

Spiritual and environmental well-being: Factors supporting adaptation of Pacific peoples during pandemic times

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Abstract: *Most Western models of well-being focus only on social, mental, financial and physical well-being. Collecting data on how tourism-dependent communities in the South Pacific had adapted to the dramatic impacts of the pandemic, we became aware of the significance of spiritual and environmental dimensions of well-being. We also identified several Pacific well-being models that incorporate these dimensions. This article thus examines how COVID-19 lockdowns influenced the spiritual and environmental well-being of Pacific peoples living in tourism-dependent areas. It demonstrates that many people were able to adapt well despite dramatic changes in their financial situation and restrictions on their mobility. They often showed deep appreciation about having more time for religious practices and to care for others in their communities, and they enjoyed working more with nature, on the land or in the ocean, and looking after the environment. We conclude that if the tourism industry can rebuild in ways that support spiritual and environmental well-being, this could mean tourism will be appreciated more by resident communities as something which complements – rather than competes with – their culture and way of life.*

Keywords: *Cook Islands, Fiji, Samoa, tourism, Vanuatu, well-being*

Introduction

The sudden onset of COVID-19 had implications for every aspect of people's well-being, causing many to adjust how they live, work and connect with each other (OECD, 2021). In the first wave of the pandemic in March/April 2020, 168 countries put border restrictions in place (UNHCR, 2021) and thus the global tourism industry suffered greatly: tourists were scarce, revenue was lacking and tourism providers had to find alternative ways of operating (Connell and Taulealo, 2021; Becken and Loehr, 2023). The effects were felt significantly in the Pacific Islands, where tourism had become the 'backbone' of many Pacific economies providing revenue, overseas investment, job possibilities and mechanisms to progress towards achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (Movono and Hughes, 2022).

Many tourists from all over the world travel to the Pacific Islands for the '...sun, sea, sand and an exotic social and cultural environment...' (Rao, 2002: 408). However, fear of the impacts of the

pandemic in the context of weak national health systems led Pacific governments to initiate border closures, which in some cases remained in place for over two years. Local people faced high unemployment through hospitality and tourism-related business closures, which had compounding effects throughout the region (Connell, 2021). In the first year of the pandemic it was suggested that Pacific people's living standards were set back by almost a decade (Dayant, 2021). In the countries we focus upon – Samoa, Vanuatu, Cook Islands and Fiji – tourism contributed between 38% and 70% of their gross domestic product before the pandemic (South Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2019). Additionally in 2018, tourism made up 35.5% of overall employment in Fiji and 34.51% in Vanuatu (NTOs, NSOs and SPTO, 2018 as cited in South Pacific Tourism Organisation, 2018). These statistics reinforce the heavy dependence that Pacific nations have on tourism, which amplified the flow-on effects of lockdowns and border closures associated with COVID-19.

Tourism-dependent communities thus faced a stark reality which was at odds with the picturesque ‘paradise’ they lived in. Around the globe, it was anticipated that the range of new stressors would have negative implications for people’s physical, mental and social well-being, such as leading to less nutritious food on the table, heightened anxiety and less connectedness (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2020; Okabe-Miyamoto and Lyubomirsky, 2021). Our findings from Pacific Island countries paint a contrary picture (Scheyvens et al., 2021).

Many academics have explored the well-being impacts that tourism has on tourists (see e.g. Vada et al., 2020), and the relationship between COVID-19 and tourists’ well-being (Rahman et al., 2021; Rokni, 2021; Sun and Guo, 2022). However, few studies have analysed how tourism impacts residents’ well-being, with Hughes and Scheyvens (2018), Kim et al. (2013), Uysal et al. (2016) and Wang et al. (2020) providing a few notable exceptions. We argue that it is important to understand the impacts this industry has on tourism-reliant communities as this could help to encourage more sustainable and equitable tourism practices in future. This research thus puts residents’ well-being at the centre of analysis.

Previous studies have produced well-being models that have typically highlighted the importance of social, mental, financial and physical well-being (Diener et al., 1985; Prawitz et al., 2006). Focusing on the Pacific, however, the research team became aware of the significance of spiritual and environmental dimensions of well-being. Our aim in this article, therefore, is to examine how COVID-19 lockdowns influenced the spiritual and environmental well-being of Pacific peoples living in tourism-dependent areas. We start by discussing the existing literature on tourism and spiritual and environmental well-being, and comparing Western and Pacific well-being models, before outlining the study’s methodologies and findings.

Literature review

Tourism and spiritual well-being

Overwhelmingly, articles written about spiritual well-being and tourism focus on the experiences and impacts on the spiritual well-being of tourists

rather than residents (Li et al., 2021). The tourism industry has played into the desire of some tourists for self-improvement or enlightenment by curating spiritual experiences marketed to both religious and non-religious tourists. ‘Spiritual tourism’ is supposedly a more meaningful way to travel, to find spiritual purpose and fulfilment (Norman, 2011). It can involve anything from mass tourism to sacred religious sites, to yoga and meditation retreats (Norman and Pokorny, 2017). Pilgrimage tourism is one type of spiritual tourism wherein destinations enable tourists to progress their spiritual journeys: Muslims, for example, are expected to make a six-day pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, and this pilgrimage attracts 2 million visitors to Saudi Arabia every year (Oumoudden and Zahrani, 2021). Another example is wellness tourism, wherein tourists travel to destinations with the hopes of improved physical or spiritual well-being (Devereux and Carnegie, 2006; Wang et al., 2020). Tirta Empul Holy Spring Temple in Bali is considered sacred by the majority Hindu population, but it simultaneously taps into wellness tourism and is popular with tourists (Wiwiek Agustina and Arie Yudhistira, 2021). Over-commercialisation of such sites can be destructive (Qurashi, 2019: 85), however.

