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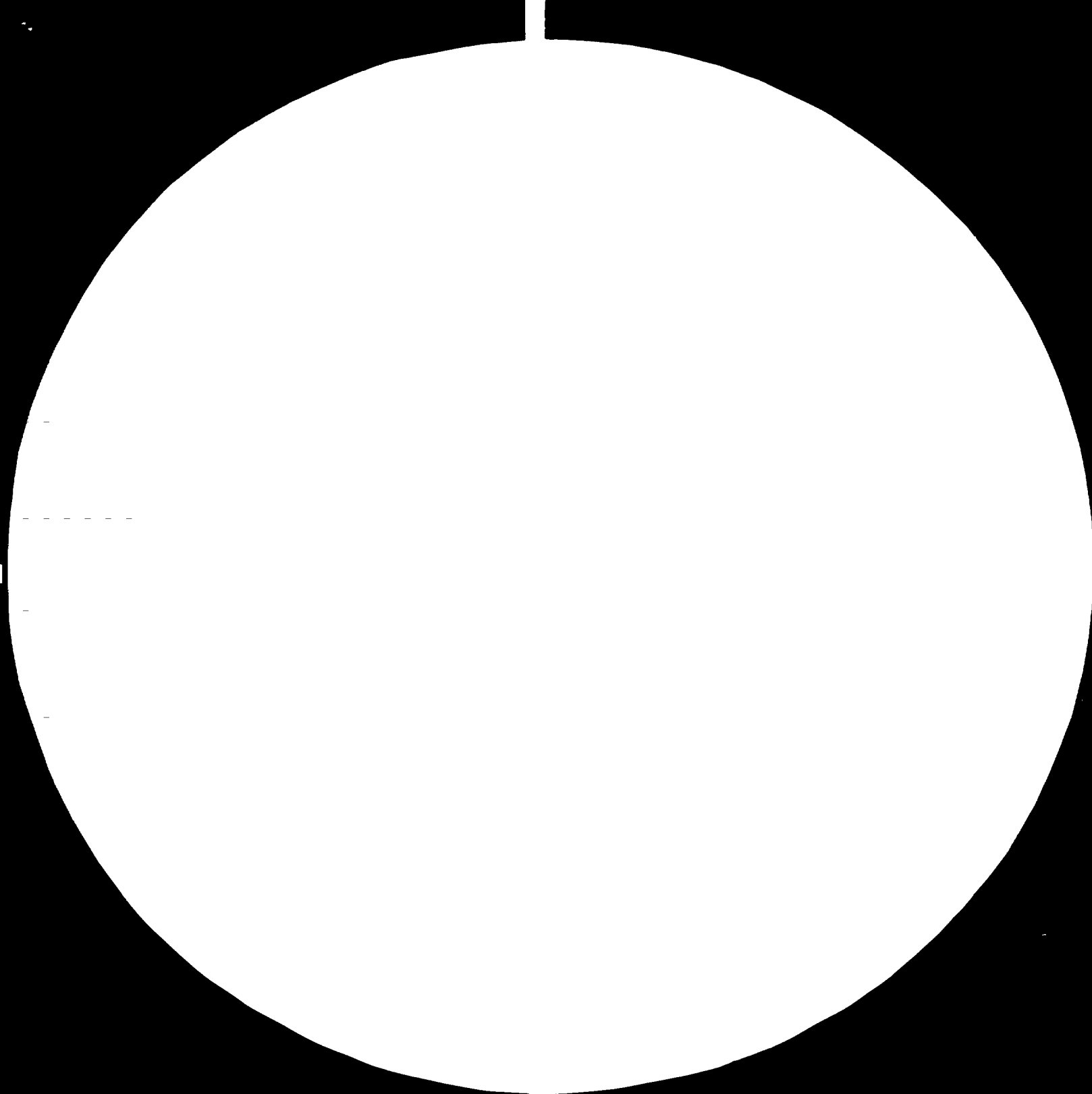
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THE COOK ISLANDS REPORT BY TONY WHITE

REFERENCE NO. DP/GKI/80/001/11-51/313.L

DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES:

12.11.1982

The objectives of this mission were primarily to create employment in the informal sectors of the economy which produce hand-crafted items for sale. Sectors such as straw and vegetable fibre industries, shell products, wood items and ethnographic reproductions and jewellery. To ensure the income benefits of the working family and to supply these products.

