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## Scales of Eden: conservation and pristine devastation on Bikini Atoll

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**Abstract.** Landscapes are often discursively constructed as wildernesses through an erasure of the histories of people in the landscape. Current representations of Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands as an Edenic wilderness are no different. What is unusual about conceptualizations of Bikini Atoll as a pristine wilderness is that it is the site of a recent history of colonial appropriation and massive landscape transformation through nuclear-weapons testing. Although people both outside and within the Bikinian community regularly represent the atoll as a kind of paradise, there are strong differences of opinion regarding what the future uses of the atoll should be. This is because there is a sharp division between representations of the atoll as a pristine wilderness with visually pleasing landscapes and seascapes that need to be preserved and locally produced representations of the atoll as an Eden with an abundance of useable natural resources.

In 1946 the indigenous population of Bikini Atoll was removed by the US military and replaced by tens of thousands of US military personnel who used the atoll for twenty-three nuclear-weapons tests between 1946 and 1958. During the testing era, coral reefs were dynamited to allow passage for naval vessels, three of the islands of the atoll were vaporized, a mile wide-crater was blown through the reef, and the terrestrial vegetation was removed or burned off. Today the atoll is widely regarded as too radioactive to live on (Davis, 2005a).

So it is perhaps an understatement to say that it seems ironic and unusual that today the atoll is widely portrayed as a 'natural' landscape in need of preservation. The Bikini Atoll website (<http://www.bikiniatoll.com>) includes the following representations of the atoll:

"It is a wilderness. This place hasn't been touched in forty years"

[a manager of a tourism operation on Bikini Atoll, quoted in Kristof (1997)].

"To me [Bikini] was simply 'Utopia', not just for the magnificence of the submerged 'ghost fleet', but for the pristine beaches as soft and as white as baby powder" (Patty Newell-Mortara, publisher of *Women Underwater* 1999).

"After being on Bikini and seeing this spectacular atoll, and after diving on the wrecks, I would call Bikini the ultimate island experience" (Nick Versteeg, A&E History Channel/Dusmar Productions, 1997).

"With fishermen absent for 50 years, Bikini's waters [have] returned to a rare, undisturbed condition" (Bill Curtsinger, *National Geographic Magazine* January 1995).

"The amazing thing about Bikini is how alive it is: a white sand island full of coconut palms swaying over a perfect turquoise sea, fish and sea turtles swimming languorously by the beach" (Nicholas D Kristof, *The New York Times* March 1997).

How is it that the former nuclear test site at Bikini Atoll has come to be regarded as a 'natural' landscape? Furthermore, how is it that the activities of indigenous people in this landscape are now seen by some as threatening that nature? In this paper

I investigate contemporary conceptualizations of Bikini to understand the ways in which landscapes are discursively constructed as natural, even in the face of extreme landscape alteration and well-known histories of phenomenal destruction. Unlike many studies that discuss the erasure of the histories of ‘premodern’ people from landscapes deemed to be natural, in this paper I will discuss how it is the quintessentially modernist project of nuclear testing that not only has been erased from a landscape, but also has actively produced a landscape widely regarded as natural.

I approach this process of the naturalization of landscapes by engaging with Bruno Latour’s model of how ‘modern’ people attempt to relegate objects, processes, and landscapes into purified natural and social realms (1993). Latour has proposed that the supposed rationality of subjects who see themselves as ‘modern’ is derived from the (ultimately doomed) historical project that strives to maintain a pure separation between natural and social phenomena. In his model, widely discussed by researchers examining conceptualizations of nature, it is so-called ‘First World’ ‘modern’ people who endeavor to maintain this “first great divide” between nature and society, and in so doing they also make a second, spatial, great divide: the gap between the modern ‘First World’ people who keep nature and society separate and the ‘Third World’ premodern people who do not. Latour argues:

“the Internal Great Divide accounts for the External Great Divide: we [moderns] are the ones that differentiate absolutely between Nature and Culture, between Science and Society, whereas *in our eyes* all the others—whether they are Chinese or Amerindian, Azande or Barouya—can not really separate what is knowledge from what is society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature as it is from what cultures require” (1993, page 99, emphasis added).

As I stress in the above quote, Latour purports that this scheme of dividing the world is not a fact, but a widespread belief among people who see themselves as modern. As is also evident from this quote, this type of classification derives from a heavily Eurocentric view of the world that combines the people outside the ‘Western’ world into a collective mass of premoderns with a similar inability to see the world as moderns see it.

As other theorists have pointed out (Haraway, 1997; Swyngedouw, 2003), and as Latour himself elaborates in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) and in his later work (1999), this modern project of delimiting the world into natural and social spheres is never successful because of the proliferation of hybrid objects and processes that resist simplistic categorization. Latour himself, as well as others, views this model of understanding the world as a failing (failed?) project. Despite this, it is fairly obvious that, in contemporary debates over environmental preservation and resource management, these categories of ‘natural’ and ‘social’ remain quite durable. In this paper I want to examine more closely this process of dividing the world into the realms of the natural and the social at Bikini Atoll. My point in engaging with Latour’s model by contrasting its schematic portrayal of how nature is constructed with the situation on Bikini is not necessarily to confirm or repudiate his analysis of his model, or the analysis of it by others in the realm of landscape (Sluyter, 2002). Rather, I use the model as a rough schematic against which I attempt to explain better how people at Bikini engage in the process of imagining and designating natural landscapes and how those people arrive at conclusions about what kinds of people and activities should be allowed in a given landscape.

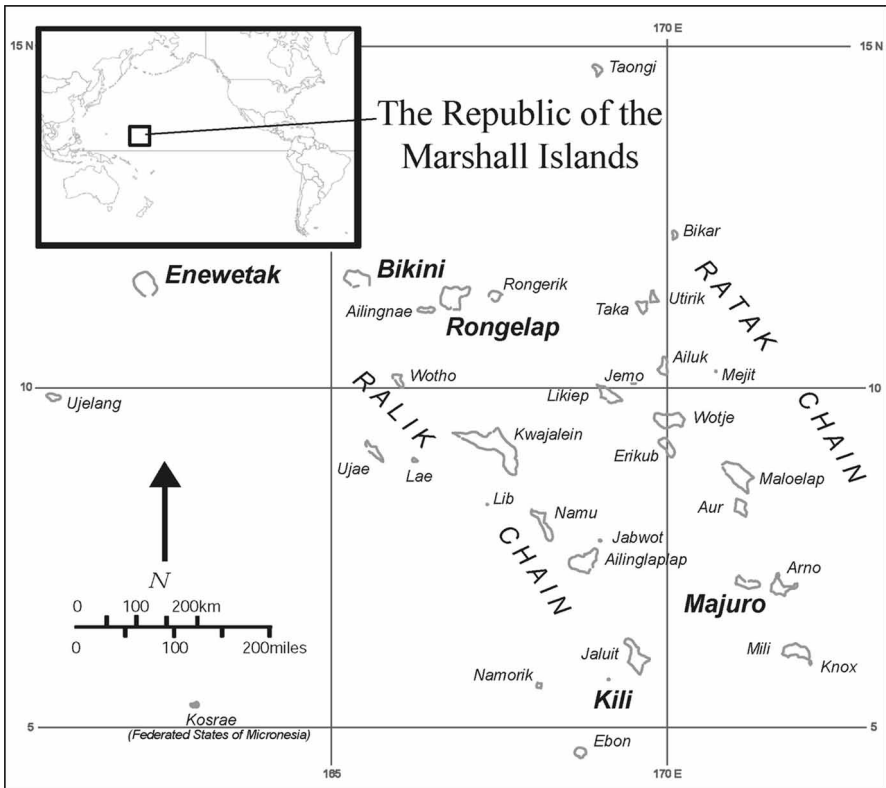
The starting point of my analysis is the irony of the wilderness created by nuclear weapons and the danger that the nature will be spoiled by the subsistence practices of a native people. This irony inverts the modern view on ‘nature’ and on the position of supposedly ‘nonmodern’ natives in it. In so doing, it adds to the evidence found by other researchers that there is a much more complex interaction between

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conceptualizations of pristine wilderness and the activities of both modern and premodern people than is supposed in Latour's model. In Andrew Sluyter's work he explodes the myth that supposed nonmodern people in Mesoamerica lived in nature without actively reconstructing it (2002). Roderick Neumann also problematizes the roles of the colonial 'moderns' and colonized 'nonmoderns' in constructing natural environments (2000). He demonstrates in his work on parks in Africa that colonial administrators (and, significantly, postcolonial administrators) inverted the dynamic of who belonged in nature: 'nonmodern' people were seen as a threat which might 'wreck' a nature constructed through the practices and stewardship of the colonial moderns.