It is rare to find studies that focus on the spiritual well-being of destination communities involved in tourism, but insights are provided from three studies focusing on China. The significance of spiritual well-being for residents was highlighted by Li et al. (2021), who suggested that resident’s quality of life was as much determined by spiritual well-being as it was by economic, social and emotional factors. In their studies in traditional Chinese villages, spiritual well-being was a unique component of residents’ quality of life that contributed significantly to their attitudes towards tourism. This was reiterated by Pan et al. (2021) who suggested that spiritual well-being has strong impacts on social, psychological and subjective well-being. In addition, there are some tourist experiences that might provide benefits to tourists, while being spiritually detrimental for local people. Focusing on one community that attracted a lot of physically ill tourists seeking help because of its focus on ‘wellness tourism’, Wang et al. (2020) found that tourism adversely

impacted residents because of negative stigma from the large numbers of sick people visiting the area. It is clear that spiritual well-being is a component of a resident's quality of life in multiple ways, and that residents' spiritual well-being should be considered whenever tourism is being developed.

Tourism and environmental well-being

The environmental well-being of local communities in tourism destinations cannot be separated from tourism practices. Much research in this area reports on the negative impacts of tourism on the natural environment. For example, there are major concerns about overcrowding and environmental degradation associated with tourism, and how this might undermine the well-being of the tourists, the local people, or both (Gowreesunkar and Vo Thanh, 2020). Other research looks into how cruise tourism is resulting in toxic waste disposal into our oceans (Carić and Mackelworth, 2014) and how tourism activities create significant atmospheric emissions contributing to global warming (Russo *et al.*, 2020). In terms of environmental implications for local people, one study found that tourists use up to eight times the amount of fresh water that locals do, putting pressure on local supplies (Becken, 2014), and resident communities have reported that they cannot even use their own beaches as they are overflowing with tourists (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021).

Tourism can actually have both positive and/or negative impacts on environmental well-being of local people. Research shows, for example, that positive environmental outcomes can be associated with tourism in particular destinations, especially where tourism provides justification for conservation of nature (Buckley, 2012), and when people's environmental awareness is increased due to ecotourism ventures (Stronza *et al.*, 2019). Nature-based activities might improve the well-being of tourists and residents because they are based around care for the natural environment (Kim *et al.*, 2015). Sometimes other forms of tourism – such as cultural tourism in Hong Kong and southern China – also lead to improvements in the well-being of local communities because they promote environmental conservation (Ho and McKercher, 2012).

Pacific peoples and understandings of spiritual and environmental well-being

Spirituality is engrained in Pacific ways of life. Various religions were introduced in the South Pacific region during the 19th and 20th century by Western missionaries (Lange, 2005). Since then, Christianity, in particular, has continued to play a significant role in traditional and modern contexts, intertwining with almost every aspect of Pacific life. Spiritual well-being can include the totality of spiritual activities, including church participation, a relationship with God, traditional practices and ancestral connections, which are strongly tied to one's land or village (Havea *et al.*, 2018; Farbotko and McMichael, 2019). As Robbins (2009: 588) explains:

The cultures of the region, both traditionally and still today, generally give religion a prominent place, and none of them holds it separate from other domains such as politics or economics: all of social life in the Pacific Islands has religious aspects and most situations, whatever else they demand, require that people take religious considerations into account in formulating their responses.

Efi (2014) highlights the inextricable linkages between cultural and religious values. As such, spirituality has, for a while now, been shown to promote multiple well-beings (Powell *et al.*, 2003; Weber and Pargament, 2014). Spirituality has even been shown to underpin Pacific students' concerns regarding climate change (Nunn *et al.*, 2016) and it affects how youth in Fiji care for their environment (Raman and Luetz, 2021). As such, spirituality is essential to sustaining Pacific peoples' cultural identity and well-being, especially during adverse times such as the pandemic where many circumstances were beyond individuals' control.

A Pacific interpretation of environmental well-being sees a person's relationship with the environment as something that can be strengthened through caring for and respecting natural resources and customary land. A project with youth in Vanuatu, for example, found increased well-being in young people who were encouraged to learn about customary lands and traditional ways to live in harmony with their environment (Mitchell *et al.*, 2020). Indigenous

peoples have established and retained an intrinsic connection to the natural environment for many generations, meaning that ‘people’ and ‘nature’ are not necessarily seen as separate entities, rather they continuously interact with one another and rely on each other (Batibasaga et al., 1999). In Samoa and Tonga, the *vā* is a sacred space within which people are inevitably related to one another and to entities, like the physical environment (Finau et al., 2022). This is emphasised in Movono et al.’s (2022) discussion, whereby land, or *vanua* in Fijian, extends beyond Western understandings of environment to also include people, culture and tradition.

Customary land is a significant manifestation of this concept in Pacific cultures as it is passed on to each generation as a legacy of one’s heritage. There are expectations that customary land, which is where one’s ancestors are laid to rest, should be used carefully so it can also sustain future generations, thus making it significant to people’s well-being and identity (Movono et al., 2022). In this sense, environmental well-being is inherently important to tourism destination communities in the Pacific as it is both a source of livelihoods, with the land and sea being major sources of sustenance, and tied to one’s identity and socio-cultural relationships.

Pacific well-being models that depict spiritual and environment components

This section will focus on how spiritual and environmental components of well-being are considered in Pacific models, but it is first worth reflecting on their inclusion in Western models

