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The Challenges of Survey and Site Preservation in the Republic of the Marshall Islands

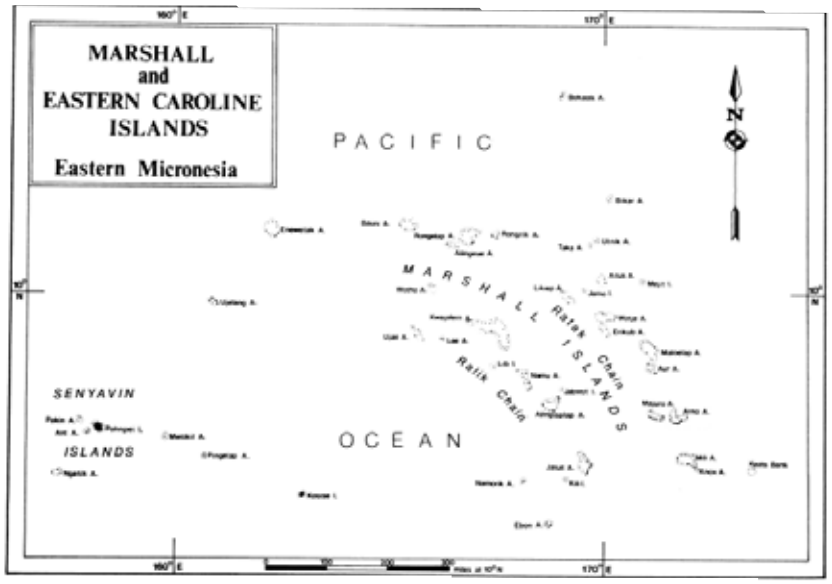
As with all federally funded historic preservation offices, the primary duties of the Republic of the Marshall Islands' Historic Preservation Office (RMI HPO) include site survey, registration, and preservation. The problems encountered, however, by the RMI HPO in accomplishing these tasks are unlike those of any other historic preservation office. Located in eastern Micronesia, 2,200 miles southwest of Hawaii, the Republic of the Marshall Islands is a nation of 1,200 islets that form 29 coral atolls and five isolated islands. Scattered over 750,000 square miles of ocean, all these islands make up only 70 square miles of land. This geography and geology, as well as the culture of the Marshall Islands make the basic duties of the RMI HPO extremely demanding.

Given the isolation of not only the Marshall Islands from the rest of the world, but also each atoll to one another, site survey is a logistically difficult task itself. Transportation is either by air or sea, both of which are intermittent and unreliable. When a survey is required off the capital atoll of Majuro, the minimum travel time is counted in days—even if the work required takes only hours.

When a site survey does occur, given the nature of a coral environment, detection of anything but historic World War II structures is nearly impossible. Prehistoric cultural remains are all organic and thus highly perishable. Standard reconnaissance surveys alone are insufficient—leaving obvious gaps in the prehistoric record. The office has relied on the use of local informants during each survey to assist in identifying traditional Marshallese sites. Although identifying these traditional sacred sites has merit in its own right, it is hoped that a traditional fishing site, for example, may very well be the location of a prehistoric fishing site as well.

As challenging as survey may be, the real difficulty arises during the registration and preservation process. Like much of the Pacific, land tenure in the Marshall Islands is extremely privatized, and—at least seen through Western standards—complicated.[1] In general, the system allows for up to three or four individuals to own each parcel (*weto*) of land. One of the individuals is the traditional chief (*iroojlaplap*); another is the lineage head (*alab*). In the past, before the advent of Western style government, the system worked well to ensure that every Marshallese had land use rights. The alab secured land rights for his family and the *iroojlaplap*—in essence the government—oversaw and partially controlled each *weto* of land within his domain. Today the *irooj* system still exists but so too does a democratic government. Who then has ultimate control of the land? With few exceptions, the landowners, and not the government, have absolute control of the land. In addition, this control includes not only the land, but all resources discovered on, in, and above the land—and even out into the lagoon. The government not only has no right to impose any restrictions on private land; the government itself does not own any land.[2]

The implication of this for historic preservation is not good. Although preservation laws exist,[3] many of these regulations are based upon U.S. laws and do not conform to the customs of the Marshall Islands. The concept of private property and the control of all items on that property is too ingrained in Marshallese culture to support historic preservation legislation that affords any protection to any item on private land. While the concept of eminent domain is in the RMI constitution, it has never been applied. Moreover, as there is no public land, there is no precedence to protect natural or cultural resources for the public good through legislation.



While difficult, historic preservation in the Marshall Islands is not impossible; but it does require some innovative thinking. Although survey, inventory, and registration all continue within the RMI, preservation must come through education rather than legislation. Unfortunately, even education is not simple. Tourism, one of the primary economic reasons for historic preservation, is almost non-existent in the Marshalls and, given the RMI's isolation, it will be many years before tourism validates the importance of historic preservation. Ethnic or cultural pride, an excellent educational tool for preservation, also does not work as well in the RMI as it does in the U.S. Unlike other regions in the world, where there are native groups fighting for the protection of their indigenous land from those they perceive as "outsiders" (an "us vs. them" mentality), this situation does not occur in the Marshalls. The vast majority of the RMI residents are ethnically Marshallese, and since foreigners cannot own land (the major government regulation on land use), Marshallese do not perceive that foreigners are destroying their cultural heritage through the destruction of historic properties. There is, in fact, so little economic development that any interference from the HPO in construction activities is seen as not only hindering development, but also infringing on the traditional Marshallese cultural heritage to do whatever they want on their land. Additionally, there is the perception that since most of the visible and potentially preservable sites are not prehistoric, but instead date from either the German or more likely Japanese (WWII) era, the preservation of these sites has nothing to do with Marshallese heritage anyway.[4]

Nevertheless, Western culture is coming and there is a growing concern among Marshallese to preserve local customs, traditions, and language (if not actual sites). It is in this regard that the RMI HPO supports unconventional activities. If the preservation of Marshallese heritage through the protection of historic sites does not work, we will preserve the sites by first protecting the culture. In conjunction with the national Alele Museum many cooperative projects have occurred. Educational activities such as the instruction in and videotaping of traditional Marshallese activities, including outrigger canoe production and sailing, making of baskets, and recording of oral histories, have all had the support of the HPO. Although not directly related to the primary duties of site survey and preservation, these activities that preserve the intangible past get the high profile attention that is required to lay the groundwork needed to preserve the physical past.

Notes

1 Jack E. Tobin, "Land Tenure in the Marshall Islands," *Atoll Research Bulletin* No. 11 (1952): 1-36; and Jack E. Tobin, "Land Tenure in the Marshall Islands," *Land Tenure Patterns, Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands*, Vol. 1 (1958).

2 Despite studies by former RMI HPO archeologist, Dirk H.R. Spennemann, which raise the possibility of government owned land, Dirk H.R. Spennemann, *Cultural Resource Management Plan for Majuro Atoll, Republic of the Marshall Islands Part 1: Management Plan Majuro: Office of Territorial and Insular Affairs*, Department of Interior, United States Government (1990), the author is not aware of any land that is presently owned by the government.

3 Republic of the Marshall Islands Historic Preservation Legislation, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Historic Preservation Office, Majuro Atoll (1992).

4 Jon G. O'Neill, *Management of German Colonial Heritage in the Pacific*, unpublished bachelor's thesis, Faculty of Science and Agriculture, School of Environment and Information Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Albury, New South Wales, Australia (2000).

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