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DISCUSSION

At present the making of hand-crafts in most sectors is done on an ad hoc basis with no overall organised programme. Adding to this disorganisation is the fact that the Cook Islands are made up of fifteen Islands spread over a large distance taking up to two weeks to reach the more remote Islands by boat. The main Island of Rarotonga is the centre of all retail outlets and it is to this Island that all goods have to be brought for sale. Some of the Islands have airstrips but the services are carried out by very small aeroplanes incapable of carrying large amounts of hand-crafted goods, so the transportation is mainly by sea, which is often slow and irregular.

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Groups of craftsmen on each Island produce for sale often items which they prefer to make rather than those in demand by the retail outlets making it difficult to maintain supplies of popular lines.

These craftsmen and women often perform the complete process, from the gathering of the raw material, preparing it, then producing the final object and even down to selling it to a retail outlet.

This system is commendable in the sense it is authentic. However, it results in low productivity. The most skilled craftsmen are to be found in the older generation (over thirty years), while the younger generation have little interest in such activity. They look to brighter prospects beyond their Islands, such as New Zealand and Australia, where they are able to earn high wages, a proportion of which is then sent back to their families at home in the Cook Islands. Another result of this practice is that the recipient families have not much incentive to work.

There appears to be no real poverty on the Islands.

The quality of work produced is exceptionally high in some sections especially the weaving being the finest in the Pacific. The articles made of "Ritu", which is the frong of the new coconut leaf, cured in sea water before use, is unique to the Northern group of Islands and Tokelau Island near Samoa. The work in "panjanice" and shell, especially the Pu Pu

shell is also excellent. Wood carving is less developed.

The marketing of these products when carried out by the Islanders is often unsatisfactory to both manufacturer and retailer. The principles of business are unknown to many Islanders, due to the tradition that hand-craft items were usually made for utility purposes or gifts.

They have a very naive way of evaluating their products in that they price a similar item in a retail store and expect the retailer to pay them that same price, not understanding the simple principle of retail selling.

However, most of the more professional producers accept a lower price from 20% to 50%, thus allowing for the retail mark-up.

These so-called "professionals" can earn quite large amounts of money working full time at their crafts. However, they number only a few.

WORK PLAN

With this background obtained, a review of the major commercial outlets in Avarou, Rarotonga was commenced.

The commercial outlets that were reviewed were:

Tiki Industries, P.O. Box 123 Rarotonga.

Island Trader, Rarotonga.

Women's Development Centre Rarotonga.

Beachcomber, Rarotonga.

The hand-crafted items displayed for sale were examined, noting the proportion of locally made products compared to those imported and the presentation, variety and quality of these hand-crafts.

The hand-craft shops of the private sector varied in style and content; some selling almost exclusively Cook Island goods to others selling about 50% local and imported.

Naturally, there is a need among the locals for some imported items, though one feels they should be clearly separated so as not to confuse the visiting buyers.

There is a strong demand by visitors for Cook Island products. Most people have travelled long distances to visit these remote Islands, and are interested in the authentic local product.

The variety of any one line is patchy and limited. The full extent of items made locally is hard to imagine when one sees the range in the shops.

The lack of contact with the outside world is evident in the retailing sector when compared to shops in the Philippines or Tahiti or even Tonga or Samoa.

The shops are ill lit, which hindered viewing of wares particularly at night. This was probably due to the high cost of electricity.

Some items were very difficult to find on sale in the shops. Items such as shells, embroidery and applique and the famous Penrhyn natural pearls, unless one had prior knowledge of their existence.

The best display of textiles was to be found at the annual Agricultural Show which is on for only one day per year.

As the expert is a jeweller, he was aware of the natural Penrhyn pearls, having viewed them in Sydney, Australia. Also being a keen shell collector, he was disappointed to discover that most shells on sale were from the Philippines.

The retail prices for many of the items were high compared to similar items in the East, due to the high economy as reflected on the price tags.

Some of the retail outlets have factories producing hand-crafts employing local labour and are fully fitted out with machines for cutting, polishing, etc. (see photographs). The quality of the work produced by one of these factories was good, and they all have the potential for producing more quantity if required.

The supply of raw materials is often irregular due to the problems of distance and transport. Timber has to be brought in from the outer Islands along with natural fibres for weaving.

IMMEDIATE OBJECTIVES:

To advise the private marketing sector of improved promotional sales techniques, new styling directions and new product lines which can be developed with the local Cook Island craftsmen.

Appointments were made with each of the retail outlets to discuss the above objectives. All the retailers were eager to upgrade the general standard of their shops and responded very well to advice given.