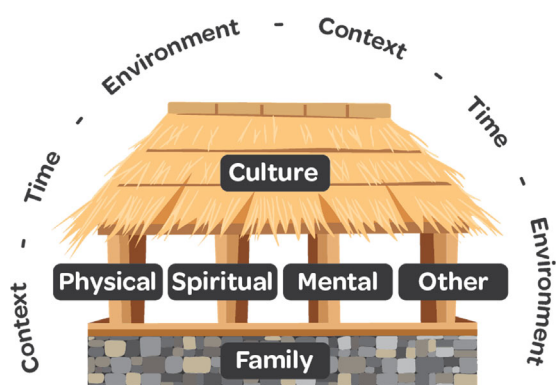


Figure 1. The Fonofale model of well-being Source: Pulotu-Endemann (2001). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/apv.12423)]

of well-being. Western discourses seem to understand that the environments people live in, and how they care for these environments, contribute to well-being. For example, the World Happiness report recognises that the happiness of an individual is influenced by the environment they are in (Helliwell et al., 2020), and a number of indicators suggest that the environment is a dimension of health in one way or another (Springer and Hauser, 2006; Bircher and Hahn, 2016; King et al., 2018). Yet, environmental well-being is scarcely mentioned in Western well-being models. Where it is, such as Ryff’s (1995) six dimensions of well-being, the environment is considered as something to be mastered, rather than a resource to be nurtured. Meanwhile, in Western models spiritual well-being is sometimes specifically included but when this occurs it appears as a sub-category of health, or is only linked to religious practices and beliefs rather than being treated holistically (Kreitzer, 2012; Salloum and Warbourton, 2019). By contrast, in many Pacific models spirituality is regarded as a fundamental part of an individual’s well-being that provides a sense of belonging across multiple contexts and shapes their identity (Manuela and Sibley, 2013).

Both spiritual and environmental well-being dimensions can be seen in the Samoan *Fonofale* model (Fig. 1) (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). Here the traditional Samoan house or *fale* is not seen alone; it sits with its own environment, time and context that encircle the framework. In this way, the *Fonofale* model demonstrates the importance of outside, environmental factors in contributing to overall well-being. *Fonofale* also highlights that a person is not just an individual, but an individual within a society, at a certain time, in a certain place. For example, *l’inei* (place of birth or origin) is a key part of identity that Samoan migrants identify with, and thus they remain tightly connected to where they grew up (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009). Spiritual well-being is one of the four *pou* of the *fale*, recognising its distinct value, while also portraying how spiritual well-being extends beyond supporting individual well-being and connects to family as well as the wider socio-cultural and environmental context.

The Tokelaun *Te Vaka Atafaga* model (Fig. 2), which is centred on a *vaka* (canoe), also

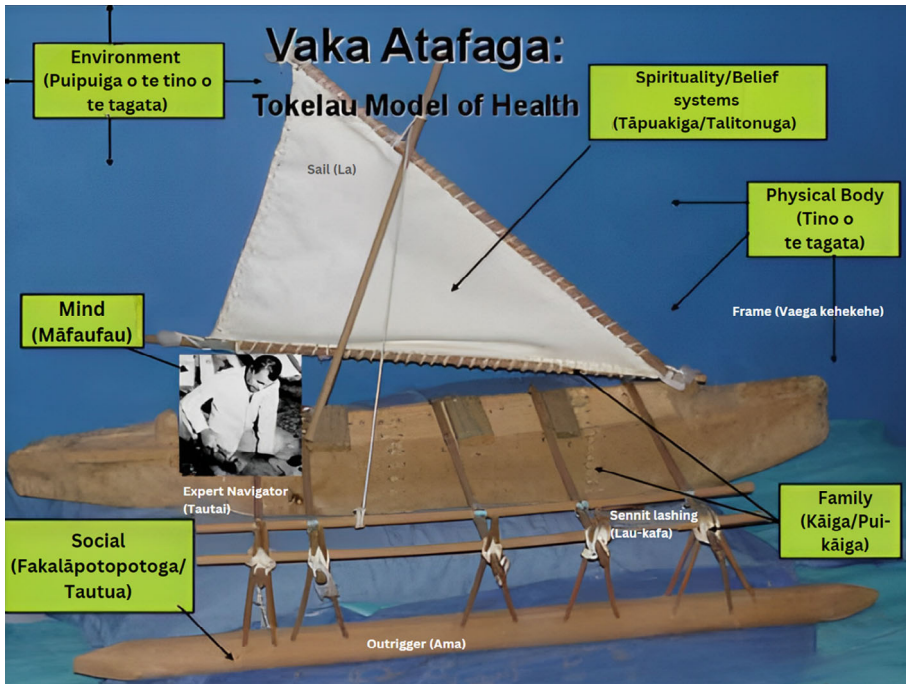


Figure 2. The Tokelauan Te Vaka Atafaga model *Source:* Redrawn version: Kupa (2009). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

recognises the importance of spiritual and environmental well-being (Kupa, 2009). Tapuakiga/Talilonuga (spirituality/belief systems) is represented as the ‘La’, or sail, that propels the vaka on its journey to well-being (Kupa, 2009). The *La* is said to be driven by *mana* (personal and collective strength and pride), which is at work across one’s life; this represents a convergence of introduced practices of Christianity and traditional Tokelauan belief systems. Like the *Fonofale* model, spiritual well-being does not stand alone but is linked to other aspects of well-being: *kaiga* (family) is represented by the rope that bounds the parts of the vaka together; the wooden structure of the vaka symbolises a strong physical body; *maufau* (mind) is represented by an expert navigator who steers the vaka; and the *ama* (outrigger) symbolises the social systems that are integral to ensuring support of all individuals. This reinforces the theme of holistic well-being as each aspect of the vaka is equally important to the overall structure and its success in sailing. Further, *Te Vaka Atafaga* positions its vaka within the ocean, which is its environmental context. If the sea is rough, or the wind is too strong, these things will affect

the boat itself and all of the well-beings associated with it.

Tonga’s *Fonua* model (Fig. 3) differs from the earlier models as it places spiritual well-being of individuals at the centre with the other aspects of well-being encircling it (Tu’itahi, 2007). This model suggests that spirituality is the fundamental grounding for other aspects of well-being. In Tongan culture, having a relationship with God and the Church is vital to not only sustaining spiritual well-being but also supporting mental, physical, community and environmental well-being (Havea *et al.*, 2018). In the *Fonua* model, environmental well-being encircles the model, providing the context within which all other well-beings are situated (Tu’itahi, 2007). The *Fonua* model also recognises scale, and how well-being must be addressed at local, national and global levels (Tu’itahi, 2007).

