

Oceans Of Possibilities: Empowering American Samoan Communities Through Coral Reef Education

(The initial project title, "Restoring Reefs, Reviving Hope: Empowering American Samoan Communities Through Coral Restoration," reflected the original focus on immediate coral restoration efforts through the construction of sites within the water. However, due to challenges in obtaining the necessary permits and the recent global coral bleaching event, the project's approach was reevaluated and pivoted towards outreach and education. Consequently, the project title has been updated.)

Project year: 2024

Island of Tutuila, American Samoa

Lake Forest College

Project Leader: Tamino Köhne, Germany, Lake Forest College, Robert Bosch United World College

Project Summary:

This project aimed to raise awareness and promote the protection of coral reefs in American Samoa through the development and distribution of an educational workbook tailored to the local context. The approach involved collaborating with coral experts, local communities, and the Department of Education to create a comprehensive workbook aligned with the educational standards of American Samoa.

Project Description:

Deciding on the Issue and Approach:

Initially, the project was planned to focus on immediate coral restoration through the construction of sites within the water. However, after encountering challenges in obtaining the necessary permits and considering the recent global coral bleaching event, the approach was reevaluated. Discussions with coral expert Victor Bonito in Fiji highlighted the importance of community awareness and involvement in protecting coral reefs. Consequently, the project shifted its focus towards outreach and education, culminating in the creation of a workbook specifically tailored to American Samoa's coral reefs and their needs.

The decision to change the project's approach was an important part. It showed that the project could adapt to unforeseen circumstances while staying committed to the overarching goal of protecting coral reefs in American Samoa. The setback presented an opportunity to reevaluate the strategy and seek alternative, potentially more effective methods.

Project Site Selection and Local Relationships:

American Samoa was chosen as the project site due to the need to protect its coral reefs and therefore the island and its people. Following, local relationships played a crucial role in the project's success. Collaboration with the Coral Reef Advisory Group (CRAG), the American Samoa Department of Education (AS-DOE), American Samoa Environmental Protection Agency (AS-EPA) and the Feleti Barstow Public Library, ensured that the workbook adhered to the educational standards and benchmarks of American Samoa, enabling its integration into the school curriculum.

Establishing strong local relationships was a critical aspect of the project's success. By working closely with organizations and authorities that had a deep understanding of the local context, the project was able to create a workbook that was not only informative but also culturally relevant.

Adjustments to Original Plans:

The original plan of immediate coral restoration through the construction of sites within the water was adjusted due to the challenges in obtaining permits and the recent global coral bleaching event. Following, the project changed focus towards outreach and education by creating a workbook to raise awareness and promote the protection of coral reefs in American Samoa. This flexibility ensured that the project remained relevant and impactful, despite the challenges encountered.

Additional Fundraising Efforts:

There were no additional fundraising efforts.

Opportunities for Continuing Work:

The workbook presents an opportunity to continue raising awareness and promoting the protection of coral reefs in American Samoa. Ongoing engagement with local communities, particularly through educational programs and initiatives, could further contribute to the long-term conservation of these vital ecosystems. Following, one could expand the project onto other island nations and their coral reefs by creating specific content and workshops that are applicable to their local culture and soundings. Overall, the successful creation and distribution of the workbook should not be viewed as the end of the project but rather as a foundation upon which further efforts can be built.

Reflection:

Defining Peace:

For me, peace in the context of this project goes beyond the traditional notions of conflict resolution and the absence of violence. It encompasses the harmony between humans and nature, between people, and between current and future generations - all supported by having healthy, resilient coastal ecosystems that communities rely on for their well-being, prosperity, and cultural identities into the future.

Protecting coral reefs is not just an environmental issue but also a matter of ensuring peace and stability for the people of American Samoa. These vibrant ecosystems are fundamentally linked to the cultural heritage, livelihoods, and overall well-being of the local communities.

Contribution to Peace:

This project contributes to peace by promoting environmental awareness and fostering a sense of responsibility towards the protection of coral reefs. By engaging with local communities and the younger generation, the project aims to cultivate a deeper understanding of the importance of coral reefs and the need for collaborative efforts to preserve them.

Short-term changes resulting from the project include increased awareness and knowledge about coral reefs among the local population, particularly students. This heightened awareness can contribute to a shift in attitudes and behaviors, encouraging more sustainable practices and a greater appreciation for the delicate balance of the natural world.

In the long term, the project's impact could extend beyond the immediate educational outcomes. By instilling a sense of environmental stewardship in the younger generation, the workbook has the potential to shape future decision-makers and leaders who prioritize the protection of natural resources and promote sustainable development practices.

Navigating Conflict:

One significant conflict observed during the project was the initial challenge in obtaining permits for the construction of coral restoration sites within the water. This conflict arose from administrative processes and regulations, which can often present obstacles to conservation efforts.

To navigate this conflict, I explored alternative approaches. By engaging in open communication with relevant stakeholders and seeking guidance from experts like Victor Bonito, the project was able to adapt a more feasible and potentially more impactful strategy – outreach and education.

This experience highlighted the value of seeking diverse perspectives and leveraging expertise to find creative solutions to challenges. As a result of this experience, there is an opportunity to learn more about the importance of remaining flexible and open to alternative approaches when faced with unforeseen obstacles.

Personal Growth:

This project has broadened my understanding of the complexities involved in environmental conservation efforts and the importance of community engagement. Furthermore, it has challenged me to adapt to changing circumstances and to seek creative solutions that address the root causes of environmental challenges.

Throughout the project, I have witnessed firsthand the power of collaboration and the necessity of involving local stakeholders in the decision-making process. This experience has reinforced the understanding that sustainable solutions cannot be imposed from the outside but must be co-created with the communities they aim to serve.

Navigating the challenges and pivoting the project's focus has also taught me valuable lessons in resilience and adaptability. It has reinforced the importance of remaining open-minded and being willing to adjust course when necessary to achieve the desired outcomes.

Personal Statement:

"This project has been a transformative journey, highlighting the complex connections between environmental conservation, community awareness, and sustainable development. Through our efforts to protect American Samoa's coral reefs, I have realized the power of education in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards our natural resources. The workbook not only provides valuable knowledge but also serves as a catalyst for fostering a sense of responsibility among the younger generation. It is my hope that this project will inspire others to embrace their role as stewards of our planet, working collaboratively to create a more peaceful and harmonious world." – Tamino Köhne