The displays needed re-arranging in attractive and appealing ways, more efficient and meaningful lighting and to remove the inevitable clutter that accumulates when dealing in large quantities of small objects. Grouping together of particular lines and isolating others. Promoting Cook Island products by putting them in more prominent positions with intelligent and informative identity tags listing the name and address of the shop and displaying clearly marked price tags on all items for sale.

A collection of reference books which were purchased in Australia especially for this mission, listed subjects such as weaving, jewellery, macrame, candle-making, woodwork, etc. were shown to each of the retailers. The books were a tremendous aid in stimulating and expanding the rather limited thinking towards new product lines.

A collection of drawings of new designs were created by the expert, these drawings were based on the existing local materials with special emphasis on the more unique and distinctive ones. All drawings were left with the different makers as working drawings, etc.

The small golden pearl shell from Penrhyn Island and the black lip pearl shell were the nucleus for the new product lines for both jewellery and weaving.

The items, as shown in the photographs, were made initially as samples only for the approval of the expert before he departed and to get some idea of timing and pricing. These samples which were made in the shop workroom were then to be sent to the other workers in villages to reproduce them. They were then to be placed in a shop in a special area for sales. Promoting them as new products. The reaction of the public will be gauged by their comments and purchasing. The products were also to be shown in a fashion parade with newly designed clothes to enhance them further.

The new items were designed with the intention of adding variety and interest to the existing products and also to compliment the traditional styling.

Reference was taken from books already available in the local library and modified for contemporary daily usage.

The local museum has a very limited collection of artifacts from the Cook Islands. It is unfortunate that little actual reference can be made to the items of the past. In lieu of not having any actual items for display, perhaps a fine collection of well presented photographs could be kept for reference.

Many of the existing lines were found to be slow moving and advice was sought as to how they could be modified or added to - to make them more saleable. Some of the items only needed slight modification while others required more. For example with jewellery; the lengths of necklaces in some cases had to be shortened or lengthened to make them more appealing or flattering to the wearer. Selecting more suitable materials to replace what was used already to upgrade the look and style of the item presented. To add more or reduce some of the ornamentation to certain items. All these adjustments which in themselves small were important in demonstrating to the manufacturer an awareness of design to apply to future products.

This same principle applied to shell items and woven products, etc.

The Government of the Cook Islands has an official building called the Women's Federation, which houses hand-crafts of the Islands. Heading this Federation is Lousia Cowan, who is directly responsible to the Minister of Internal Affairs.

The items housed in this building were well displayed but lacked any variety and tended to be repetitious in content.

This is the location which most visitors expect to see the variety and quality of hand-crafts. There is a similar establishment in Nukualofa, Tonga, which is a good example of how a centre should function.

The Federation had an excellent scheme in which they stored quantities of raw materials for use by the weavers. The weavers would purchase the materials then sell them back the finished articles which in turn would be for sale at the Federation headquarters. Unfortunately this scheme ceased a few years ago.

Another enterprising outlet for the hand-crafts carried out by the Federation was to have a stall at the airport for the transit passengers, this has also been discontinued.

A meeting was held with a Mr Clarence Dunn, a representative of the International Human Assistance Programme to discuss a skilled training project for young adults. Basically, it was to set up a training school in new premises in the centre of town with studio/workshops covering about five different craft skills. Teachers would be appointed to train a group which would eventually become self supporting. They would continue at the workshop independently with their crafts on show for sale. The complex would have to be located for easy access for the general public. The shopper could see the finished work as well as how it was made. The idea is an excellent one as it would revive

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traditional crafts and introduce new skills and the whole enterprise would eventually be self-sufficient. If successful, this would then be introduced to different outer Islands that need this type of training.

The expert offered funds made available to the Womens Development Centre for the purpose of buying materials and to employ people making new samples to be later put into production, as was done in the private sector. But unfortunately, the Director was unable to purchase materials as there were none available on Rarotonga, she would have to arrange buying from the outer Islands, so this scheme did not proceed.

The timing of my arrival in Rarotonga was on the day of the opening of the 16th Anniversary Celebrations which meant for the rest of the week the whole Island was on holidays so it was impossible to proceed with my mission. Many dancing and singing groups had travelled from the outer Islands to perform in the week long celebrations, so one was freely exposed to the different styles of traditional dress, dancing and hand-crafts without having to travel long distances.

It was suggested a visit to the Islands of Mitiaro, Atiu and Mauke would be beneficial but because of the Anniversary celebrations, it was not a suitable time, as the Islanders were divided between Rarotonga and their own Islands because of the celebrations.