These Pacific well-being models express that the environment is not simply the context within which people live, but it is part of who they are, so environmental and human well-being are understood as integrally interconnected. Furthermore, while spirituality is represented slightly

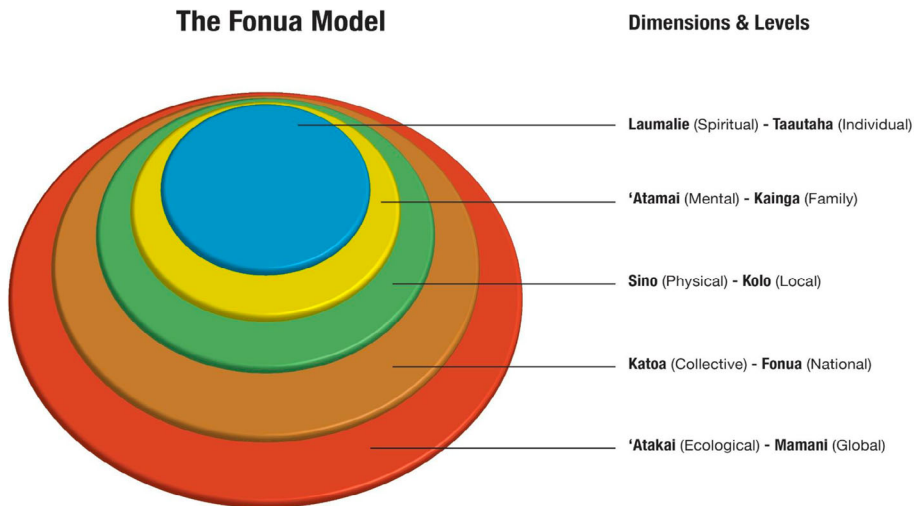


Figure 3. The Tongan Fonua model *Source:* Tu'itahi (2007). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ajpr.12422)]

differently in each Pacific model, all see it as inherent to a person's overall well-being and their wider relationships.

In summary, analysis of the literature has indicated that we need to move beyond dominant scholarly writing on tourism and well-being, which focuses primarily on the well-being of tourists. Tourism has become centralised on consumer satisfaction, which has meant tourism-dependent communities are overlooked or under-valued in discussions about future tourism development. Our optic is to put well-being of the communities hosting tourists at the centre of analysis. Examining Pacific models of well-being has made it apparent that in addition to conventional Western dimensions of mental, social, physical and financial well-being, environmental and spiritual well-being should be considered. These two dimensions will be highlighted in the research findings to follow.

Methodology

The findings presented in this article stem from wider research around the pandemic which assessed well-being in tourism-dependent communities in Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands and Vanuatu during COVID-19 related border closures (Phase 1, 2021–2022), and six months after international tourists returned to these

countries (Phase 2, 2022–2023). This article will show how people's spiritual and environmental well-being fared in Phase 1 and Phase 2. We targeted countries and communities that had, prior to COVID-19, relied heavily on tourism for local jobs and revenue (see Table 1), enabling us to compare their response to a lack of tourists, followed by a return of tourists, across a range of well-being dimensions.

The authors of this article include two primary researchers and two early career researchers. Both primary researchers have extensive experience researching tourism in the Pacific region, leading to their deep concern for how tourism-dependent communities were coping when the pandemic struck: that is what drove this project. In addition, the first author is Fijian and he has previously taught tourism students at the multi-campus University of the South Pacific and thus has extensive networks of contacts across the region, including graduates now working as tourism practitioners, policy makers and business people. This proved invaluable to the data collection approach during a time of closed borders. One early career researcher is Samoan and undertook a summer scholarship in which she was mentored to enhance her experience of doing Pacific-based research, and culturally responsive approaches to Pacific research. She was also given the opportunity to analyse and write up some of the data from this project. The other early career researcher was employed to bring social

Table 1. Comparison of tourism in four Pacific Island countries for 2019

	Population	Visitor arrivals	Tourism employment	Tourism receipts (US\$ million)	Tourism revenue as a % of GDP
Fiji	883 000	870 309	41 338	931	38.90%
Vanuatu	293 000	115 634	15 000	281	45.90%
Samoa	196 000	167 651	5158	248	30.42%
Cook Islands	18 000	168 760	2386	253	86.99%

Source: South Pacific Tourism Organisation (2019).

psychology and quantitative analysis skills to the project.

Our study was conducted during a worldwide pandemic but was grounded in a fieldwork approach. We thus worked around travel restrictions by employing local research associates (RAs) in the four Pacific Island countries. We approached RAs based on their research experience, connections in the tourism sector and the two primary researchers' pre-existing links to potential case study communities. Employing local RAs who were skilled in the appropriate language and familiar with cultural norms and local communities helped to overcome researcher-participant power relations – essentially, supporting ethics 'from the bottom up' (Banks and Scheyvens, 2014: 161–162). The RAs were trained via Zoom about the aims, research practice and ethics behind the study, the roles they would undertake and what they could gain from working with us. Our two main research methods were used in the Phase 1 and Phase 2 data collection: an online survey and in-person interviews. This article collates information from both of these data sources.

Online survey

In each phase, the RAs aimed to administer the survey to 50 people living in tourism-dependent communities in their respective countries. Sampling was purposive as we asked RAs to reach out to a broad range of people – specifically targeting youth, elders, tourism business owners, former tourism employees and owners of related enterprises (e.g. taxi drivers). RAs administered Phase 1 within the same three-month period from November 2021 to January 2022 but varied more with the administration of Phase 2 (October 2022–February 2023) as they had to wait until the borders of each country had been open again for 6 months. There was a total of 412 survey

responses recorded in Qualtrics ($F = 216$, $M = 185$, other = 8, would rather not say = 3). This included 214 from Phase 1 of the study: 57 from Samoa, 51 from Fiji, 52 from the Cook Islands, 50 from Vanuatu and 4 that were excluded due to incomplete responses. In Phase 2, there were 198 responses used: 50 from Fiji, 50 from Cook Islands, 50 from Vanuatu, 48 from Samoa and 2 that were excluded due to being incomplete. RAs targeted the same tourism-dependent communities in each phase, but it was not possible to survey exactly the same participants for the following reasons: the RAs were asked to collect demographic information from participants in Phase 1 but did not have a list of their names that they could refer to in Phase 2 (this was to protect confidentiality of participants, as required by our ethics approval process); in Cook Islands and Vanuatu, the Phase 1 RAs were no longer available so new RAs had to be recruited; and thirdly, there was considerable time between the two phases of the survey and in this period, a number of people moved in and out of the tourism-dependent communities to pursue other opportunities (noting that some moved within their countries while others travelled overseas as borders had opened for Phase 2).

