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### BCI Helps Samoans Gain National Park

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#### **A landmark victory made possible by our members and friends . . .**

On November 1st President Reagan signed a bill authorizing the creation of a national park in American Samoa. This is the first tropical rain forest ever protected by the U.S. National Park Service and will encompass nearly 8,500 acres of mostly virgin forest, including adjacent coastal waters and coral reefs. Such a monumental achievement would not have been possible without the dedicated assistance of BCI members who wrote letters, called, or telegraphed their support.

American Samoa is a United States territory located about 2,300 miles southwest of Hawaii. An early explorer described it as the "garden spot of the Pacific." Its five volcanic islands and two coral atolls comprise a total land mass of only 76 square miles, supporting a population of approximately 34,000 Polynesians. Average daytime temperatures in the 80's and balmy nights cooled by trade winds make an ideal climate. Unlike most tropical areas, there are no poisonous snakes, crocodiles or other dangerous animals.

Protection of this area is important for many reasons. Worldwide, tropical forests are falling prey to development and clear cutting at an alarming rate. Samoa's rain forests are no exception. The largest lowland rain forest in American Samoa has already been cleared, and in independent Western Samoa the forests are disappearing at such a rate that, by some estimates, they will be entirely gone within 20 years.

Due to their isolation and habitat diversity, the Samoan islands support unique plants and animals found nowhere else in the world. Hundreds of plant species can be found within just a few acres, and many of these have been used for thousands of years by Samoan healers. As many as 150 Samoan plant remedies are now under investigation by the National Cancer Institute in Washington, D.C.

The islands are also the only refuge of the Samoan flying fox (*Pteropus samoensis*) and home to the Tongan flying fox (*P. tonganus*). Flying fox populations throughout the Pacific Islands have been decimated by unregulated commercial hunting for export to Guam, where they are considered a delicacy.\* At least one or more species are now extinct, and others are endangered or seriously threatened. Flying foxes are vital pollinators and seed dispersers for a large proportion of Samoa's unique rain forest trees and plants. These bats will now have the protection of a national park where visitors can learn more about their vital role.

The park will be divided into two main units. A third, smaller unit, 225 acres of marine habitat, will be set aside along the island of Ofu. On the main island of Tutuila, the protected area will include the spectacular Mt. Alava ridge overlooking Pago Pago Harbor at 1,610 feet above the ocean. Cable cars will provide access to the park entrance and interpretative center on the ridge top. Visitors will be able to follow foot trails to scenic overlooks on the knife-like ridges. From there hikers can continue down into idyllic valleys, along fern edged streams and waterfalls, beneath giant tree ferns and liana vines and

through majestic tropical forests□ all the way to tranquil beaches and coral reefs on the other side of the island. Important sea bird nesting sites and flying fox roosts will provide extraordinary wildlife viewing opportunities. Along the ridges, people will be able to see Samoan flying foxes soaring on four-foot wingspans. Sometimes the bats can be seen from only a few feet away as they hover on midday thermals, curiously inspecting visitors.

Most of the new park will be located on Ta'u, a small pristine island with beautiful lowland and montane rain forests that rise to cloud forests on Mt. Alava, the highest peak in Samoa at 3,170 feet. Nearly half of the island will be designated as parkland, an area of mostly virgin forest. Visitors will enter through the prehistoric village of Saua, considered the most sacred site in Samoa. The area will be closed to vehicles and will include foot trails and primitive camping areas. Nearby villages will provide lodging and other services with typical Samoan hospitality.

Efforts to protect this area began several years ago. Paul Cox, a professor of botany at Brigham Young University and a leading authority on Pacific Island plants, became aware of the decline of Samoan flying foxes while conducting field work. As a botanist, he was especially concerned because he understood the bats' vital role in rain forest propagation. He also knew that at least one flying fox species in the Pacific had become extinct without even being declared endangered. No conservation organization or government agency had helped.

Cox heard of Merlin Tuttle's personal efforts on behalf of bats as BCI was being founded, and he became one of the organization's first members. At the time, however, BCI lacked the resources to help in Samoa. Then in late 1985, BCI Trustee, Verne Read, and his wife, Marion, offered to fund BCI's first trip to investigate flying fox problems in the Pacific. The Reads also assisted Tuttle and Cox in the field.

During the trip they confirmed the urgent need to protect flying foxes. As a result of their efforts, a government educational campaign was launched in the Marianas Islands, and legislation now protects all flying foxes in American Samoa from commercial hunting.\*\* The research that was begun on bat status and importance continues today.

