

**Measuring Wellbeing in Tourism-Dependent Communities in Pacific Islands during COVID-19**

**Before and After Borders Re-Opened**

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**Background**

In the absence of tourists due to COVID-19, Pacific Island nations are thought to have been dealt a “severe blow” that has undermined their wellbeing (UNCTAD, 2020). However, our research over the past three years has suggested that, despite the financial hardships, many Pacific peoples living in tourism-dependent communities have adapted to COVID-19 effectively and shown increased wellbeing across a number of dimensions (Scheyvens et al., 2020, 2022).

The current study emerged from a broader research project about the impacts of economic slowdown caused by COVID-19 on Pacific peoples. In Phase 1 of this study (late 2021-early 2022) we assessed wellbeing prior to the return of tourists in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Cook Islands. We are currently undertaking Phase 2 of this study, wherein we return to the same tourism-dependent communities in each of these countries to assess wellbeing 6 months after tourists have returned.

**Wellbeing framework**

In creating our wellbeing survey, we originally drew from models of wellbeing which highlight four key dimensions of wellbeing; physical, mental, social, financial. Our research in 2020 indicated that there is more to wellbeing for Pacific peoples - the spiritual and environmental aspects of wellbeing cannot be overlooked. Thus, we developed a 6-dimensional wellbeing model, which we have called the Frangipani framework (see poster). This framework shows the frangipani petals indicating 5 dimensions of wellbeing (mental, physical, social, spiritual, financial), while the trunk and roots of the frangipani tree signifies environmental wellbeing (including context, time and place).

**Research design**

The Frangipani Framework was used to guide survey design for the project. We consulted a number of experts in Indigenous studies, wellbeing, Pacific studies and psychology during this process. This resulted in our survey questions being largely sourced from the NZ Attitudes and Values Survey, and supplemented with questions specific to this project e.g. around environmental wellbeing. The survey contains both quantitative, Likert style questions, and qualitative, open-ended questions. The Likert style questions range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The quotes on the poster come from open-ended question responses to Phase 2 of the survey.

**Results**

 We are currently undertaking Phase 2 of this research and have data from Fiji and Cook Islands. The results section of this poster compares the collated data from Fiji and Cook Islands from Phase 1 (before tourists returned) and Phase 2 (6 months after tourists returned), based on the percentage of respondents who were “strongly agreeing” to questions about their wellbeing improving through to those who were “strongly disagreeing”.

 Results thus far show that financial wellbeing has improved with the return of tourism, as international tourists have rejuvenated businesses and ensured employment for thousands of Pacific people. Physical wellbeing has declined with the return of tourism, as people were eating more home-grown food from the land, as well as seafood, during lockdowns and exercising more, which they cannot do as they return to 9-5 jobs. Mental and social wellbeing stayed high before and after tourists returned, but comments indicated that different aspects of these wellbeings were satisfied before and after tourists returned. Social wellbeing, for example, was satisfied during lockdowns as people had much more valuable family time, but in leaving lockdown people were happy to be able to reconnect with friends from further afield. Spiritual wellbeing was also strong during both phases of the research, but more people indicated that their spiritual wellbeing was very good during border closures than after border closures, which could be attributed to having more time to attend church and pray. Environmental wellbeing was significantly better before tourists returned compared to after, as Fijian and Cook Islands people noted the increased rubbish as tourists returned and people returned to their normal jobs.

Overall, there are mixed implications for the wellbeing of Pacific peoples as tourists return to these destinations, but comparisons with earlier data (Scheyvens et al., 2020) suggests that many aspects of wellbeing improved when locals were better connected to the *vanua* (land), and each other during COVID-19 lockdowns.

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