

American Samoa's Fautasi Coastal Challenge

The American Samoa Coastal Program connects local traditions to environmental stewardship, inspiring villages to take actions that improve and protect their coastal resources.



Competitors in a traditional fautasi (canoe) race.

Three thousand years ago, ancestors of the Samoan people sailed into the bay of Pago Pago with large, wooden canoes. They settled on these islands after a 6000-mile journey across the Pacific from Southeast Asia, carrying strength of spirit and a connection to the sea that is still evident in Samoan culture today. Many centuries later, the people of American Samoa remain united by their deep traditions of family and faith. However, population growth on the islands challenges the traditional ways of life. Dense coastal villages comprised of open, thatched-roof homes are highly vulnerable to damage from cyclones and tsunamis. In addition, waste and agricultural chemicals combine with marine debris to pollute American Samoa's clear sandy beaches and vibrant coral reefs.

To inspire action and awareness about these coastal hazards, the American Samoa Coastal Management Program (ASCMP) needed to resonate with the islands' tightly-knit culture. In 2011, ASCMP established the Fautasi Coastal Challenge (FCC)—a celebratory canoe race that leads to a series of local coastal clean-ups and resource management projects. By honoring a beloved ritual, the ASCMP has harnessed the unity and pride of coastal villages and directed that drive toward environmental stewardship. The FCC begins in the water, where each participating village sends a team to compete in the fautasi race. Fautasi are traditional Samoan canoes, holding 50 strong rowers in lines of two. In order to qualify for the competition, each village commits to organize regular coastal clean-ups within their watershed and participate in ASCMP's education programs. ASCMP works with village leaders to select workshops and trainings, which cover topics such as cyclone and tsunami preparedness, land management, resource conservation, and youth engagement. This program combines the best indigenous and scientific practices for resilience. In addition, each village must designate at least two faith-based groups to adopt a coastal area and monitor it throughout the year. The village's fautasi crew is responsible for keeping the adopted area clean, while the faith-based groups submit progress reports to ASCMP.

The FCC has led to a number of local activities that enhance and protect the coastline. In 2014, the village of Fagaalu conducted two coastal clean-ups that collected 7,580 pounds of trash and debris. Volunteers included the fautasi crew, village police, church leaders, and entire extended families. Other village clean-ups produced similar results, triggering a larger regional discussion about waste management and prevention. In partnership with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, ASCMP also conducted a workshop for village leaders about tsunami preparedness, coastal mapping, and the benefit of wetlands as a buffer against storm surge.

ASCMP's approach is successful because it connects with local values and engages with key community leaders, such as the faith-based groups. The FCC empowers villages to take responsibility for their coastline and feel proud of their strength as athletes as well as environmental stewards. Participation in the FCC has increased every year, from four villages in 2011 to nine in 2014. ASCMP also partners with private companies, such as Hawaiian Airlines, who sponsor the fautasi race and provide additional funds to support village projects.