministry of Natural Resource and Environment (MNRE) learned of the subdivisions once they had already started and under the guidance of the IWRM project formed a Research Technical Team (RTT) to investigate the development. We found that the subdivision was occurring on a protected water catchment area and had already begun to be degraded with most trees cut down, infrastructure in place and a lot of land sub-divided and sold.

The RTT became aware that though the CCLB were asking for 40 acres to subdivide in their applications, they were actually developing beyond this and encroaching on protected land. We asked the CCLB for an environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the whole development area and put a halt to any new subdivision plans approval until the EIA was complete. We hoped that the Church would adhere to the request for them to cease subdivision and would not disturb the watershed or destroy the natural habitat. However once the development had started those in charge of the activities seemed hesitant to cease and initially the outcome was not a success because the landowner committee failed to listen to the concerns we presented about the state of the watershed.

We understood then that we were going to have to find a convincing way to deliver the message of conservation to the CCLB to change their mindset about watershed protection. Fortunately during this time I was studying through the IWRM Graduate Certificate and was learning a lot more about the technical aspects of watershed processes and what was required to protect any area for sustainable use and rehabilitation. Equipped with technical knowledge and the negotiating skills to deliver the right message we developed a new strategy to engage the CCLB.



Above: Lands now protected through the work of the IWRM Project. Above the pink line, no development. Above the red line, limited agriculture is permitted with permits

Above: In red, the protected area lands around the rivers that will be purchased by the Government of Samoa

We developed a presentation that highlighted the essential catchment processes, the impact that deforestation and excavation has on a catchment both locally and downstream and most importantly the necessity of conserving what was left and rehabilitating the already damaged areas. Organising meetings with the proper church leaders and upper management of the CCLB we presented this to them. The head of the church exclaimed "You should have told me about this earlier. We need to protect our water resources so this land has got to be preserved". Those in attendance were unaware of the environmental implications of the subdivision in the upper catchment area and once informed they agreed to stopping any future subdivision

From this hugely successful meeting we organised a follow up meeting with the whole management of the CCLB and proceeded to propose a solution that would allow them to subdivide some land but leave the vulnerable watershed regions to be administered by us. Using GIS based land mapping that showed the areas that needed to be protected in order to conserve environmental integrity we showed what areas needed to be protected and what was suitable for development. We gave the CCLB two options; to sell the protected areas to the MNRE for management or manage the protection of the areas themselves. To our great relief the CCLB agreed to sell the protected areas to the MNRE for environmental stewardship.

The final outcome of this process is that the Government of Samoa has committed to the purchase of 485 hectares of land required to protect the watershed. This is an unexpected achievement that has brought the issue of watershed catchment management to the forefront of the political agenda and was far from the expectations of anyone at the beginning of the process. Once the land is purchased it is planned that the area will be replanted to return it to its natural state.

“..through the IWRM Graduate Certificate program I learned skills to confidently develop and present acceptable options for the protection of the watershed”

The whole process from initial knowledge of the subdivision to gaining government approval of land purchase took over two years and I have learned a great deal throughout. Initially I was overwhelmed and frustrated by encounters with the CCLB and felt I needed greater technical knowledge to fully express the importance of the situation. I gained this through the IWRM Graduate Certificate Program and learned the skills to confidently develop and present acceptable options for the protection of the watershed. This allowed us as a team to make great progress identifying what land needed to be protected and what was acceptable for development. It became clear to us midway that we needed to be approaching the right people, which is when we organised a meeting with Church leaders and management. This was a turning point for the project and a great lesson to us in negotiating agreements.

It has been a relief and delight to see the CCLB change their mind completely about the catchment area. From being very reserved about the idea of ceasing subdivisions to agreeing to sell their land and recognising the importance of catchment management and watershed conservation. This has shown our team that with the right know-how and messaging we can make a change in our communities.