The case on Bikini differs from these other accounts in important ways and further complicates theoretical constructions of the separation of the world into 'natural' and 'social' realms. The main distinction is the widespread representation of Bikini as pristine, even though the environment has been subjected to the modernist activity of nuclear testing. This occurs even though Bikini is still widely regarded as dangerously radioactive, and has had most of its terrestrial environment completely destroyed and reconstructed in the past sixty years. The situation on Bikini can be seen as a phenomenal twisting of what is usually conceptualized as natural. This irony, however, is not the only lesson that can be learned by examining the situation on Bikini Atoll. Humans have been, after all, 'making nature' long before the nuclear age in the shape of gardens and reconstructed landscapes (Merchant, 2004). What I want to focus on in the following discussion of Bikini Atoll and its 'pristineness' is not as much the irony of that designation as the political ramifications for the future uses of the landscape. To do this I will first give some more background on the recent history of Bikini. I will then discuss the ways that visual readings of the landscape of the atoll by tourists, ecological scientists, and others are linked to Western conceptualizations of a Pacific Eden and then used as criteria for categorizing the atoll as natural. Next I will discuss portrayals of the atoll as a different type of natural Eden that is a homeland where abundant resources are for consumption and social reproduction as opposed to objects of the gaze. I will then move on to discussing the ways in which these different representations of Bikini affect the decisions over the future of the atoll: particularly decisions dealing with the possible return of exiled Bikinians.

The information for this paper comes partially from a review of scholarly and popular publications regarding Bikini published between 1946 and 2005, but primarily from participant observation and semistructured interviews I conducted in 2001 and 2002 in the Republic of the Marshall Islands on Bikini Atoll, Kili Island, and Majuro Atoll (figure 1). The interviews were semistructured in that they began with a set of standard questions regarding perceptions of the atoll, which led to other questions depending on the expertise or experiences of the interviewee. I attempted to select interviewees who would represent a variety of perspectives on the atoll. Interviews were conducted with members of the Bikinian government on Majuro Atoll, with workers and visitors on Bikini Atoll including US Department of Energy personnel, as well as with people in the Bikinian community living on Majuro Atoll, Kili Island, and Ejit Island (a predominantly Bikinian-populated island that is part of Majuro Atoll) who have been unable to repatriate Bikini since their forced removal by the US Navy in 1946. I also interviewed an international team of environmental scientists and marine biologists that conducted a study of the marine environment of Bikini Atoll and of nearby Rongelap Atoll in 2002. The purpose of their study, as I will discuss further, was to run underwater transects to study the composition of the reefs, to perform counts of marine invertebrates and fish, as well as to note underwater sites with high tourist potential. Overall, a total of eighty-eight people were interviewed for this study, some of them multiple times.



**Figure 1.** Map of the Marshall Islands (islands mentioned in the paper are in bold).

### Erasing the social and producing a postnuclear nature

The 'natural' or the 'pristine' is often conceptualized as something which exists outside of the flow of history (Cronon, 1995). The portrayal of landscapes as natural has therefore tended to erase the histories of the indigenous people who have inhabited them whether in Africa, Latin America, or the forests of British Columbia (Braun, 2002; Neumann, 1998; Sluyter, 2002). This erasure of native activities conforms to Latour's model that moderns see premodern persons not as agents who shape nature but rather as elements of nature. While this marginalization of native groups can serve to delegitimize indigenous people's rights over resources (Braun, 2002), it can also be used strategically by indigenous people to enhance their position vis-à-vis other groups (Conklin and Graham, 1995; Sundberg, 2003; Veber, 1998). In the case of the Bikinian people in 1946, they were 'asked' to leave by the US military for 'the good of mankind' (Niedenthal, 1997, page 30). At the time of the Bikinians' removal, the US Navy and US media constructed the Bikinians as a primitive, nomadic people living in nature, who could legitimately be moved to any other 'natural' atoll (Davis, 2005b). This labeling of the atoll as 'natural' served to erase the social history of the Bikinian people in their place.

On Bikini the first two atomic tests in 1946 were highly publicized, relatively small, 21 kiloton blasts: approximately the size of the bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Stone, 1987). These tests were directed against a target fleet of large naval vessels in Bikini's lagoon to test the effects of atomic weapons on ships.<sup>(1)</sup> In the 1950s,

<sup>(1)</sup> Not surprisingly, the US Navy learned from the 1946 Bikini tests that, for the most part, when you drop an atomic bomb near ships they sink.

twenty-one more atmospheric tests were conducted. Most of these involved much larger hydrogen bombs with explosive yields of up to 15 megatons (approximately 1000 times the power of the bombs the United States dropped on Japan in 1945). The largest of these tests, the 'Bravo' blast in 1954, is responsible for the mile-wide crater through the atoll rim and for the vaporization of three of the islands of the atoll.

Today Bikini Atoll is politically part of the independent Republic of the Marshall Islands, but for all practical purposes it is controlled by the Bikinian local government, known as the 'Kili/Bikini/Ejit Council'. The United States no longer controls any parts of the atoll. As the name of the elected Bikinian Council suggests, it represents all ethnically Bikinian people, most of whom live on the islands of Kili and Ejit in the southern Marshall Islands (figure 1). Most of the approximately 3100 Bikinians have never lived on or even visited Bikini. The atoll remains, though, a culturally important place for Bikinians.

The present landscape of Bikini is still peppered with scars and artifacts from the testing era. The original population of Bikini Atoll has had scant lived experience on the atoll for the past five decades, and in that time Bikini has hosted tens of thousands of US military personnel and scientists. During the nuclear-testing era the landscape was dominated by living quarters, bars, basketball courts, bunkers, docks, and trash. Today not only is the landscape still moderately radioactive (mostly from Cesium 137 in the terrestrial food chain), but much of the vegetation on the two main islands of the atoll consists of coconut trees planted in an eerily perfect grid by the US Department of Energy in 1960 (figure 2). Concrete bunkers and other structures remain scattered around the atoll, and one end of the main island serves as a dump where trash and abandoned vehicles have been left to decay (figure 3). Given this state, and the reasonably well-known history of nuclear testing, it seems odd that the atoll is so widely regarded as 'pristine nature'.

There has been, however, another erasure of history on Bikini. Unlike in 1946, it is not the impact of indigenous people on the natural environment being erased, but rather the modernist project of nuclear-weapons testing. It is the history of moderns



**Figure 2.** Palm trees on Bikini (photograph by the author).



**Figure 3.** Trash on Bikini (photograph by the author).

that is being denied so as to place the nature of Bikini outside time. As with the other erasures of history there are, of course, political consequences.