The quantitative analysis in this paper details responses to one question asked in relation to the well-being dimensions, for example, in Phase 1, 'During the period of COVID-19, my spiritual [or environmental] well-being has improved', and in Phase 2, 'Since the return of international tourists, my spiritual [or environmental] well-being has improved', which could be scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' through to 'strongly agree'. The qualitative aspect included a general open-ended question for each well-being dimension. For example, 'Overall, has the 2020–2021 period of the pandemic had positive and/or negative impacts on your spiritual [or environmental] well-being? Please explain'.

Table 2. Interview demographics

	Interviews and Talanoa		
	Males	Females	Total
Fiji	8	8	16
Cook Islands	8	8	16
Samoa	5	7	12
Vanuatu	26	7	33
Total	47	30	77

Interviews

While the well-being survey included some open-ended questions, we also wanted to ensure we allowed more time for people to reflect on the topic of well-being in a conversational setting. Thus, we asked the RAs to also do some semi-structured interviews with tourism sector workers/former workers, young people, women and elders in the communities. A total of 82 interviews took place in 2021 (see Table 2) following a semi-structured interview format.

The RAs were at liberty to select participants based on their prior relationships and experience, and to decide whether individual interviews or small group *talanoa* (fluid, less structured conversations) were most appropriate given the cultural context and other factors (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012). RAs were asked to follow appropriate cultural protocols (e.g. in Fiji, organising *sevusevu* – offerings to the village head or chief) as required, and providing *koha* (a small gift) or *kai*/refreshments for those taking part.

RAs provided research materials to the research team in the form of audio recordings (where permission was granted), and/or summary notes and quotations from participants. Where we quote from the interviews in this report, the word ‘interview’ will explicitly appear in the source after the description of the person speaking and date; where we are quoting from a survey response, the word ‘survey’ will appear as part of the source.

Data analysis

Quantitative data were processed in Excel where Likert responses were recoded into numbers (1–5). Data were transferred into SPSS where *t* tests and analyses of variance with post

hoc tests were conducted for each time point. Qualitative data were analysed on NVivo and Qualtrics. For the open-ended questions asked in the survey and the interview data, a six-step structure of thematic content analysis was used (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The researchers familiarised themselves with the interview data through a manual transcription process, and with the survey data by semi-manual transcription from Qualtrics. They then carefully combed the transcripts and responses to amend any errors. Next, they collated a general list of ideas about patterns in the data within each dimension of well-being; note that the two lead researchers examined the transcripts separately to search for common themes, then compared notes to cross-check key themes and ensure rigour. This process was aided by thinking back to aspects of the well-being literature and other psychological models of well-being. From here, themes were systematically reviewed to ensure their robustness and uniqueness to one another. To finish, themes were grouped under each over-arching well-being dimension.

Findings

Before launching into the research findings, we would like to explain our use of the terms ‘Pacific’ or ‘Pacific peoples’: these terms have their flaws as they can homogenise the thousands of distinct Pacific cultural and linguistic groups. We do not want to generalise or to suggest Pacific peoples share the same experiences in every case, but the surveys did indicate that there were some similar experiences of the pandemic for tourism-dependent communities in the four targeted countries. It has also been suggested that an element of Pan-Pacific belonging, in general, factors into well-being (Manuela and Sibley, 2013). Thus, throughout this work we do refer to ‘Pacific’ or ‘Pacific peoples’ when talking about findings that seemed to resonate across several countries of the South Pacific.

Previously, the authors of this article have examined various dimensions of Pacific well-being in relation to COVID-19 and tourism. Our findings have suggested that Pacific peoples coped well with respect to various aspects of well-being despite facing financial hardships

during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2021; Movono *et al.*, 2022). While the spiritual and environmental aspects of well-being addressed in this article are noted in an earlier publication (Scheyvens *et al.*, 2023), the purpose of that article was mainly to explain how and why we developed a six-dimensional framework of well-being, showing how this had evolved from an initial analysis of four dimensions of well-being. We then communicated brief findings on each of the six well-beings in order to show the validity of the framework of well-being which we developed. This article, by contrast, delves deeply into the two *novel* aspects of well-being in our six-dimensional model, because while there are numerous studies verifying the value of understanding social, mental, financial and physical aspects of well-being, few consider either environmental or spiritual well-being. Specifically, spiritual and environmental well-being data from the online survey and interviews across Phase 1 and Phase 2 is collated and analysed below.

Spiritual well-being

A paired samples *t* test was conducted to compare spiritual well-being during border closures due to COVID-19, and when international tourists returned to the Pacific. Analysing results from the 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (=1) through to 'strongly agree' (=5), average spiritual well-being was significantly higher during border closures ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.06$) compared to six months after borders opened and international tourists returned to these countries ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.10$); $t(194) = 2.36$, $p = 0.019$.