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The only outer Island visited was Mangaia which had to be taken as typical of the southern Islands. Here quite a lot of traditional hand-crafts are being made but mostly on a personal basis. There was a slight reluctance to sell anything they made but I was able to buy some wonderful examples of their work unlike what was available in the Rarotonga shops.

The items of interest was particularly fine hatbands made of local land snails (Pu Pu shells). The shells would be gathered after rain, cooked and cleaned, then painted ready to sew onto cloth bands in intricate patterns. Also produced were particularly finely woven baskets, bags and hats.

The craftsmen were prepared to make and sell to Rarotonga, but they required an assurance that their consignment would be paid for promptly.

Being isolated groups of people, it is natural for them to be very cautious and a little naive when dealing with big commercial interests on a larger Island. It seems through past experience, payment for services rendered were slow and often difficult to obtain and this has created a lack of trust on the part of the outer Islanders. Professional business practices and better communication could improve the situation. The Islanders seem disillusioned by any proposals to do anything on a large scale. Having seen earlier projects flourish and then fail (e.g. the Pineapple Programme).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

There is a strong need to encourage and promote the development of hand-crafts which will in turn increase the benefits of the family units which supply the products.

I discussed my recommendations with Senator V. Inghams and Senator I. Short.

Primarily, there should be a comprehensive collection of locally made hand-crafts housed in one area, open to the general public to view. The Womens Federation building would be the ideal location. The collection should represent all the fifteen (15) Islands of the Cooks.

Monsia Cowan in her capacity as Director of the Womens Federation should visit each of the Islands to select a person to be responsible for gathering the best examples of typical hand-crafts on their Island.

Ms. Cowan should then make a time to return to the Islands to personally select from what is presented and be granted sufficient money to be able to purchase same.

The individual Island Co-ordinator should then maintain a comprehensive list of what has been purchased, the maker and the price. This list would be needed to enable items to be re-ordered, etc.

As there are relatively few artifacts left on the Islands; everything on display would be new, therefore, the collection would be a living one, giving people the opportunity of not only seeing the wealth of innovative and skilled hand-crafted items able to be made today, but they would be able to purchase same. Back up stock of more popular items should be purchased so as not to deplete the display.

The opening of this collection could coincide with the next Anniversary Celebrations, as it is a time when most people, both locals and visitors are in Rarotonga. It would also add tremendously to the celebrations.

Having a permanent collection as proposed being maintained continually is a self promotional project as it is a show case enabling any overseas buyer to readily see what the Cook Islands have to offer. Overseas orders could be placed at the centre whatever the quantity.

The centre could become a focal point of the town, a popular tourist attraction.

This centre would then directly affect the smaller working units as their products would be seen and handled in a professional way and should result in more output and more income.

The building at the moment has no identity and to improve the present ambience, it was suggested that some activity

be performed on the lawns in front of the building to attract attention to the function of the building (see photographs which were taken in Tonga).

Also at the back of the centre a large covered shelter be built to house groups of workers, they would be free to work together creating hand-crafts as is done in the more traditional style.

The proposed trainee workshop by I.H.A.P. is an excellent idea and should be implemented as soon as possible. There are certain skills lacking in the Islands especially in the jewellery field.

There is sufficient work to maintain at least one jeweller and this would eliminate work being performed in New Zealand.

The upgrading in other existing skills would occur if properly trained teachers were employed and the continuation of traditional skills would be maintained professionally. Therefore, I suggest that a Jewellery Craft Technician Teacher follow up to give lessons for a three month period at least.

The re-establishing of a shop or stall at the airport is an excellent way of spreading Cook Island hand-crafts to all parts of the world without purchasers visiting the actual Islands. Transit passengers are often good potential buyers, if comprehensive collections of items for sale are readily available.

Encouraging more airlines to land at Rarotonga could only improve the exposure of the items for sale to a wider audience.

A small but comprehensive booklet should be printed and distributed to all arriving passengers at the airport. This booklet should contain all the facilities available on the Islands:- Hotels, restaurants, hand-craft stores, etc. So the visitor is aware of all avenues of interest.

The private and Government sectors should be encouraged to take a stall at the next Pacific Island Trade Fair in Sydney, Australia in September 1982. Whether done individually or as a group. This is an excellent venue to show the best of Cook Island hand-crafts to the widest audience.

Cook Island hand-crafts have an unique and therefore an immediate appeal.

Due to high labour costs compared to other countries in the Pacific region, and the high transportation costs involved, the items selected for the fair would have to be geared towards an upmarket clientele.

With the photographs and samples brought back to Australia by the expert, he will be able to gauge the type of merchandise acceptable to Australians.