The erasure of nuclear testing from Bikini has happened in two complementary ways. First, as has been detailed by Teresia Teaiwa (2000), there has been a discursive erasure of nuclear colonialism at Bikini by the prominence of the bikini bathing suit. As most people are aware, the dominant meaning of the word ‘bikini’ in the Western world is the bathing suit rather than the atoll. Teaiwa argues that the bikini bathing suit “alienates the colonized referent of the commodity” (2000, page 99) by replacing the colonial history of nuclear testing, and the image of the disposed Bikinian, with the bikini-clad woman. The bikini bathing suit, she argues, through the eroticizing of female bodies and the linking of them to European and US mythologies of South Sea women “has two colonized referents, and privileges (however minimally) one (generic South Sea noble savage) over the other (dispossessed Bikinians)” (page 99).

Complementing this discursive erasure of the colonial nuclear history on Bikini is the physical removal of many of the signs of nuclear testing from the landscape. Today many of the visible signs of construction (and destruction) associated with the nuclear-testing era have been cleaned and removed *from certain parts of the atoll*. This is especially true on the main island, where most visitors stay. It is not that the landscape artifacts of nuclear testing have simply eroded away with time. Instead, there has been a concerted effort to remove these visible reminders. As I will argue in the next section, the visual appeal of Bikini’s beach and reef landscapes forms the basis for the portrayal of the atoll as nature. As for the issue of radioactive contamination, its invisibility renders it peripheral to the visually based conceptualization of the atoll. The radioactivity of the atoll has affected the landscape, but these effects largely support the representation of the atoll as natural. Dangerous radiation levels reduced human activity on the atoll to a minimum for almost forty years. Even now, Bikini’s lagoon and most of the marine resources in it are generally regarded as safe, but the terrestrial landscape is still considered too radioactive for long-term habitation (Davis, 2005a). There are a few temporary residents (approximately twenty five) who work for either the Department of Energy, a construction company hired by the Bikinians to maintain the infrastructure on the main island, or the tourism operation that started on the island

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in 1996. Currently, the small enterprise on Bikini hosts approximately a dozen tourists at a time. Some visitors engage in sport fishing, but most of the tourists are scuba divers who explore the large wrecked warships that lay at the bottom of Bikini's lagoon and which were sunk by nuclear tests in 1946 (Davis, 2005b). The operation is run by the Bikinian local government, which is based on Majuro Atoll. The tourism business has been successful in bringing money into the Bikinian community. For instance, in 2001 tourism brought in roughly a quarter of a million dollars, which was then equally divided among the over 3000 Bikinians.

The tourist operation is important for constructing the image of Bikini as nature, but also complicates it at the same time. Because of its presence a steady stream of tourists and journalists visit the atoll and spread representations of it such as the quotes shown above that profess the beauty of the atoll. However, most of the tourists are there to see the largest artifacts of the nuclear-testing program: sunk naval vessels from World War 2 such as the aircraft carrier USS Saratoga and the Japanese battleship Nagato. Also, when the tourists relax after dinner they are shown documentary films about the atoll and about the impacts of nuclear testing on the people and lands of the Northern Marshall Islands. In this way, the Bikinian council, which runs the dive operation, endeavors to discursively reinscribe the history of their colonial dispossession into the landscape the tourists are visiting. Being shown these histories, as well as the knowledge that there is a radiation risk, does set up an undercurrent of unease to many of the tourists' (and scientists') portrayals of the atoll as nature; but it usually remains just that, an undercurrent.

### **Seeing nature on the beaches of Bikini**

It may seem somewhat contradictory, if not downright weird, to be talking about a former nuclear test site as a pristine environment. Bikini, however, is not the only site of contamination to be thought of in this way. Locations near nuclear sites in the United States such as Savannah River, South Carolina; Hanford Reservation, Washington; and Oyster Creek, New Jersey, have been considered as protected natural environments as well (Burger, 1998; Burger et al, 1997; Greenberg, 1997). As in the case of Bikini, it is the past labeling of the place as contaminated and as off-limits that has restricted human activities and their accompanying damage to the environment.

Whether Bikini Atoll is 'really' pristine or not is less my concern than the reality that many people who interact with the atoll conceptualize it as such. In my interviews with environmental scientists, tourists, tourist managers, Bikinian government officials, other Bikinians, and Republic of the Marshall Islands government officials, the word 'pristine' came up so often to describe Bikini that no discussion of the environment of the atoll would be complete without analyzing the pristine-wilderness place image (Davis, 2005b; Shields, 1991). Of the nine environmental scientists I interviewed on Bikini in 2002, five referred to the atoll directly as 'pristine', and the other four described the atoll as 'untouched' or 'unspoiled'.

The lack of a large human habitation on Bikini Atoll has resulted in a different oceanic and terrestrial environment than is found in the rest of the Marshall Islands and Micronesia. In particular, many of the visitors to Bikini Atoll note the islands are relatively free of the trash and artifacts of modern consumer culture prevalent throughout the Island Pacific. Also, there has been almost no fishing pressure on the reefs. In stark contrast to the populated atolls of the Marshall Islands, the reefs on Bikini and on the other nearby nuclear-affected atolls are relatively free of refuse. The visiting environmental scientists made frequent comments that the reefs on Bikini are healthier and populated by a greater diversity of marine life than other areas in the Marshall Islands.

Also, they mentioned that the members of the species found at the atoll tend to be larger and more numerous than in other parts of Micronesia (especially sharks).

There is a desire among tourists and scientists working in the Marshall Islands to set up wildlife sanctuaries and conservation guidelines on Bikini and on the other nuclear-affected atolls across the northern Marshall Islands. For the most part, the local councils that govern these atolls are interested in these conservation projects. The question then arises: why here? What is it about these atolls that have been decimated by explosions and radiation that makes them candidates for conservation measures? Discussions about Bikini's pristine ecology are partially based on observations of biodiversity, fish size, coral health, shark populations, and bird behavior and endemism, but its designation as a pristine wilderness comes from more than just scientific information. Rather, most descriptions of Bikini's environment are based on a visual aesthetic environmentalism with deep philosophical roots in Western culture. Numerous theorists have discussed the primacy of the visual, often termed 'ocularcentrism', that prevails in modern (or, as some would emphasize, postmodern) Western societies (Barthes, 1981; Baudrillard, 1994; Evans and Hall, 1999; Rose, 2001; Urry, 1990). As an example, the Republic of the Marshall Islands government official in charge of tourism development said of Bikini:

"When you go to Bikini you'll see ... The atoll, it's amazing. It's so pristine. Naturally. It's just turtles and birds and fish everywhere. I've only been in half of the 29 atolls in the Marshalls, but Bikini is definitely a very, very special place ... . When you go there you realize that even before the testing it must have been a really, really special place, not just another atoll" (interview, 2002).

To say that most of the visitors to the atoll that I interviewed described Bikini as 'beautiful' would be an understatement. Thirty-five out of the thirty-six tourists I interviewed, agreed that the label of 'beautiful' should apply to Bikini. One of the marine scientists studying the atoll said:

"It's just beautiful looking at the beach. It's not that common to see beautiful, sandy white beaches. Forget Majuro, or even Likiup or Ailingnae [other atolls in the Marshall Islands], they don't have these long beautiful, wide, white beaches. And then the contrast with the white and green and those blues in the lagoon, fantastic. I'm totally happy to just sit and watch the ocean even if I don't go dive" (2002).

An official working for the Bikinian government also talked about the effects that the visual beauty of the atoll can have on visitors:

"I mean that was our best lobbying tool. We take these US officials up there [Bikini], feed them steak and shrimp and let them walk on the beach and just say, 'This is what we gave up to you. Now you help us get back here'. Real simple. We didn't have to go up there and use, you know, do a lot of lobbying. It's just have them see the place. It's a very beautiful place" (2002).

This emphasis on the visual beauty of Bikini is essential for constructing it as a wilderness area. It is also the reason why Bikini can be conceived as a pristine environment and as a paradise while at the same time being contaminated with (invisible) nuclear radiation.