Phase 1. The qualitative data corroborated these findings as most respondents indicated that their spiritual well-being had increased during the pandemic period. Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu are generally considered highly religious countries, with most people seeing religious practices as a cornerstone of the community and a part of their culture. Many respondents articulated that their faith was deepened when they turned to God for support when facing pandemic-related shocks:

Spirituality has grown. When you try everything and there is still nothing, what is left is to seek God. That is the strength of Pacific people, being spiritually devoted. (M, Samoa, survey, 2021)

I think a lot of people turned spiritual ... I've never seen these people go to church in the past. And now you see them dressed up on Sunday mornings heading down to the church. (M, Cook Islands, Interview, 2020)

The implementation of COVID-19 restrictions alongside widespread job losses also provided people with more time to devote to spiritual activities by themselves, with their families and church communities. This saw an increase in religious participation and a rallying of collective support for others in their communities:

I was never focused on my spirituality before, [but] this period made me practice my religion more because during this period we've had to check in on our neighbours more, and it feels like we've been practising and living out religious values more. (F, Cook Islands, Survey, 2021)

Even respondents who were not particularly religious said that spirituality was an important aspect of their well-being, and they practiced their beliefs or values in different ways:

Although I am not a religious person, I admit myself and many in my community have turned to the church, the land and each other – this is a good thing instead of the selfish ways before the pandemic. We are now more god-fearing people. (F, Fiji, survey, 2021)

Spirituality is deeply embedded in Pacific culture and tradition, not just in religious beliefs, and this traditional spirituality continues to be relevant in modern contexts. This became clear when many people moved back to their home villages because it was too expensive to live in town after they lost their tourism-related jobs. This reverse migration saw a renewed connection with their *vanua* (ancestral lands) and their traditional roots, which also strengthened spiritual well-being.

Interestingly, social distancing requirements meant that many church services were held

over zoom and people had to adapt to a new way of worshipping. This saw an increase in spiritual practices at home:

Since COVID started, we now do our religious commitments over zoom, which has been good, you get used to it and it is more convenient. (F, Cook Islands, survey, 2021)

There was a time where all the church gatherings on Sundays were stopped, so it made us stay home and do our prayers at home with the family, more often than attending church on Sundays. (F, Samoa, Survey, 2022)

The shift from in-person church services to online services also saw changes to some respondents' religious participation. Now that services have resumed in person, some people still prefer to pray at home rather than going to church. Although this would not necessarily impact spiritual well-being, this could impact their social well-being as they would not have face-to-face interactions with their church community. A Samoan woman, for example, indicated that:

Personally, I am a spiritual person, but I prefer doing my own kind of worshipping God thing at home not in a church full of people. (F, Samoa, survey, 2022)

Most people spoke positively about the increase in spiritual practices and associated impacts on well-being. However, there appears to have been a negative impact on well-being for a small number of respondents who, dealing with a major drop in household income, felt judged for having to reduce their financial contributions to their church. The emphasis on religious commitment and contribution in some denominations, where tithing is the norm, can put a lot of financial and social stress on families. Reduced cashflow brought tension between families and individuals who could afford to give, and those who could not. Several respondents' statements corroborated this theme and noted the financial struggles of stretching their money to meet all their needs as well as their church commitments:

The expectation of the church can be negative, they expect people to make their contributions even though there are people who have had their pays cut. There are churches who sell bingo tickets, and there is a punishment for not being able to sell all the tickets you were given. (F, Samoa, interview, 2020)

Overall, however, most Pacific peoples in our study have felt that their spiritual well-being flourished during the pandemic and contributed to a heightened sense of overall well-being. They relied on spirituality to guide them through tough times and were able to worship together with their families while becoming more spiritually connected. People saw the value in spirituality, adapted to new ways of practising their faith, and many rejuvenated their faith during this time. It was also clear how spirituality was connected to social and mental well-being through the qualitative data.

Phase 2. As tourists returned to the Pacific, a strong sense of spiritual well-being among respondents continued. People reported being happy that they were now able to pay tithes and go to church along with their friends and families more as everything returned to 'normal'.

I didn't go to church a lot before but now that we are free to move place to place, I read the bible and attend church more too. (F, small business owner, Vanuatu, survey, 2023)

With the opening of borders everything goes back to normal including service on Sundays and conferences that our church holds every year, and it helps improve my spiritual life. (F, teacher, Samoa, survey, 2023).

I now have money to give as offering and tithes at church and I'm able to visit other church members and take part in outreach. (F, tourism related business owner, Vanuatu, survey, 2023).

However, some displayed mixed feelings about tourism's impact on spiritual well-being.

Tourism is both a blessing and distraction to spiritual wellbeing. (F, Fiji, survey, 2022)

Many people felt that work dominated their time and spiritual well-being was neglected with the return of tourism:

I am more interested in making money from tourists on Sundays rather than going to church. (M, small business owner, Vanuatu, survey, 2023)

I have felt too busy and overwhelmed to breathe and practice spirituality. (Female, Cook Islands, survey, 2022)

Unsurprisingly, then, some missed the peacefulness of life without tourists:

I have started to miss most of my special quiet time. We are constantly moving from place to place. (M, Fiji, survey, 2022)

Others were unhappy with the 'bad influence' of tourists on spirituality: many tourists are non-religious and they tend to engage in behaviours (e.g. alcohol consumption, style of dress) deemed inappropriate by some denominations:

Tourists are introducing us to a way of life that is against our spiritual beliefs. (M, unemployed, Samoa, survey, 2023)

Overall, spiritual well-being was clearly important to most of our respondents. Although there were good sides to spiritual well-being during both time periods, respondents indicated a greater sense of spiritual well-being over the period of border closures compared to when tourists had returned to these countries.

Environmental well-being

Environmental well-being generally improved for Pacific peoples over the pandemic period. A paired samples *t* test was conducted to compare environmental well-being during border closures due to COVID-19, and when international tourists returned to the Pacific. Average environmental well-being was significantly higher during border closures ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.21$) compared to when international tourists returned to these countries ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.13$); $t(184) = 3.02$, $p = 0.003$.

