**Welcoming Address for Cook Islands ABS Capacity Building and Awareness Raising Workshop, Rarotonga, Cook Islands**

Delivered by Joseph Brider, Director, National Environment Service

**Kia Orana,**

**Kia Orana Tatou Katoatoa**

* Our Papa Orometua, Kia Orana and thank you for the guidance message from the good book.
* Kia Orana Te Au Ariki, it is a pleasure and privilege to have you with us today
* Representatives of the House of Ariki and Aronga Mana amongst us, Kia Orana, Turou, Oro Mai.
* Our invited participants from the **pa enua**, **kia orana kotou katoatoa.**
* Our invited guests from **SPREP**, Ms **Ofa Kaisamy**, Mr **Rahul Chand**, and Ms **Isabel Rasch** – Kia Orana and Welcome to the Cook Islands.
* Our invited guests from the **ABS Capacity Development Initiative** and supported by the **Australian Research Council**, Dr **Daniel Robinson** and Dr **Margaret Raven** – Kia Orana to you both, welcome to the Cook Islands Dr Raven and it is a pleasure to have you back on our shores Dr Robinson.
* To the **Heads and Representatives of Ministries** present today, Kia Orana.
* Government staff, NGO partners, Community leaders and representatives
* Ladies and Gentlemen, Kia Orana Tatou Katoatoa

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this workshop, and join us on our journey together, a journey that started more than 15 years ago. A journey that started with some people in this room and visionaries, who have since past such as the late **Tania Temata** and the late **Te Tika Mataiapo, Dorice Reid**.

So, here we are today, to take up our own paddle, plunge it into the water, and move our Vaka forward, make our contribution to this national journey.

The Cook Islands have long been committed to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and have been a **Party to the Convention on Biological Diversity** since 1993, since that time we have brought species, such as the **Kakerori** back from the brink of extinction and removed threats like the **Pikikaa Papaa** from **Aitutaki** and **Manu Kavamani** from **Atiu**.

But conservation is more than just the protection and management of tangible resources. Conservation also needs to consider the **intangible resources** such as our traditional knowledge about the uses of our plants and animals. Conservation needs to consider **if and how** we allow access to this knowledge, access to genetic material and how do we ensure the **fair and equitable sharing** of the benefits arising out of the use of these resources.

For many of us the term **Access and Benefit Sharing** or A.B.S or Abs, as I have heard many say, may sound like a **foreign term** and the words are, but the **concept is not**. We have **a culture of give and take**, a culture of honest trade, you give someone something in exchange for something else. We traded amongst ourselves, between our islands and between countries, for example, Cook Island and French Polynesian trade of resources. I give you taro in exchange for pork, I give you my special flower in exchange for a nice fruit. **Trades were open and honest**, nothing was hidden from each other when dealing a trade.

However, it has become essential, **in this day and age**, that Cook Islanders need to be aware of the issues surrounding access and benefit sharing or else risk having the genetic resources and traditional knowledge of our **biodiversity exploited or abused with very little benefit returning to our people**.

Access and benefit sharing is about **protecting a country’s sovereign rights**, our rights to our traditional knowledge and our genetic resources. Providing people access to a plant or our traditional knowledge around how a plant is used is no longer an open and honest trade. Access to a plant or its traditional knowledge, especially vai rakau maori knowledge could run the **risk of that plant or the chemicals within it being developed in a laboratory, packaged and sold overseas, without anybody here knowing about it and any profits generated from its sale not being shared with the people here who provided that knowledge**.

The importance of this issue was highlighted under the Convention on Biological Diversity with the creation and adoption of the **Nagoya Protocol** on ABS in 2010.

Its objective is to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources, making sure that when or if we provide access to a resource or knowledge, **we are clear on what we are giving access to, how that resource will be used and what will become of any benefits that arise from the use of that resource**.

I do not think I need to dwell on what bounties we have here in the Cook Islands, I think those of us in the room today are aware of the special plants and animals that live in the Cook Islands, and most of us are aware of our traditional uses of those plants and animals. But I would like to ask, to you all, **not to look at conservation of these species as just protecting that species in a protected area but it can be so much more**.

Do not look at the conservation of the **Ara** as just protecting a tree or managing a source of **Rau Ara** for weaving, but to also look at the need to protect the special ways that we have learnt to weave Rau Ara into light but sturdy sails for canoes, strong mats for floors or soft mats for sleeping. Don’t just look at the conservation of Punga as protection of a coral rock or protection of the reef but to also consider the protection of its medicinal benefits and its potential to remove **Kikotupu** or warts. And what about those **plants and animals that we are yet to discover, what beneficial uses could they provide in the future? What do we need to do to protect them?**

The purpose of the workshop is to provide an **avenue for consultations** on ABS implementation, help **facilitate capacity building sessions**, **consolidate national progress** and **map ABS processes in the country**. This is a working workshop, our Vaka needs to keep moving so we will all chip in and paddle our stretch.

This workshop also aims to align the implementation of the **National ABS Project** being delivered by NES with activities and support from the **SPREP Regional ABS Project**, the **ABS Initiative** and the **Australian Research Council**.

We hope that through this workshop and ongoing community consultations that we will continue to raise the profile and awareness of ABS, why it is important, and encourage us all as knowledge holders and resource owners to engage in the process to determine how best to protect and preserve our biological resources for us and our future generations.

To conclude, I would like to thank and acknowledge the generous support provided by the **Global Environment Facility**, the **ABS Capacity Building Initiative**, **SPREP** and **UNDP**. I would also acknowledge the **Australian Research Council** and look forward to fostering a relationship which is beneficial to all.

I would also like to acknowledge the hard work of the staff at the National Environment Service, especially Ms Louisa Karika and Ms Emily Pierre for their work in arranging this workshop and bringing us all here today.

And so with these words, I would officially like to declare this workshop open.

Kia Orana e Kia Manuia