The perceived beauty of landscapes, often more than scientific ecological findings, can be the basis of environmental preservation activities. James Duncan and Nancy Duncan refer to this as "aesthetic environmentalism" (2001). Just as Duncan and Duncan found in their study in New York, many of the justifications brought up by scientists, tourists, and government officials for preservation at Bikini have to do with the preservation of pleasant view-scapes (both above and under water). I argue that these conceptualizations of landscapes that are worthy of environmental preservation,



particularly on tropical islands, come not from a rational scientism but from aesthetic concerns based on historical narratives of island paradises.

As is evident in the above quotes from scientists, tourists, and the media, it is not the whole visual landscape of Bikini that people focus on. Rather, their attention centers on the beaches (figure 4). Beaches have become special sites of liminality that have great importance in tourism places. In Western culture, ‘the beach’ has been constructed as a zone outside of normal social conventions. It is a zone that has been designated for play, for eroticism, and for gazing upon both landscapes and bodies. There is nothing natural about this, of course; researchers have discussed how conceptions of beaches have changed historically (Doyle, 2005; Heaney, 2005; Shields, 1991; Taussig, 2000; Urry, 1990), and different people from different cultural groups may view a beach as meaning very different things (as with any other place). But for the mostly American, Australian, and European visitors to Bikini the beach is a zone for play and gazing.

The presence of beaches is not the only reason Bikini is labeled as a paradise. Bikini’s beaches are Edenic because they are tropical and largely uninhabited. One tourist on Bikini exclaimed, “Oh my god, I’m the only one on this beach! I can see as far as I can see and I’m the only one” (2002). These are beaches that belong to a special category of landscape that is significant in the Western imagination: the South Pacific Island. This is a geographic label that connects Bikini to other places. Bikini is thus assumed to share many of the characteristics of other ‘South Pacific Islands’. This does not necessarily mean that Bikini is believed to be like Rarotonga or New Caledonia, (or for that matter Moruroa).<sup>(2)</sup> Rather, the term “South Pacific Island” points not as much to a real geographical place as to an ideal setting that is a powerful Western cultural narrative. After all, Bikini’s position 11 degrees north of the equator does little to dampen its appeal as a South Pacific Island.



**Figure 4.** The beach on Bikini (photograph by the author).

<sup>(2)</sup> Moruroa is an atoll in French Polynesia which the French have used for nuclear-weapons testing.

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### Constructing Pacific natures

Many scholars have discussed how the South Pacific narrative has been formed in the European and American imagination through literature, art, philosophy, film, and advertisements over the past centuries (Denning, 1996; Desmond, 1999; Howe, 2000; Jolly, 1997; Lutz and Collins, 1993; Smith, 1960; 1992; Wilson, 2000). This imagining of the South Pacific as a paradise dates from descriptions of Tahiti by British Captain James Cook and other explorers. The South Pacific Island, as well as being a geographical antipode to Europe, is seen also as its cultural antipode. A special kind of Orientalism has been applied to the Pacific. Rather than being the space of the Asian 'other' that serves as a threatening antithesis of the European (Said, 1979), the South Pacific Islands have been imagined as a space of a much more natural, primitive, pliable, and erotic other in a landscape often dubbed an 'Eden'.

Eden, as a concept about a supposed origin, paradise, or utopia, dates back in Western culture, some argue, to as long ago as 7000 BC (Grove, 1995). Over time, a remarkably stable set of attributes as to what defines Eden has persisted. Namely, Edens are places where there are bountiful food supplies, toil is unnecessary, and people, if they are there at all, are few in number. Edens connote wildernesses: 'self-willed lands' where the impacts and actions of humans are sublimated by the powers of nonhuman forces or of 'nature'. Whereas the definition of Eden has been rather stable, the geography of Eden—where it can be found—has changed dramatically over time. As David Arnold (1996), Greg Denning (1996), Kerry Howe (2000), and others have convincingly argued, there is a history to the way that tropical islands have been constructed as Edens. Although most scholars recognize the widespread application of Edenic narratives to tropical islands in the 1700s, especially in the Pacific, most argue that this was not the origin of discourses about Eden; rather, this time period is marked by a shift in the location of Eden to the antipodes of Europe. There is nothing necessarily 'natural' about the fact that this floating conceptualization of a place known as Eden, first applied to the area of present-day central Iraq 9000 years ago, has now landed on islands in the tropical Pacific. Instead, there has been a merging together of the imagined geography of Eden with European experiences at physical sites on islands in the tropics.

European visions of Pacific Edens, and of the supposed 'naturalness' of the people who inhabit them, are not always portrayed positively. Rather, the supposed primitiveness of the Pacific is split into an uneasy dichotomy. Bernard Smith demonstrates through his analysis of European representations of the Pacific that there have been changes in the form that the naturalness of the Pacific takes both across space and through time (1960; 1992). According to Smith, the representations fall into two forms of primitivism: a 'soft primitivism' that extols the inviting fruitfulness of the landscapes and the virtuousness of premodern inhabitants as 'in nature' (the noble-savage trope) and a 'hard primitivism' that portrays landscapes as harsh, diseased, and impenetrable and the inhabitants as fierce and uncivilized (the cannibal trope). As is evident in the language used in these representations, there has been an obvious gendering of Pacific landscapes, and of the people in them, that is still very much in operation today (Desmond, 1999; Dowler et al, 2005; Jolly, 1997; Lutz and Collins, 1993; MacCormack and Strathern, 1980; Teaiwa, 2000).

Spatially, Europeans tended to mark Eastern Polynesia (in the eastern Pacific) with the soft primitivism label and Melanesia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, and Australia (in the southwestern Pacific) with the hard primitivism label. Although there are a lot of exceptions to this generalization, much of it centers on European racial distinctions between lighter skinned Polynesians and darker skinned Melanesians. Smith also points out that there have been shifts in the dominant representations of the

Pacific through time. Smith's (1960) work focuses largely on the age of early European exploration (late 1700s to the mid-1800s) and demonstrates that the type of primitivism that dominates European representations changes based on events (such as the killing of Captain Cook in Hawaii) and on the political and cultural climates in Europe.

It is clear that these early representations of the Pacific were applied unevenly in both time and space. However, Smith and others are struck by how these two types of primitivism are often applied to the same place at one point in time (Dening, 1996; Howe, 2000; Jolly, 1997; Lutz and Collins, 1993). This creates an uneasy tension in the representations, but at the same time it reinforces the overall impression of 'naturalness' and 'primitiveness' by adding elements of unpredictability, uncontrollability, and irrationality.

Whereas much of Smith's work focuses more on historic representations of the Pacific, others have shown that the label of the Pacific as a 'natural' place (whether in its 'hard' or 'soft' form) is still a powerful discursive force. The image of the natural South Pacific has been perpetuated and reinforced through time through the writings of Henri Rousseau, the paintings of Paul Gauguin, plays such as *South Pacific*, and television shows such as *Gilligan's Island*. One only has to watch the television program *Survivor* (whether set in Palau, Vanuatu, Cook Islands, or the Marquesas) or to view the exotic and erotic imagery used to woo tourist dollars to Hawaii to see that this place image is very much still in force.

How, though, does this image of naturalness get applied to the ex-nuclear test site of Bikini Atoll? First, a lacuna in the work of many of the people looking at early representations of the Pacific needs to be addressed: Micronesia. Smith makes brief mention of a European journal about Palau (1960, page 97), but there is not much of an effort to fit Micronesia into the generalized dichotomy of European representations of Polynesian – soft primitivism and Melanesian – hard primitivism. One notable exception to this oversight is the work of Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993), who show through their analysis of *National Geographic* articles that more recent portrayals of Micronesia have tended to borrow the trope of soft primitivism usually aimed at Polynesia. Lutz and Collins emphasize that *National Geographic* represents Micronesia as "out of historical time" and as influenced by "the innocence of Eden" (page 138).