Phase 1. A key theme across several interviews and survey responses was that the absence of tourists gave the environment a chance to rest and recover. Some participants, from the Cook Islands especially, shared how the commercialisation of land and beaches for tourism has seen increased overuse and natural resource degradation:

as the years went on as I'm growing up, it [the Cook Islands] is changing, to become like a mini Hawaii. (M, Cook Islands, interview, 2020)

People across our case study countries then felt like the COVID-19 pandemic had a good side in that there was less rubbish in tourist areas and a drop in pressure on resources which led to revitalisation of ecosystems:

With no tourists around the lagoon, reef and land has had time to relax and recover so that has been positive to see fish come back. (M, tourism employee, Fiji, survey, 2021)

I believe having no tourists around is good for nature. We have less waste and rubbish which saves the environment. (F, retired, Samoa, survey, 2022)

With more time on their hands and also a drop in their income, people began to reacquaint themselves more closely with the natural environment as they started working more on their customary lands to grow food for their households, and they engaged in more fishing. Respondents suggested that this reinvigorated traditional diets and lifestyles, enabling them to live more healthy lives in more sustainable and cooperative ways. Over a number of months their gardens or plantations became a place of socialisation and abundant produce, reinforcing their relationship with the land:

Covid-19 made us go back to the land, having the time to work and be connected to our lands, the main possession we have. No wonder our people say our land is our identity, where we belong. Because when everything fails we always go back to it, planting and developing. (M, Samoa, survey, 2021)

The above quote highlights a theme that was shared by many people, who noted the

continual value of land through unprecedented times. They reflected on how environmental resources have always been important to Pacific cultures, enabling them to survive regardless of their financial situation. As noted earlier, this was reinforced through the reverse migration of tourism workers, from urban cities to villages, where people were able to rebuild their resilience in the face of the challenges associated with COVID-1:

This has been an opportunity we now go back to work the land with plantations and also raise pigs and chickens, things we have neglected for a while, we now are reminded how useful to keep these going as we fall back to it during hard times like the pandemic we face now. (M, Samoa, interview, 2020)

The agricultural, horticultural and fishing knowledge that had been pushed aside by many tourism workers was relearned and retaught to many individuals and families for the sake of their survival and well-being:

People are now becoming self-reliant in terms of food and other small businesses. This is good because it brings people to depend on the land, care for it and be sustained by it. This is important for my people, to be one and within their land. (F, Fiji, survey, 2021)

Some people decided to become tourists in their own countries and appreciate their surrounding environment. This contributed to people's environmental well-being as they felt more connected to nature and appreciative of its beauty:

I enjoyed spending holiday time at the beach camping, taking time to appreciate the beauty of our place. (F, Cook Islands, survey, 2022)

Others decided to restore their villages to benefit the natural environment. In the absence of tourists, people had time to look after their own surroundings rather than putting on a show for overseas visitors. This was enhanced by the sense of guardianship over the environment due to the ability to spend more time outside:

There have been more village beautification projects and people are repairing their homes

and taking pride in the village, not like before the pandemic. (M, Fiji, survey, 2021)

Before Covid, people didn't care about our environment, but with this pandemic everyone is trying to keep the environment clean. (M, Vanuatu, survey, 2022)

It could be expected that losing jobs would have seen many lose purpose and develop negative emotions. However, some expressed how spending time in nature absolutely helped their mental health as they felt more at one with nature:

It is good to be out in the open and getting dirty, I miss my friends at work [at a resort] and meeting different people every day but this is nice too, the quiet in the plantation allows us to relax while working. [There is] less stress and this feels natural. (M, Samoa, interview, 2021)

There were downsides to environmental well-being during the pandemic too, however. Some respondents thought that there was environmental degradation due to higher demands on the land when people returning to the villages from cities. This saw more people clearing land for farming. These changes were necessary for the livelihoods and survival of many families who relied on agriculture for food and money, however, there was an environmental cost:

I think now there is greater destruction of the forests as more people are clearing for farms. (F, Fiji, survey, 2021)

The environment has degraded a lot because the population of my community has increased a lot. I don't have [as] much connection the environment as in the past. (M, Vanuatu, survey, 2022)

There were some obvious country-based differences in environmental well-being. The Cook Islands, for example, reported significantly lower environmental well-being in comparison to Vanuatu, which had the highest environmental well-being across the board. This may have been due to the higher numbers of tourists in Cook Islands relative to land size: there were nine visitors for every local resident in 2019

(Table 1). The negative ongoing impacts of tourism on the environment are shown in the following quote:

Tourism is filling our environment, that's killing our lagoon and the other thing is waste. (M, Cook Islands, Interview, 2020)

Phase 2. On the whole, environmental well-being declined when tourists returned. However, there were good aspects noted by respondents. These included participants having a strong sense of pride for the beauty of their countries and communities in the face of the scrutiny of international visitors:

I like sharing how beautiful my country is. (F, Cook Islands, survey, 2022)

I think it has had a positive impact as it has caused us to think seriously about cleaning our environment... (M, tourism related business owner, Vanuatu, survey, 2023)

However, the negative side of the return to tourism outweighed the positives for many in terms of environmental well-being. Some noted that they had less time and opportunity to be in nature, at peace:

We can't even use our own beach now since tourists are always there using it every day except Sundays. We like our quiet beach. (F, Cook Islands, survey, 2022)

Other people reported that there was more pollution and rubbish, less care of gardens and the abandoning of customary land to go back to 9–5 jobs.

Beauty-wise tourism has a direct impact on land use. If you look outside, that area was clean because people attended to their garden but now it's overgrown as they go back to work. Cars starts to run again frequently causing air pollution. (F, Fiji, survey, 2022)

There's a lot of littering. Also, many vehicles and the flights of planes to and from Samoa with many vehicles on the road – everything leads to climate change. (F, unemployed, Samoa, survey, 2023)

I don't think it has had a positive impact as the focus for a lot of the villagers has gone back to making money from tourists and I find that there is not enough space to plant or start up small gardens on our island and there's a lot of rubbish. (F, small business owner, Vanuatu, survey, 2023)

Overall, most respondents felt that their environmental well-being improved over the period of COVID-19 thanks to an absence of tourists and pollution, utilising customary lands, and a higher level of care for the environment showed by all. When tourism resumed, there were some negative implications for environmental well-being – including pollution, crowding of some natural sites and less time for people to have their hands in the soil or relax and enjoy nature. The isolation brought on by COVID-19 enabled the environment to 'rest and recover' to some extent, and for Pacific peoples to feel more connected to the natural environment than is possible when tourism is their main economic driver.

