

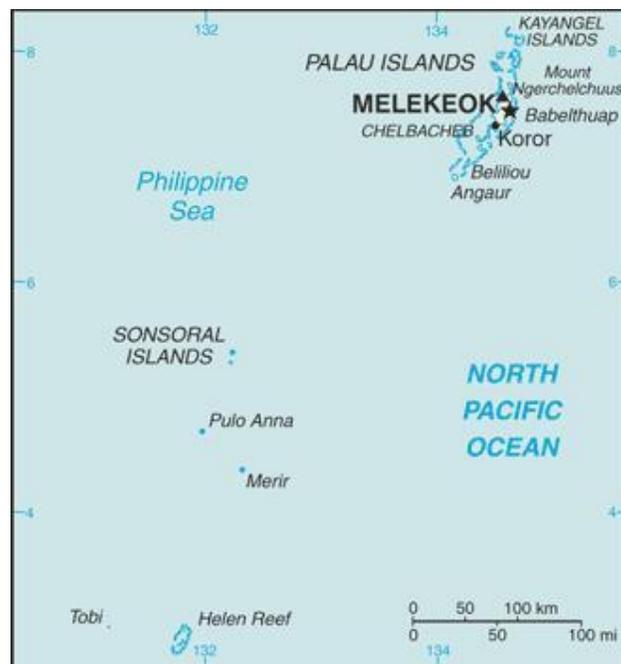
Unit 17: The Rock Islands, Palau

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Facts

Capital:	Koror
Largest island:	Babeldoab
Other islands:	Koror, Peleliu, Anguar and 300 Rock Islands
Highest point:	Mount Ngerchelchauus (242m)
Population:	20, 796 inhabitants (July 2009 estimate)
Religion:	Catholic, Protestant and Modenkngai (indigenous to Palau)
Independence:	1 October 1994



Map 18.1. Palau

This chapter is about the Rock Islands of Palau and how and why these islands have affected Palauans for centuries.

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- describe the location of the Rock Islands
- describe the historical origins of the Rock Islands
- understand the significance of the Rock Islands to modern Palauans
- argue for and against the impact of tourism on the Rock Islands

Significance of the Rock Islands to the Republic of Palau

The Rock Islands have been important in the history, politics, and economy of Palau. The Rock Islands are a group of small raised limestone rocks, islets and islands ranging in height from a few meters to over 200m above sea level. Each of the 300 Rock Islands is a unique combination of ocean and land, flora and fauna. They are scattered to the southwest of the Palau archipelago.

A Palauan's livelihood, and indeed, the very essence of being a Palauan may well depend upon these tiny coral islands.

Historical Significance

Once upon a time, a million years ago, a tiny particle evolved into a clam, which lived in the bottom of the sea near Angaur in the Pacific Ocean. This clam later conceived Latmikaik, which bore Uchererak, Uab, and Ilouchel, the only female child.

Uab was unusual because he grew enormously day by day. Villagers had to use ladders to reach his mouth to feed him with basket loads of food all day and everyday.

Finally, the local people got tired and frustrated with the rascal giant and the enormous quantities of food he ate. They argued for many days about how to get rid of him. Finally they decided to burn him alive. All the villagers, young and old, went looking for firewood or anything that could be burnt. Before noon, a heap of firewood was placed underneath and around his dwelling. The heap of wood was then set on fire. The flames could be seen high in the sky. Immense heat burned Uab while he kicked and struggled to survive.

At last the giant rascal collapsed and scattered sideways to form islands and islets in what is today known as the Republic of Palau. Uab fell with his back toward the east and his front facing the west. In his death throes, his arms and legs beat at the waters in front of him, pushing obstacles away. That is why the east coast barrier reefs are closer while the western barrier reefs are further away from land.

Recent History

As well as the 300 smaller Rock Islands, the Republic of Palau is made up of many bigger islands and islets. Only 10 of the islands are inhabited. The rest have been set aside for wildlife, conservation sites, and some for recreational sea parks. Four main islands are surrounded and linked to the Rock Islands.

The Rock Islands serve as a resource and supplement to the life of the local islanders. These "floating gardens" of the Republic have contributed to the kaleidoscope of land and marine life for thousands of years and for human life in recent times.

Economic significance

The Rock Islands were important to Palauans before European explorers reached Palau's shores. The use of the Rock Islands' resources now has a new history as economic changes occurred in the Republic in recent years. Lumber commonly used for building purposes was only found in the Rock

Islands, and turtles hunted for their shells are still a vital part of the Palauan culture for traditional or customary rituals.

One of the earliest economic uses of these Rock Islands was for lumber. Today it is still evident in historical buildings; for example, men's meeting houses (*bai*). Certain lumbers, mainly ironwood, can only be found in these Rock Islands.