The national park initiative evolved from a meeting in which BCI requested the assistance of American Samoa Governor A.P. Lutali and Lt. Governor Eni Hunkin in developing proper game management procedures for Samoan flying foxes. Tuttle, Cox, and the Reads all commented on the pristine beauty and uniqueness of Samoan rain forests. They suggested that a national park would not only safeguard the survival of flying foxes, but also would save the island's forests from further destruction. Both Lutali and Hunkin enthusiastically supported the idea, and the two year effort began.

Even though BCI was able to generate keen interest among a group of congressmen, the funds to hold the necessary preliminary hearings were not forthcoming for a full year. It was Verne Read's tenacity that led to their being held in Samoa in January 1987. Chaired by Congressman Bruce Vento, who is noted for his interest in environmental issues, the hearings were a great success. Paul Cox served as official translator for the Samoan chiefs, and he, Tuttle and the Reads also testified. A feasibility study for the park was authorized by Congress, headed by Gary Barbono of the National Park Service. His findings were highly favorable. Additional assistance from the Reads enabled Cox to return to Samoa several times to help plan details for the proposed park with local chiefs.

The next crucial step was to gain congressional hearings before the House Subcommittee

on National Parks and Public Lands in Washington. They were finally held in August 1988, and Governor Lutali and Samoan high chiefs provided persuasive testimony, assisted by a team of BCI members and friends of Samoa.\*\*\* With strong bipartisan support, committee Chairman Congressman Bruce Vento, and the minority leader, Congressman Robert Lagomarsino, co-sponsored the bill. It gained unanimous House approval on September 13 □ too late, according to most experts, to be considered by the Senate before next year, especially given the added pressures of an election year. Failure to gain approval in the 100th Congress would have meant starting all over next year.

The companion Senate bill was introduced by Senators Bennett Johnston and Jim McClure, with Robert Kasten and Spark Matsunaga as co-sponsors. In an effort to gain Senate approval this session, the bill was placed in an omnibus package. The hope was to get it passed on the "coat tails" of other noncontroversial bills on public lands.

With only two weeks to go before Congress adjourned, the bill remained unpassed. BCI made an all-out effort to gain Senate approval. Merlin Tuttle, Paul Robertson and Pat Morton of BCI coordinated efforts with members Dixie Pierson, Bill Rainey, and Barbara Cox (Paul was doing field work in West Africa). They each spent countless hours on the phone and writing letters. Members in key senator's states were asked to voice their support, and BCI contacted environmental groups in those states to alert their members.

The Samoan park bill was approved separately on October 13, despite the failure of the omnibus package to pass the Senate. The BCI team immediately began efforts to ensure presidential approval. In the final days before the November 2 deadline for the President's signature, they were back on the phone, still exhausted from the campaign to gain the bill's Senate approval. Merlin Tuttle was on the phone almost constantly, enlisting the support of Congressmen and Senators from coast to coast, and Paul Cox called daily from Africa.

With one day to go, the bill was signed by President Reagan on November 1st.

Our success has important ramifications far beyond American Samoa. As Congressmen Lagomarsino and Vento both noted, this timely act sets a precedent for American international leadership in the fight to save rapidly dwindling, but vitally important, rain forests. It also serves to reaffirm faith that individuals still count.

Getting the area set aside as a national park was only the first step toward protecting these lands. We still must be sure that the park bill is funded and implemented.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:** We deeply appreciate the many BCI member letters, phone calls and telegrams that undoubtedly played a crucial role. BCI especially thanks Congressmen Robert Lagomarsino (R-Calif.), Howard Nielsen (R-Utah), Bruce Vento (D-Minn.), and Senators Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), Bennett Johnston (D-Louisiana), Robert Kasten (R-Wisc.), Spark Matsunaga (D-Hawaii) and Jim McClure (R-Idaho). John Seiberling, former Chairman of the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs provided initial introductions to interested Congressmen. Dale Crane, Staff Director for the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands helped prepare and guide the bill through Congress. Republican Advisor on Pacific Island Affairs, Manase Mansure, played a key role in helping coordinate our efforts in the final weeks of lobbying. Especially helpful congressional aids included Sharon Mathews, Carol Lambert, and Lori Stillman.

Within American Samoa, Rick Davis, Nancy Daschbach and other members of the conservation organization, Le Vaomatua, contributed greatly from the beginning. As a

result of their efforts President Reagan received hundreds of letters from Samoan school children and more than 175 telegrams from private citizens.

(Footnote 1)

\*BATS, December 1984; March and December 1986; March and June 1987; Summer 1988

(Footnote 2)

\*\*BATS, December 1986

(Footnote 3)

\*\*\*BATS, Fall 1988

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*The BCI team looks on as Pe'a, the flying fox, is introduced to the Samoan park bill's co-sponsor, Congressman Robert Lagomarsino. From left to right, Verne Read, Merlin Tuttle, Congressman Lagomarsino, and Paul Cox. PHOTO BY MICHAEL ROTHMAN*

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