Discussion

This article has shown how Pacific peoples in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Cook Islands showed high spiritual and environmental well-being during the COVID-19-related border closures in 2020–2022, and to a lesser extent this continued after borders re-opened to tourists. The rapid decrease in international tourism brought on by the pandemic gave people time to deepen their connection to their spirituality, which is closely intertwined with culture (Manuela and Sibley, 2013), contribute to their church and to the broader community. Pacific peoples who had previously relied on income from the tourism sector reverted to their roots and were more in touch with the natural environment because of this, whether this involved growing food or fishing, enjoying their beaches or tidying up around their villages.

Thus the pandemic provided a unique period wherein Pacific peoples could not rely on tourism for income, yet many people reported that they thrived. What is particularly significant is that they were able to look inwards to find solutions, rather than relying on outside help,

demonstrating how culture and traditional ties and practices can contribute to resilience (Movono et al., 2022). The pandemic changed some people's perceptions of the tourism industry as the backbone of their economies and their assumed dependence on tourism when, overnight, they lost their main source of income. Meanwhile, their cultural networks, collective practices, their natural resources and spiritual connections enabled them to stand strong during this crisis (Leweniqila and Vunibola, 2020). For example, people were proud that they were able to significantly increase production of root crops in Fiji and Solomon Islands (Iese et al., 2021). Also, by returning to the land to grow food it became apparent that they did not need to be so dependent on imported processed foods which have resulted in problems like hidden hunger and a rise in non-communicable diseases across the Pacific (Haden, 2009). A forced shift to localisation (Scheyvens et al., 2023) and the slower-pace of life during the border closures thus supported Pacific people's spiritual and environmental well-being.

This research thus provides evidence that people's spiritual beliefs and practices plus their connections to the natural environment have cushioned them from the devastating impacts of the pandemic, such as the financial and mental stressors. Indeed, some of the quotes above from participants showed how various aspects of well-being were interwoven. For example, a number of people felt more 'at peace' when working the land or out on the ocean, suggesting strong links between environmental and mental well-being. Similarly, caring for one's neighbours as a religious obligation led to a heightened sense of social connection and well-being for some people. Spiritual and environmental well-being are also inextricably linked with each other and with people's cultural identities, just as Pacific people and environment are not necessarily seen as separate entities (Li et al., 2021; Counted et al., 2023).

In terms of well-being models, this article adds to the literature by demonstrating the legitimacy and importance of spiritual and environmental dimensions of well-being, showing how they interact with other dimensions to contribute to a more holistic vision of well-being. Our findings corroborate the value of Pacific Indigenous approaches to well-being as demonstrated in the *Fonofale*, *Te Vaka Atafaga* and *Fonua*

well-being models presented earlier (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001; Tu'itahi, 2007; Kupa, 2009). These models show that people's relationships with each other, their spirituality and their place or environment are highly regarded, and can lead to positive well-being outcomes for people (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009). Now is also a good time to rethink Western well-being frameworks. Spiritual and environmental well-being are often overlooked or overshadowed while mental, financial, social and physical well-being become the focus. Attention to environmental well-being is long overdue in a world where we are feeling the consequences of humans' incessant exploitation and degradation of the environment to increase their material wealth. As Indigenous models of well-being show very clearly, human and environmental well-being are reliant on one another: they are interwoven (Batibasaga et al., 1999). Thus it is not surprising that research shows that contact with nature can contribute to the well-being of many people (Sturge et al., 2021) and provide an effective population-wide strategy for prevention of mental health issues (Maller et al., 2006). Similarly, spiritual well-being is important even for many people who identify as non-religious, it links to both mental and physical health, and it can be regarded as a crucial component of people's quality of life (Bredle et al., 2011).

A key conclusion from this article is that tourism studies need to pay more attention to the well-being of resident communities, rather than focusing mainly on customer satisfaction and the well-being of tourists. This is particularly critical if we are to move towards some of the aspirational goals for tourism laid out during the pandemic years, when scholars reflected on how we could engage in more responsible tourism practices (Dias et al., 2021), promote social and ecological justice through tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020) and prevent over-tourism (Milano et al., 2022). A concern for resident well-being would also mean being aware of the specific cultural and environmental contexts of tourism-dependent communities, and paying heed, in particular, to promoting the well-being of groups who have faced spiritual and environmental harm due to tourism, such as Indigenous peoples (Carr, 2020).

We need to go about tourism in a way that still allows residents – including the tourism

workforce – to thrive, in line with a more regenerative approach to tourism (Becken and Kaur, 2021). Tourism cannot take place without the hospitality of resident communities, so it is important to see how they are doing and what they need from tourism. Clearly many tourism products centre on the cultural traits of host communities (Tolkach and Pratt, 2021). For example, resorts expect their employees to welcome guests with traditional greetings and ‘put on a good cultural show’. However, typically they do not also accommodate other aspects of traditional practice such as, for example, funeral rites (which could take employees away from work for several days) or religious commitments (such as having Sundays off to attend church services). We argue here that traditional practices and beliefs that helped Pacific people to survive in the pandemic times should be protected. Both governments and major employers of people working in tourism in the Pacific should seek to retain spaces for employees to practice traditional roles and retain their traditional knowledge: this goes hand in hand with supporting their spiritual and environmental well-being.

Conclusion

Spiritual and environmental dimensions of well-being are important to most human beings and should be considered in a wide range of well-being models. The concern around these well-being dimensions is heightened in Pacific contexts, where cultural identity is founded upon connections to nature and place as well as through spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, success of tourism should not be measured simply by seeing if tourists’ well-being is enhanced during their holidays: there should be concern for the well-being of resident communities as well. In conclusion, if the tourism industry can rebuild in ways which support spiritual and environmental well-being of tourism-dependent communities this will mean tourism is valued more by these communities and appreciated for complementing – rather than competing with – their culture. Tourism should celebrate the strengths-based approach of Pacific peoples in responding to unprecedented events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Movono *et al.*, 2023),

leaving a space for Indigenous peoples in the Pacific to practice and retain their traditional knowledge and appreciating the inherent interplay of this with spiritual and environmental well-being.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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