As Lutz and Collins demonstrate, and as I explore elsewhere specifically for Bikini (Davis, 2005b), there has been a change through time in the way that *National Geographic* portrays Micronesia. In particular, Micronesia has been more frequently portrayed as a 'paradise lost', where a childlike Micronesia is 'growing up' and becoming developed and modern. There is a particular emphasis on the presence of refuse in the landscape as symbolizing a fall from an Edenic state of nature. This refuse in the Pacific landscape, especially on beaches, destabilizes the visual base of the social – natural dualism that Latour proposed resides in the modern psyche. Lutz and Collins analyze a 1986 photograph of a polluted beach on Ebeye, Kwajalein Atoll, in the Marshall Islands that has the caption "pollution in paradise, junk overwhelms a beach" by contending:

"beaches are the essence of the Pacific for many Westerners, as travel posters attest; the beach should be a scene of pleasure, not of work or unpleasant sights. If the Pacific is a paradise, as the caption and countless other cultural images tell us, then our despoiling of it is sacrilege here, merely commonplace elsewhere. Moreover, the 1986 lagoon suggests something not just about the Pacific but about the potential end to the dualism of the civilized and the natural human. The tragedy suggested by the picture and its caption is the end of our ability to define ourselves by way of this long-standing dualism" (1993, page 140).

The contemporary beach at Bikini Atoll (figure 4), in contrast, reaffirms the dualism. Through its correlation, *visually*, with established cultural representations of what the natural Pacific ought to be, the empty and clean Bikinian beach confirms the nature–society dualism. It is extolled as an Eden. It serves as a visual counterpoint not just to the profane spaces of modernity in urban Europe or the United States where people and trash are an expected part of the landscape, but also to the fallen nature of other Micronesian islands. Even though knowledge of the nuclear history and radiation risk gives some a sense of unease, the overwhelming response of visitors to the atoll was that it is a pristine wilderness that needs to be preserved. Comments by visitors often used Majuro Atoll, the capital of the Marshall Islands with over 20 000 inhabitants, as an example of what might happen to the ‘natural’ Bikini if it is not protected (Davis, 2005b). One of the environmental scientists studying Bikini used Majuro as a cautionary example:

“You can’t have a reserve and at the same time have 500 people living on it. To keep this pristine place, for naturalistic and biodiversity reasons, and for touristic reasons, if you have people living here [it must be] in a considerate way. Not as they are doing in Majuro. Majuro is doomed” (interview, 2002).

### **Bikini as Eden part two: the bountiful (but boring?) garden**

Western visions of a Bikinian Eden do have an impact on how the landscape of Bikini is managed. Bikini Atoll, however, is politically controlled by the elected local council and there are very different conceptualizations of what Bikini is and what it ought to be within the Bikinian community. These conceptualizations are by no means uniform. As I will discuss, there is quite a variety of opinion within the Bikinian community about the desirability of the atoll and about what the future plans for the atoll should be. Just as with visitors to Bikini, Bikinian representations of the atoll share the same recurring theme: the portrayal of Bikini as an Eden. However, *the kinds of human activities that are imagined to be appropriate in an Eden differ dramatically between the two groups*. In this section of the paper I wish to elaborate on Bikinian representations of the atoll that they have been exiled from for most of the past sixty years. In the section that follows this I will detail how the different versions of Bikini as Eden inform quite different strategies for the current and future use of Bikini’s resources.

Narratives about Eden are, in the end, narratives of loss. In the case of Western culture the Eden myth represents an imagined place of origin (Merchant, 2004). As I discussed, the islands of the Pacific region are seen as places where people are not alienated from nature and where the necessities of life are supplied without labor and deprivation. In Western culture Eden is far away historically but simulacra of it are created in the mythologized accounts of ‘South Sea Islands’ and in modern tourism landscapes. To the displaced Bikinians, however, paradise was lost quite recently.

The Bikinian people, most of whom converted to Christianity early in the 1900s, were expelled from their atoll amid US Navy proclamations that the Bikinians were like the biblical “children of Israel” (Davis, 2005b, page 614; Kiste, 1974, page 27). Today the community remains exiled throughout the Marshall Islands, most of them on Kili Island (figure 1). Few Bikinians remain who have a living memory of life on the atoll prior to 1946. An exception, however, is that approximately 100 Bikinians lived on the atoll for a few years in the 1970s when the US government mistakenly proclaimed the atoll radiologically safe (Davis, 2005a). After their subsequent removal this group did not want to return to Kili Island and instead formed the Bikinian community on Ejit Island on Majuro Atoll.

Like many of the visitors to the atoll, many of the Bikinians I spoke with also referred to Bikini as a paradise or Eden. Many used biblical metaphors and emphasized

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the garden-like aspects of Bikini and the availability of edible plants and animals. In this respect it is not just the land of the atoll that is paradise, but also the bountiful lagoon environment. The lagoon environment on Bikini is compared with the lack of one on their place of exile (Kili Island) and with the overused and polluted lagoon environment of Majuro. One Bikinian man said:

“We take the meaning [of paradise] from the bible, like Adam and Eve ... It is a paradise, a place where you have everything you need. It is a place God puts you where all is within your reach. If you want fish, you go get one. Lobster, you walk out on the reef and get some, or crabs, or birds” (interview, 2001).

As this quote demonstrates, the attractiveness of the Edenic qualities of Bikini lies not in the atoll as a viewable landscape, but as a place where resources can be accessed. Although this portrayal of the atoll as an abundant paradise was common, it did not always translate into a desire for a permanent return.

Currently, there is no timetable for the opening of Bikini Atoll to long-term habitation. Estimates on when Bikini will be safe for repatriation range from today to never. As many Bikinians were exposed to high levels of radiation in the 1970s, the Bikinian local council is reluctant to allow anyone to move back while there is still uncertainty about the contamination. But what would happen if Bikini was declared safe tomorrow?

It is clear that the Bikinians would not return en masse and abandon Kili and Ejit Islands. Most of my interviewees believed it is more likely that some families would move back and that many others would visit or live there part-time. Some Bikinians already follow a path of circular migration between Kili, Majuro Atoll, and the United States. It is quite conceivable that Bikini Atoll would become another site in that circuit. This is not to downplay the importance of Bikini. Although it may become only one place in which Bikinians live, it would be a highly significant place culturally. It has even been suggested by some of my interviewees that Bikini Atoll may become a site of heritage tourism for Bikinians living elsewhere (see below).

Although not all Bikinians will become permanent residents if their atoll is declared safe, there is no doubt that some people will. Some Bikinians are more or less likely to return based on conceptualizations of radiation safety, but that is only one of the issues that affect repatriation decisions. Other factors include age, desire for the modern ‘city life’ of Majuro, and landownership on Bikini.

Those who are old enough to remember life on Bikini are the most adamant about returning. In sharp contrast, younger members of the community are less enthusiastic about moving to Bikini. One younger Bikinian woman living on Majuro said:

“There are people that just want to move back and then there are those people that say, ‘Why don’t we just sell Bikini? What’s the point?’ ... The older people though, ‘Oh, I wish I could spend my last years there’. The younger people, no. I don’t even think they have even been thinking about it like, ‘Someday I want to move back to Bikini’. No. A lot of young girls that I talk to are like ‘I just want to visit Bikini’. ‘I want to see Bikini’. But they don’t say, ‘I want to live there’” (interview, 2002).

To many younger Bikinians their atoll is not just radioactive, it is boring. To them, it is an outer island that lacks the attractions of Majuro. These differences in attitude are not just a result of who was alive in 1946, but a result of the generation gap caused by the rapid pace of modernization in the Marshall Islands. Stores, movie theaters, sporting events, cable television, and medical care on the capital atoll are draws to the younger generations of Bikinians. One young male Bikinian employee who works on Bikini said:

“I think Majuro is better than here. This [is an] outer island. On Majuro [there are] movies, friends, cars. [We can] go cruising” (interview, 2002).