One of the uses of timber was in the craft of making wooden storyboards, which conveyed ancestral Palauan legends and myths. Since history and tradition were only transferred orally, this was the best possible way of maintaining the communities' past from one generation to the next.

Other timbers were used for the production of weapons, canoes, tools and fishing gear. Recently, westernised tools and boats have quickly replaced traditional methods. Only a few old methods remain. Other metal and rubber objects and tools, for example, the chisel (*ebaki*) and the speargun have been introduced.

Many Rock Islands, with their sandy beaches, are the nesting places for turtles. In the olden days, hunting turtles at the Rock Islands was a common practice. Men would spend a night at a nesting island waiting for the turtle to lay her eggs. Turtle shells were commonly used in the Palauan culture long before their exploitation by westerners. For Palauan women, turtle shells have never lost their consistent value. They are regarded as money during customary practices and this respect is as strong today as it was before.

Hunting has remained important because it was such a vital part of the island heritage. However, due to the exploitation and over-hunting of Hawksbill turtles in Palau, they have become endangered.

The Rock Islands have been used as a refuge and shelter for to the local islanders as well as for foreigners. For instance, Captain Henry Wilson's ship the *Antelope* was grounded off the Ulong reefs on the night of August 9th, 1783. All the *Antelope's* seamen were saved and lived on Ulong Island until they built another ship, the *Uruloong* to take them back home. During the three months stay on Ulong Island, the Englishmen never for one moment knew hunger or thirst. In fact, they always had more than they could eat to the very day they left Palau. All this is told in the book, by George Keates, *An Account of the Pelew Islands* published in England in 1789.

In World War II the Japanese Imperial Army survived in caves in the Rock Islands and lived through heavy bombing and powerful assaults by the U.S. military. It was supposed to take the U.S. armed forces three days to conquer the Japanese in Palau. Instead, it became three months of bloody, intensive fighting. The natural holes in the caves were a strategic benefit for the Japanese as they fought on with very minimal casualties. Ultimately, the American forces defeated the Japanese.

Question and Activities

1. How many Rock Islands are there?
2. Why was Uab such a problem to the people?
3. When was the *Antelope* wrecked in Palau?
4. Only a small number of the Rock Islands are inhabited. What are the other islands used for?
5. How did the Rock Islands help the Japanese to slow down the American attack on Palau during World War II?

Political significance

After the Second World War, under a United Nations trusteeship the USA took over the administration of the Palau Islands. Palau, along with the other Micronesian Islands, officially became U.S. Trust Territories.

In the late 1950's, local government was being established. Each state (municipality) was given boundaries. Unfortunately, traditional boundaries were already in place and were not the same as the new state boundaries. This caused a conflict between two states, Koror State and Peleliu State. Both states bordered the Rock Islands. Both states claimed the Rock Islands as part of their original 1950 municipal boundaries.

Today, there are 16 states of the Republic of Palau. They were created in the 1980s.

The Koror-Peleliu boundary dispute began during this time when these two states claimed possession of the Rock Islands. In its 1980 constitution, Koror State defined its boundaries as described in its former municipal charter from the 1950s. Peleliu however, in forming its constitution, described its borders using ancient and traditional boundaries. Both states realised the Rock Islands' economic value. When the debate reached a stalemate, the conflict between these two states went to the Republic of Palau's Supreme Court. Based on the 1950's municipal charters, the court ruled in favour of Koror State.

Questions and Activities

6. After World War II, what was the official name given to the islands off Micronesia?
7. What caused the conflict between Koror and Peleliu States?
8. Which state do the Rock Islands now belong to?
9. What type of wood is only available on the Rock Islands?
10. List 3 things the lumber from the Rock Islands is used for.

Tourism in Palau

The use of the Rock Islands by the tourism industry has created a heated economic debate in the Republic. While turtles are on their way to extinction, the tourism industry is expanding and being heavily promoted. In recent years, tourism has drastically changed the economic outlook.

As a home to more than 1,500 species of fish and 700 species of coral and anemones, the Rock Islands provide an amazing diving experience for scuba divers but unfortunately it is these very attractions that tourism is threatening to destroy. With clear waters and temperatures averaging 82-84 degrees Fahrenheit, diving is a year-round activity. Consequently, the Rock Islands are Palau's premier visitor attraction.

Tourists from all over the world come to Palau each year at an alarming rate. Since the beginning of the 1990's, the total number of visitors has steadily increased every year. Thus, the attention of the government and business has shifted to accommodate the needs of the booming tourism industry. Despite the economic opportunities under the 1994 Compact of Free Association with the United States

States, tourism is regarded as the future of Palau's economic prosperity. The following chart and graph show the increasing number of visitors to Palau between 1990 and 1996.