Magazines have been contacted already with the intention of having some of the items photographed. Certain importers have also been approached as to their reaction to the various products.

CONCLUSION:

The hand-crafts of the Cook Islands have a strong future mainly because of their high quality and unique appeal.

There will have to be great efforts made to organise, train and manage the informal sector of the economy so they can expand and maintain a good livelihood from their work.

The re-establishment of the Womens Federation to cater for groups of women working together to produce items that are required for sale by the retail outlets, to re-introduce the system of storing raw materials so stocks are always on hand

A good network of public relations between manufacturer and retailer should be established so all problems can be discussed and solved to mutual benefit. To establish a feeling of working together as a country so all will benefit but maintaining the individual styles of each Island, giving a sense of pride in their work.

The establishing of high quality and constant supplies of hand-crafts to outlets in Korotonga which will in turn lead to good export possibilities.

When all this has been achieved the country will be in a good position to export their crafts and attract foreign exchange.

Raw materials are in short supply in many areas and continued supplies seem difficult to obtain.

Encouragement to produce more raw materials locally should be done as it is more economical and also produces more employment.

However, certain materials which are always in short supply, like turtleshell and boars tusks could be obtained from Fiji, New Guinea or the Philippines, all having plentiful supplies.

Raw undecorated tapa could be bought from Tonga through the relevant Government body at an advantageous price.

It would be economical, however, for a buyer to be sent in an official capacity to the Pacific and Asian regions to gather information as to the cost and availability of supply and delivery of the more specialised raw materials applicable for use in expanding the variety of hand-crafts produced.

Other materials not used extensively but available in the Pacific such as black coral (Tonga) sharks teeth, (Australia) whales teeth, bone, feathers and coral (Lane Moore, Marine Specimens Pty. Ltd., 27 George Street,

Sydney, 2000, Australia) could be of great help in this regard.

After having visited the high price stores in the Pacific namely Nadi International Airport, Duty Free Prouds in Suva and some of the boutiques in the better hotels in Fiji. The Cook Island products should sell well but only selected items such as "ritu" hats, shell and "ritu" fans, and especially the Penrhyn pearls both unset and in jewellery.

This would also apply to Koumea, Tahiti and Hawaii.

It would probably require someone to visit these Islands with samples, take orders and fulfill same promptly. This has a two-way effect of opening up new selling markets as well as making people more aware of the existence of the Cook Islands and their products.

A modus operandi which would work is for the Rarotongan Government to follow up an ambitious programme to promote the Cook Islands as the leading producer of unique hand-crafts in the Pacific.

This programme would involve a large proportion of the Islanders throughout the group producing high quality items to be shown world wide. It would give them a great sense of pride in their Country and in their work.

A programme like this would take many years to come to fruition. However, if the Government gave strong support throughout its development, it would be successful.

A sense of competition would have to be instilled within the Cook Islanders to do better than the other Pacific Islands. It would require outside advisers both with design production and marketing skills to be employed to guide the development of the programme. However, the backbone of this project should be made up by Islanders themselves.

The idea of training locals in special fields is very important as they in turn can educate more Islanders in their particular field, creating an ever expanding group of specialists.

Initially, a scheme to create a unique commercial collection of Cook Island designs could be achieved by inviting the best of the Islands' craftsmen to submit their work in all mediums:- jewellery, woodwork, textiles, weaving, shell work, etc. to be shown collectively in an exhibition in Rarotonga. This would then enable a professional designer to view a comprehensive collection of crafts in one place and thus enable an easier selection of those items most suitable for further development into potentially commercial products.

Prototypes would then have to be made of each of the selected items and a limited mass production carried out to ascertain whether quality and economy could be achieved.

When this has been successfully obtained, a booklet should be produced showing all the products (coloured photographs) with accompanying price list. This should then be distributed to suitable buyers in the Pacific, Australia and the Americas (who are always looking for something unique).

The buyers' reaction to this booklet would give a good indication of how successful the programme has been.

This would inevitably lead to modification and adjustment to some of the products and other facets of the programme. All advice should be at least considered.

If successful this should be followed up by a Trade Fair in Rarotonga inviting all interested parties including the press so the whole promotion could be launched with a big marketing emphasis. This sort of promotion should also be combined with something else like the Anniversary Celebrations to give it more excitement and interest.

The type of programme as suggested, developed from the beginning with a clear and positive purpose to promote the Cook Islands as the leading producer of unique hand-crafts in the Pacific would solve the

present situation by stimulating the economy and
creating job opportunities for all.

