

TIGHAR TRACKS

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Bad News

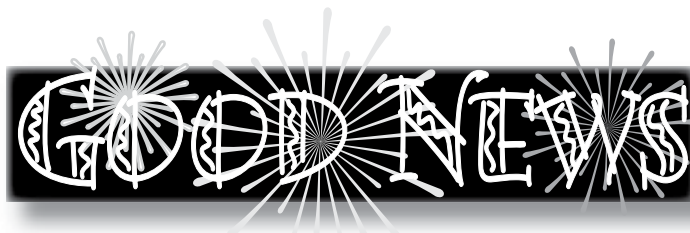
The bad news is that the Wheel of Fortune, AKA WoF (see *TIGHAR Tracks*, July 2003) is gone. Not there. Can't find it. At least it is nowhere near where marine biologist Dr. Greg Stone saw it in June of 2002, but there's no mystery about why it's not there. When the team reached Nikumaroro on July 28th they were amazed to see an island much altered by the forces of nature. All along the western and southwestern shoreline the beaches had been scoured and the beachfront vegetation torn up and hurled inland. The village radio shack that had stood near the southern lagoon passage since the early 1950s was flattened. Under water off the edge of the reef, the delicate staghorn and other corals that had so impressed the 2002 New England Aquarium expedition were smashed and scattered. House-sized chunks of the reef platform itself had broken off.

Devastated as the shoreline was, the changes to the lagoon were even more dramatic. Bauareke Passage, the shallow southern lagoon opening, had previously provided little communication with the ocean. As a consequence, in our experience, the water of the lagoon had always been murky. Now Bauareke is open to the sea even at low tide with the result that there is now free passage of clear water through the western half of the lagoon. The "lakes" at the southeast tip of the atoll, formerly brackish and nearly dry, are now filled with clear water and teeming with fish.

Subsequent research has shown that in December of last year Nikumaroro was hit with back-to-back tropical cyclones (as hurricanes are called

in the South Pacific). One of them, dubbed "Zoe," was a Category 5 super-cyclone with sustained winds of 178 mph. Based upon an examination of the damage, coral reef geologist and Niku Vp team member Howard Alldred estimated a storm surge (rise in sea level due to reduced barometric pressure) of approximately one meter and wave heights of at least three meters on top of that in 2002.

Given the level of violence visited upon the shoreline where the WoF was seen, it is hardly surprising that it is no longer there. Where did it go? Inland perhaps, and if it did it may still turn up in the detailed searches scheduled for next summer's Niku V Expedition. But it may also have been swept back out into ocean depths that are inaccessible to us unless and until further discoveries on the island bring us the funding necessary to deploy the technology needed to look there.



THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT THERE IS MUCH MORE GOOD NEWS THAN THERE IS BAD NEWS.

In addition to collecting vital data and measurements that will allow us to refine out tidal calculations, the expedition discovered and recovered some of the most promising artifacts we have ever found on Nikumaroro. They found more dados. For an explanation of why that is such a good thing see "Dados Galore," page 3.

Expeditions are, by their nature, expeditious. They are all about dealing with uncertainty and answering new questions. If an expedition turns

out just the way you expected it to, it was probably unnecessary. The Niku Vp team did a marvelous job dealing with more than their share of uncertainty and new questions. The information they brought back has changed much of our planning for Niku V and the artifacts they found instead of the one they expected to find have set us on a whole new course of investigation. They were the smallest team on the smallest boat we've ever sent into the Phoenix Group and they accomplished their mission with no injuries and no equipment breakage despite many difficulties and obstacles beyond their control. To Van, Walt, John and Howard we say, "Well done." And we extend our thanks and appreciation to Ken, Louise and Mollie of the sailing vessel *Mollie* who patiently endured nearly a month of maddening delays and then carried the expedition out and back with safety, professionalism and good will.



The radio shack, before and after. Veryl Fenlason stands in front of the shack in 1997 in the photo above by K. Spading. Van Hunn took the photo at right this year.



Photo of Mollie at sea by Van Hunn.