Another Bikinian male concurred:

“I hear some younger people they talk about [Bikini is] too far, but they don’t mention the radiation. They talk about too far, they don’t have TV. You know, they think it is like an outer island. They like to go to mainland, Honolulu, stay in Majuro, use a lot of stores, cars, yes. Things to do, movies ... Yes. And this generation now on Kili I believe they don’t know how to make copra. It is hard for them” (interview, 2002).

This generation gap is particularly illuminated by comments that, if repatriation to Bikini is allowed, many older Bikinians would return and leave the younger members of their families behind on Ejit Island, Majuro, and Kili. One woman on Ejit said:

“Well we feel like the older people could go back to Bikini but the younger ones they stay here and go to school for a better future. But we [will] move back to the island because there [are] a lot of trees: breadfruit, coconut ... What we are going to miss [by leaving Ejit] is playing with the children, and that the doctor is near and the schools and everything” (interview, 2002).

Another major factor in who is going to return to Bikini is landownership. Whereas all Bikinians have the right to *use* land on Bikini, the *ownership* of land follows a semi-matrilineal system and is quite uneven and concentrated in the hands of heads of lineage known as *alabs* (Kiste, 1974). In the 1970s the main determinant of who returned to Bikini and who did not had to do with landownership. A Bikinian government official describes the motivation for one man to return to Bikini in the 1970s:

“He had huge tracts of land up there. Big tracts of land. And here on Kili he’s just like everybody else and that’s why he talks about land to a Marshallese is their form of gold. If you got a lot of land you are a very important person. You go down to Kili and everybody’s got the same little chunk of land for their house. Suddenly you’re just like everybody else and you feel like I should be getting a lot more because I’m a land owner and here’s this Joe Blow guy over here who’s maybe half a Bikinian or something, and not from his mother’s side, where he’s getting the same thing I am. You got a lot of resentment like that. But all the land lines on Bikini, everybody knows where they are. Everybody knows whose land it is. That never goes away” (interview, 2002).

The families who have ownership over large amounts of land on Bikini, and who returned there in the 1970s, are the families who founded the community on Ejit. It is this group, then, that would seem to be the most likely to lead a return to Bikini when one occurs because of landownership and also because, for many in the community, their lived experiences on Bikini date from the 1970s and not from the 1940s. There is, though, still a great amount of uncertainty about who would go back. One Bikinian council member summed it up well when he said:

“For now I’m not really sure which community [Ejit or Kili] will be most likely to move back. Because right now our elders have been [dying] right now. Almost all are young age now so I don’t know if their mind is, you know, like their elders ... And another thing, our elders really didn’t care about the radiation level on Bikini. Their mind was only to get back to the land. They don’t care how high the radiation level ... Because they don’t have any knowledge on radiation, but for our younger generation now that we’ve been understanding more about radiation so maybe it will make us scared to go back to Bikini unless we know that it is really 100% safe for us to live” (interview, 2002).

Overall, according to the members of the Bikinian community I interviewed, whether they resided on Kili, Ejit, elsewhere on Majuro, or worked on Bikini, there is a consensus that Bikini is a paradise of *useable* natural resources with intense cultural significance. The differences in opinion are based on whether living in that

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kind of place is desirable. As most people within the community have no direct experience with the atoll, and there is doubt about the safety of returning soon, some in the Bikinian government feel the future for Bikini lies not in a return to subsistence living, but in using Bikini as a means to generate income through tourism and through the associated preservation of the resources of the atoll. As one Bikinian government official said:

“We are planning to, if necessary, looking into it, establishing what we call the marine sanctuary. Because, you know, Bikini is one of the [atolls] known [for] the very, very, large sharks. There was a TV channel called Discovery that came to Bikini and they discovered that there is a pass full of sharks. I think people might be interested in this. Also we have a lot of turtles, seabirds, and we are pretty sure that it might be good for a marine sanctuary or something like that” (interview, 2002).

### **Tourism, conservation, and versions of Eden**

There are potential conflicts looming on the horizon for Bikini Atoll. Currently, the designation of Bikini as a pristine wilderness set aside for the gaze of the Western tourist does not cause too many conflicts with other uses of the atoll. It has successfully attracted tourists and it serves as a way for the Bikinians to generate income. As for Bikini’s status as a radioactively contaminated place, ironically, it is what has enabled the establishment of the pristine-wilderness narrative by disallowing human activities. Changes in the status of Bikini as a contaminated place, however, may bring about changes in the way the atoll is used. When it is decided that Bikini is safe for the repatriation of the Bikinian people, other uses of the atoll will become more important. Although not all Bikinians will return to Bikini, many will. The people on the neighboring nuclear-affected atolls of Enewetak and Rongelap have already returned. What happens to the environmental imaginings of Bikini if a large number of people come back to the atoll and see it as a home with useable resources?

Seeing Bikini as a homeland is in many ways at odds with the other conceptualizations of the atoll as ‘nature’ in that designating a place as nature, according to the Western binary of the natural and the social, marginalizes the people in these places and discourages many social activities within them. Ecological parks and marine sanctuaries are not places where people live and work as much as they are places that are set aside for other activities. In this way, spaces of environmental conservation can be seen as marginal spaces in much the same way as vacation sites (Shields, 1991; Turner and Ash, 1976), or, for that matter, sites for atomic testing (Cosgrove, 1998; Davis, 2005b; Kirsh, 1998).

As I think should be evident at this point, the impetus for conservation regulation comes from more than just ‘modern’ Western visitors to the atoll. Government officials across the Marshall Islands have interests in this area as well. For both Bikini and nearby Rongelap Atoll, the setting up of spaces of environmental conservation is viewed as an essential part of their tourism plans. This marriage of tourism practices with environmental conservation occurs, of course, in many places around the globe (Holden, 2000; Neumann, 1998). What should be emphasized is that the discussions among both local officials and the environmental scientists on Bikini are based not only on scientific measurements of biodiversity or fish populations, but rather on the spectacular landscapes and animals that can be viewed by tourists, photographers, and filmmakers.

The marine environment is not the only realm on Bikini that draws discussion of conservation for the aesthetic pleasure of tourists. Bikini’s terrestrial environment is also unique and could serve as a magnet for tourists. Plant and animal life has returned

in abundance to the islands near the larger nuclear blasts, and the lack of activity by humans and other mammals on some of the islands has led to tremendous populations of seabirds. When tourists are brought to the west side of the atoll for a look at the numerous sharks in “Shark Pass” they are also treated to a visit of the nearby islands covered with birds and their unhidden nests. Several managers at the tourism operation (one of whom has a degree in environmental studies) have even suggested that the incredible variation in the terrestrial ecosystems makes them an ideal setting for an ecological park comparable to those in the Galapagos Islands.

The scientists’ and tourism managers’ conceptualizations of Bikini and Rongelap are important because of their advisory roles to local governments. As the leader of the environmental study on Bikini and Rongelap noted:

“Bikini is mostly interesting to us because of its special status, that it’s been almost untouched for 50 years and there is no reference of open research done before ... For Rongelap it’s both going to be a comparison [with Bikini] but especially we want to do it to help the government establish protected areas to develop Rongelap as an ecotourist location. So the mayor asked me directly if I could do some of the underwater studies to help him select good sites that could be protected that could be attractors for tourists, divers ... They understand that if you have one, or maybe more than one, spot that are [sic] established as a protected area, or a national park, or a reserve, they are attractors for tourism. So they really want it” (interview, 2002).

