REPORT ON THE MANNING OF THE
SOPAC BOOTH AT THE
APPEA CONFERENCE 1996

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The booth exhibition area was poorly sited and organised and there were many complaints by exhibitors who had to work in the full sun or were tucked into obscure corners. The SOPAC position was one of the better ones, but even so we were not on a natural walkway (very few booths were). So we did not get much in the way of passing traffic. As Peter Butler has observed, booth attendance had to be boosted by active proselytising .... but those who came to the booth were usually motivated.

The Vanuatu Project results formed the centrepiece and proved a draw-card (helped by the presence of Stanley Temakon, Director of Vanuatu Mines & Water Resources). Parallels with SOPAC companion countries were easily seen. With more arc areas becoming hydrocarbon sources, the prejudice against arc terrains (commented on in previous reports) is much less marked. The more serious enquirers were especially interested in the possibility of slivers of continental foreland (ex-Gondwana rim) being incorporated in the arc pile. In this connection, the video of Yan and Kroenke on the tectonic development of the SW Pacific over the last 100 Myr. was extremely useful. Part of Tonga - the oil-bearing part - is shown in the Yan and Kroenke development as coming from south of New Caledonia (at about 40 Ma). Although not posited directly in their plan, the development allows for the notion that the Vanikolo Basin (northern Vanuatu) may indeed be a slice of attenuated continental crust (from north of the New Caledonia strip of Gondwana margin). This concept enhances the attractiveness of the Torres prospects. The Yan and Kroenke video was keenly appreciated by viewers.

With the realisation of the virtues of the marginal marine play, reservoir potential of reefal piles, and (for some) the possibility of foreland slivers being present, all four countries - Fiji, Tonga, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands continue to rate as attractive wildcat propositions.

Most of the more serious visitors agreed with these propositions but could give no assurances of any future action. The ‘leads’ indicated in the Vanuatu prospect maps were regarded especially favourably. The apparent lack of abundant source rocks is still a problem and one almost universally raised by visitors. This problem is more apparent than real, as is discussed in the Project Report.
A more serious negative is the prevailing No-Risk climate manifested by both majors and smaller companies. No ready explanation is apparent for this attitude. At last year’s APPEA, oil prices were low. This year prices are up - the pessimistic climate seems to originate within the companies governing boards.

Dr John Conolly (Director of Lonman Pty Ltd), one of the Vanuatu Project personnel and a friend of SOPAC, gave us invaluable help. He is continuing to advise several companies of the virtues of exploration, especially in Vanuatu. One of these companies is OXE (Occidental International, California with David Grellman, Exploration Manager East Asia) which we snared last year in Adelaide. Dr Grellman has set up an Asian branch (with Dr Kurt Neher) to evaluate prospects, aimed specifically at SOPAC countries. Stanley Temakon advises that one company is about to take up an oil exploration lease.

As an aside, various visitors stressed the urgent problem that agencies throughout the world are now faced with - the extreme fragility of much of their stored data. This was a familiar topic at the Conference. Surely SOPAC could make a strong case for financial help from AUSAID to transcribe the priceless store of marine data in the SOPAC archives. Australia was actively involved in acquiring much of these data.

The Conference was a fine opportunity to publicise the work of SOPAC and the petroleum potential of the countries exhibited. We stressed the work of SOPAC over and above the search for hydrocarbons. Peter Butler and Stanley Temakon joined me in handing out brochures and in publicising the work of SOPAC. Peter Butler deserves special mention for the quality of the exhibits and for his background organisation. The supply of Solomon Islands’ brochures is finished; in any case the brochure is now outdated. A re-evaluation of Solomon Islands’ prospects along the lines of the Vanuatu project would surely produce equally promising results, especially with the use of reprocessed reflection profiles.