Countries	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Japan	12453	13380	16235	17903	16635	19987	21125
USA	4498	4597	6039	5907	7197	7629	7235
Australia	1379	830	664	458	314	522	1061
Philippines	1019	1233	1028	949	829	627	732
Europe	1064	1074	1397	1614	2048	2361	2630
Taiwan	621	909	1384	3334	5518	10653	22398
Korea	285	344	422	806	1137	1698	1840
Hong Kong	496	349	105	99	336	427	203
Other Asia	430	427	424	674	663	616	432
Others	1153	626	335	381	353	330	608
TOTAL	23398	23769	28033	32125	35030	44850	58264

Fig 18.3. Tourist Arrivals by Country

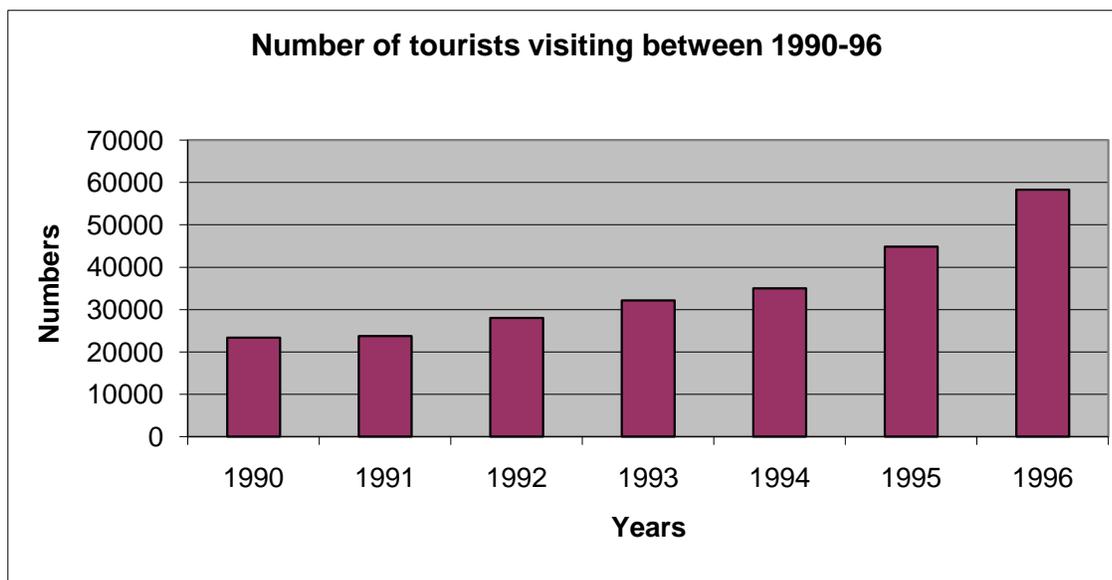


Fig 18.4. Graph showing tourists visiting Palau between 1990 and 1996

Tourism is one of the few businesses in Palau that is rapidly growing. As it expands it gains political importance. There are many questions about Palau's ability to cope with this increase in foreign investment, demand for beds, transport, facilities and access. Because of Palau's lack of natural resources there are few other job opportunities. More than half of Palau's employment is in the government sector. Therefore, the money and jobs brought in by tourism are welcome.

Reflections

Although the country's economic future may depend on the tourism industry, other serious issues are appearing. A fear of pollution in the marine and land environment has become widespread. It may soon reach uncontrollable proportions. For example, a facility for the disposal of rubbish has not yet been a high priority. Road, sewerage, water and power facilities are being over utilised. There are problems in the disposal of waste in an efficient and pollution-free manner. Unfortunately, the government and private business sectors have different priorities. Protecting the environment has not been one of them.

Palauans are very proud of their nation and work to protect its culture and traditions. They are also a small nation with few natural resources. The pressure to make money from the beauty and marine world of the Rock Islands is balanced by the need to protect the stories, myths and traditions that are linked to this place.

The first tourist hotel in Palau was only built in the 1970s. But, tourism increased to 11 000 visitors in 1986, then more than doubled in five years to 27 000 visitors in 1992.

The future of the Rock Islands, safe from excessive tourism, pollution, over-use and development, is in the hands of Palau's traditional leaders. The parliament will also be challenged by the voice of the Palauan people, who will demonstrate, petition and protest if they consider a bad decision has been made. This active democracy should save the Rock Islands for future generations of Palau's children.

Questions and Activities

11. Why do tourists like diving around the Rock Islands?
12. What is Palau's main tourist attraction?
13. In 1994, how many Taiwanese people visited the Rock Islands?
14. What is a major problem threatening the environment of the Rock Islands?
15. Look at the chart showing tourist arrivals by country:
 - (a) List the names of the three main tourist groups.
 - (b) Name the three countries which had fewer tourists in 1996 than in 1990.
 - (c) List the three countries where the number of tourists had more than doubled between 1990 and 1996.
16. See if you can find some current tourism statistics for your country and compare them to the figures in the charts above looking for trends in tourist arrivals