This connection between preservation and tourism has been noted elsewhere as well. Neumann mentions in his study of the establishment of a Tanzanian national park that, “While the possibility of economic gains through tourism helped to motivate the state’s efforts to protect and control natural resources, national parks are a unique form of resource management. They served as powerful symbols of a European-based vision of what Africa should be” (1998, page 123). Neumann’s comments about the power of European imaginings of ‘what Africa should be’ are similar to those made by Howe about tourism spaces in the Pacific: “They are Western cultural spaces, not the cultural spaces of the Other to whom they ostensibly belong. Pacific island tourism remains a colonialist activity, not just in social and economic terms, but in its intellectual/imagining process, even in these so-called postcolonial times” (2000, page 30). Just as Neumann contends that Western conservationist visions of what ‘Africa should be’ affect the reproduction of African places, there are effects on what Bikini will become not just because of scientific information, but because scientists and other visitors have been applying the narrative of pristine wilderness to the atoll. These aesthetic visions affect what ‘Bikini should be’.

The effects of these discourses of pristine wilderness are demonstrated in the environmental policies shown in table 1. In an effort to minimize the impacts of human activity on the reefs and islands of the atoll, the Bikinian council passed a series of regulations to protect the resources on Bikini Atoll: fish, birds, turtles, and lobsters are all desirable foods throughout the Marshall Islands as well as resources that commercial fishers and tourists are interested in taking from the environment. There is little doubt that the regulations are based on concepts of conservation popular in wealthier countries. They even include reference to the fact that these rules are similar to rules used in other places. These regulations, though, are not imposed on the local council from other scales of governance. Instead, the conservation rules represent an internalization of ‘global’ environmental ethics popular throughout the world and a hybridization of those ethics with local ones. This blending is hardly surprising given the Bikinians’ lack of recent experience with living on Bikini Atoll and their extensive interaction with the wider world through education, travel, books, newspapers, and television. It also reflects



**Table 1.** Specific environmental regulations for Bikini Atoll.

The following regulations were created by the Kili/Bikini/Ejit Local Government Council and enacted on 28 July 1997 (all capitals and emphases in original).

**Protected Fishes at Bikini Atoll**

- All Bonefish shall be released IMMEDIATELY.
- ALL Trevally of any species shall be released if caught within 300 yards of any land structure, or any reef flats surrounding land.
- NO “snappers” can be taken off any reef flats (reef on ocean side of islands and at either end).
- A MINIMUM SIZE OF 12 INCHES applies to ALL species of fish roughly classed as “GROUPERS” and “SNAPPERS”. Fish smaller than this must be released, and if the hook has been swallowed then the line should be cut as close to the hook as possible to aid survival. DO NOT try to cut or pull out a swallowed hook as it may kill the fish. A fish hook is inexpensive to lose, and you CANNOT keep these fish even if they die!
- The use of BARBLESS hooks (Barb squashed down with pliers) aids in releasing fish easily upon capture, and does not significantly reduce the catch rate!
- No fish or lobsters can be taken with spears, Hawaiian slings, etc.
- This does not mean that you cannot catch these fish, it just means that they must be released so that somebody else can also catch that fish later on. The reason for these regulations is to maintain the great fishing we have here for future guests to these islands, and all the regulations are very, very reasonable to anyone who has lived in the USA or elsewhere in the developed world.

**Rules for Lobster**

- The only method allowed for taking lobster is by hand. NO lobsters can be taken with spears.
- ALL female lobsters with eggs shall be immediately released unharmed.
- The minimum size for lobsters should be 14 inches from eyes to tip of tail, or about 1½–2 lbs.
- The lobster caught here should be for local consumption, and definitely not for sale in Majuro.

**Rules for Birds**

- No “Frigate Birds” or “Hawks” shall be taken for consumption or sent to Majuro.
- No birds will be sent to Majuro without the written permission from the Bikinian Council.
- Bird “harvesting” shall be LIMITED to 1 bird per person, with an ABSOLUTE MAXIMUM of 10 birds per party.
- NO adult birds will be taken.
- Only one harvest of birds every six months.
- Birds can only be taken from the “Bird Islands”, and are completely protected on all islands from and including Enue over to Aoemen, where NO birds shall be taken.

the influence of people who have come into the Bikinian community as managers, consultants, volunteers, visitors, and teachers. Furthermore, foreign-born employees and managers of Bikini Atoll’s tourism operation and visiting researchers carry with them their own ideas about environmental conservation, and their opinions and views carry weight within the local institutional structure.

As is evident in table 1, the regulations are written in a matter of fact, almost casual, way. Interesting references are also made in the laws as to why they are justified. Particularly noteworthy are the discussions in table 1 of the reasonableness of the regulations to people who have lived in the “USA or elsewhere in the developed world”. Whereas the environmental regulations for Bikini Atoll are being produced and implemented by local institutions, the ideas that legitimize them are based on an aesthetic environmentalism: the global origin of these ethics is literally inscribed within the regulations themselves.

So what happens when people move back to the atoll and have a desire to live on it in ways that transgress its designation as a pristine nature? Many tourists made comments about 'shanties', garbage, and the danger that may come with having a native population around the resort. I asked visitors, both tourists and environmental scientists, what they thought Bikini would be like if 500 Bikinians (one sixth of the current Bikinian population) returned to the atoll. Most stated that they did not mind if Bikinians came back to the atoll as long as they lived in the environment in the 'correct' way. Some tourists welcomed the chance to visit the atoll, do some diving, and also have a cultural tourism experience with 'primitive' people. One male tourist said:

"There could be a distraction if there were more people on the island. The other thing is that there are a bunch of islands around there. So maybe they might not come back to Bikini itself but one of the other islands that are already out there. Then you could go visit them and do the village thing" (interview, 2002).

An American employee of the resort stated:

"I'm not being judgmental. If that's the way they live, then that's the way they live. It just happens to be different than me. I don't care, but when you start talking about tourism I know what is acceptable and what will attract tourists and I know what is unacceptable and won't attract tourists ... . The reality is if you've got a place with a lot of refuse around and there's motor vehicles, and the kids are allowed to play unattended and run back and forth across the street it's not going to attract the tourists" (interview, 2002).

So in the tourist imagination a natural island can have native people, but it is not expected to have *modern people* (particularly ones viewed as untidy).

This was a sentiment echoed in regards to the environment of the atoll as well. The visiting environmental scientists, as well as employees at the resort, are wary of what may happen to Bikini's ecology if Bikinians return and do not live in certain prescribed ways. Their responses demonstrate a range of opinions about repatriation, from it being a certain disaster for the ecology of the atoll to it being something which can be reconciled with environmental protection if 'planned correctly'. This wariness about the environmental effects of repatriation is generally associated with resource use by the Bikinians for subsistence, but some people also voiced concern about waste management and the potential for the Bikinians to engage in commercial fishing as well. Again, when people discuss the potential impacts of a permanent community they use the heavily fished, polluted, and crowded Majuro as a comparison. One employee at the resort said regarding a large influx of Bikinians to the atoll:

"The environmental impact, it would be as such that it would have massive amounts of decrease in fish, you would have massive concentrations of bird lossage. Unless they had some way of enforcing environmental rules and regulations this place would just be like Majuro very quickly" (interview, 2002)

From the view of Bikinians, who see the atoll as a homeland with plentiful *useable* resources, there would likely be resistance to continued restrictions over fishing and hunting on the atoll. The visitor to the atoll, however, is coming from the perspective that Bikini is a pristine wilderness and that the imaginings of the atoll as a homeland have to be brought into line with the pristine-wilderness place image, not vice versa. One marine biologist went as far as to suggest that it would be best for the pristine nature of Bikini if there was a limit on the number of Bikinians that return:

"The pressure on the reef would be fairly intense and that would be a real pity, because this is probably one of the few places in the world where there isn't pressure on the marine resources. That's a pretty special thing to have a pristine reef. So it would be nice to be able to protect that. I think it would be good to have a few people back on the isle because there's been a population here, and it would

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be nice to have some sort of balance. It would probably be difficult to sustain 500 people I think. Maybe 200 might be a more appropriate limit” (interview, 2002).

It is helpful at this point to take a step back and remember that this is a former nuclear test site that people are talking about. People are talking about the potential negative impacts that 500 people will have if they engage in subsistence fishing and hunting on an atoll that has been utterly laid to waste by twenty-three nuclear weapons and by the associated activities of tens of thousands of military and Department of Energy personnel. In the debate over the preservation of the atoll, it is easy to overlook the fact that Bikini bears the scars of one of the most destructive modernist projects in the history of the world. Three islands were vaporized, and it is still considered dangerous to spend any kind of time on Nam Island in the northern part of the atoll because of high background radiation. A crater a mile wide runs through the atoll reef. The vegetation on the islands on the other side of the atoll was annihilated by nuclear fire. Not to mention the fact that Bikini and Eneu Islands have gone from being forests of coconut trees and pandanus to nothing but scrub brush, and now to being neatly planted rows of Cesium-137-tainted coconut trees.

I am recounting this nuclear history not to say that the pristine-wilderness place image is wrong, but rather to show the power that the place image has to cover past conceptualizations of the atoll and, more importantly, to show the power it has to mold the place now and in the future. Limiting the numbers and activities of a local population may make sense when a place is considered to be a pristine wilderness. But, if Bikini is instead viewed as a site which has been a playground for US military destruction, it sounds incredibly callous to suggest that foreign scientists should be making recommendations that restrict how many people ought to be able to fish in the lagoon so that it can be preserved as a unique specimen of biodiversity. I do not mean to attack the scientists themselves or to belittle the idea of environmental conservation. Rather, I caution against the negative political consequences of attaching the pristine-wilderness place image to Bikini because it shifts the scale at which people designate ownership of the resources of the atoll.

Unlike many places with top-down conservation governance, however, the Bikinians’ strong political control over their atoll gives them a greater ability to keep the scale of resource control at the local level. This allows them the ability to govern landscape change, resource use, and other activities according to whichever conceptualization of the atoll holds sway *within* the community rather than outside it. Of course, there will always be input and pressures from outside the community as to what should be done with the atoll, especially if the Bikinians wish to continue receiving revenue from a flow of tourists to the atoll. The Bikinian government, however, is well positioned to engage in whatever kind of tourism or resource-management scheme it desires or to choose not to ‘manage’ resources at all.

I want to stress that, unlike some of my interviewees, I do not see this as an all-or-nothing affair between having a repatriated Bikinian homeland or environmental conservation. The Bikinian council has, after all, enacted its own set of conservation regulations, even if the rules are currently difficult to police and not rigorously enforced. The main point is that because of local governance it is the Bikinian council that will act as arbitrator of conflicts that arise as a result of various conceptualizations of place. In this way, when repatriation does occur, the island can be a homeland first and an ecotourist marine sanctuary second. As one of the environmental scientists put it,

“There’s always going to be resource use. But we can’t say, ‘You shouldn’t come back here because I want a reserve’ when I live somewhere else. I just think that it should be thought about carefully, how it’s set up and how it should be. Because it is a chance to start anew” (interview, 2002).

### **Purification, politics, and the scales of Eden**

Bikini Atoll, represented as a pristine wilderness, has become a site in a global system of place imagining. Neumann, drawing on the work of Denis Cosgrove, Raymond Williams, and others, claims that the landscape aesthetic in Western (particularly British) society has resulted in “the creation, materially and symbolically, of two distinct landscapes: one of production ruled by rationality and profit and one of consumption where recreation and contemplation prevail” (2003, page 241). The extensive literature on searches for Eden bears this out. A sacred, natural Eden is imaginable only in opposition to the profane social spaces of the modern subject that are seen as intrinsically divorced from nature. To return to Latour’s model (1993), it could be said that ‘moderns’ believe in the need to divide the world into dichotomous natural and social regions with their corresponding premodern and modern people. How useful, though, is this model for understanding cross-cultural interactions in places such as Bikini Atoll? As mentioned, Latour himself does not use this model to show how the world is actually divided up, but rather he uses it to explain the *tendency* for subjects who see themselves as modern to attempt to divide the world into these purified categories. I argue that this tendency is a strong force at Bikini, a force that legitimizes certain uses of the landscape and seeks to prohibit others. In this instance, the proliferation of problematic hybrids of nature–society, such as the garbage-filled Micronesian beach (Lutz and Collins, 1993), does not cause people to abandon the project of trying to find pure nature, but rather intensifies it and brings forward strong demands to protect the ever-shrinking spaces that fit the (visually defined) pristine natural landscape—even when the space is a former nuclear test site. Although the dragon of reified categories of ‘natural’ and ‘social’ has largely been slain in the academic circles of political ecology (Castree and Braun, 2001), the categories still have a tenacious grip on the minds of many actors who actively shape places. So, as is not uncommon, there is a large gap between academic conceptualizations of the world and the conceptualizations held by the actors most involved in making places and fighting the battles of resource control.

I argue in this paper that, although perceptions of the ‘naturalness’ of a place (and what one is allowed to do in it) differ across cultural divides, there is still a strong tendency for Western actors to represent a reified version of nature. These ‘natural’ landscapes fit into a global system of place imagining that divides the world into civilized social spaces and natural Edens: one space for modern living and a premodern ‘pleasure periphery’ for tourism and ecology. In the case of tropical Bikini Atoll, the forces of modernity have created a visually appealing wilderness that places it in the latter category. This has real implications for the future of the atoll. An environmental scientist said this about what she wanted Bikini to be in ten years:

“[I want it to be] the same ... The only change that I would like to see, because I’m a marine biologist, I would like to have people interested in seeing the coral reefs. They’re so special and so unique in the middle of the Pacific ... In terms of the structures around, nothing should be added. Nothing [should be] changed, it should stay the way it is” (interview, 2002).

This person is not alone in hoping that Bikini stays the way it is today. The sentiment is shared by many visiting scientists, tourists, resort employees, and some members of the Bikinian community. The problem, of course, is that keeping Bikini ‘the way it is’ means maintaining its status quo as a place from which the Bikinians are still exiled. I do not mean to imply that most people consciously oppose the return of the Bikinians so that the atoll can continue to be used as a tourism operation and as an ecological park. The fact is, however, that a fair number do. All of the workers at the resort that I interviewed expressed profound reservations about repatriation. Eight of the nine environmental scientists I interviewed believed that repatriation would threaten the

ecology of the atoll. And only three of the thirty-six tourists interviewed responded to the idea of repatriation with comments that could be considered positive.

These concerns are illustrative of many Westerners' views of how a repatriation of Bikini must occur. Namely, it must be regulated so as not to harm the pristine nature of the place. The Bikinians, as well as other Marshallese on Majuro, are seen not as premodern natives fitting in to nature, but as agents who, if allowed, will defile the natural place through their modern behaviors (driving cars, producing refuse, living in houses rather than huts). Of course, the irony that these tourists and scientists themselves live modern lives with automobiles, houses, and disposable products while simultaneously trying to deny Bikinians the same rights because it will ruin a 'pristine' nuclear-weapons test site somehow escapes them. This, I contend, is a testament to the power of the imaginary that divides the world into a global-scale system of civilized profane spaces and pristine wildernesses. It is a spatialization of what practices should occur where and who should perform them. The taken-for-granted nature of this global-scale dichotomous imaginary obscures for Westerners the fact that most people lack the mobility to cross back and forth between the spaces assigned to modern and premodern activities. It is not that the tourists believe the Marshallese should not be able to partake in the activities of making a living in an environment, or enjoy the trappings of civilized society; it is just that they feel they should not be allowed to do it in the globally prescribed Eden that their tropical islands have been labeled. The fact that it is the only space they have is not given careful consideration. Instead, the naturalness of the atoll becomes something not just to be viewed, but also something to be enforced.

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