

Exploring the heart of Fiji



Sustainability Policy

Talanoa Treks is committed to environmental and cultural sustainability throughout our business operations. As a company founded on the beauty of Fiji's tropical rainforests, pristine rivers and dramatic peaks and its rich cultural heritage environmental and cultural sustainability are part of who we are and the reason our guests come trekking with us.

A summary of our initiatives is provided below and you can read more in our full sustainability policy.

Our vision of sustainability

Talanoa Treks is inspired by doing tourism differently. We place the communities we partner with at the heart of everything we do – empowering them to establish small enterprises, generate employment and income that can support them to realise their development goals whilst also conserving Fiji's natural beauty and giving tourists a unique experience.

Environmental sustainability

- Talanoa Treks is a corporate member of NatureFiji- MareqetiViti, Fiji's only local conservation NGO helping to preserve Fiji's unique environment for the benefit of all.
- We aim to keep our carbon footprint as low as possible and are currently assessing offset options to allow guests to offset the emissions from their treks (mainly from transport).
- Leave no trace hiking – we encourage all hikers to carry out their litter in our vehicles. The exception to this is where plastic bottles can be usefully re-used in the community.
- Our guide training emphasises environmentally conscious behaviour and ensures that education and information is provided that explains the damage caused poor environmental practices (in particular burning, littering and pollution of waterways).
- Our guides and briefing emphasise the importance of behaviour that contributes to the ongoing protection of the places we visit. This includes for example keeping noise and disturbances to a minimum at the Wailotua caves, a roosting site for the endemic Fiji blossom bat.

Cultural sustainability

- We reflect and respect Fijian culture. We encourage the communities themselves to think through which aspects of their culture and their stories they want to share with visitors to their communities. As such every visitor gets a unique experience!
- We support the preservation and documentation of traditional knowledge. In 2014, we facilitated a Fiji Museum cultural heritage mapping exercise in Nubutautau and supported a community elder to produce a digital story describing the process of traditional valevakaviti (Fijian house) building.

- We support our partner communities to meet their own development goals. Where possible we link them with funding sources that can support them with specific projects.
- We believe that community tourism must be driven by the communities themselves. This means creating the space and the enabling environment for them to recognise the possible opportunities, identify their own training needs and the way in which the enterprise can contribute to community development, and shape the way the business operates and grows.

Our values

- We expect all our employees and customers to act with honesty, integrity and fairness.
- We accept our responsibility to engage with communities and we will invest in society in a way that makes effective use of our resources, including support for charitable organisations.
- We are committed to sustainable business practices, environmental conservation and minimising our carbon footprint.
- Our customers have chosen to trust us. In return we must strive to anticipate and understand their needs and delight them with our service.
- We aim to contribute to making the world a better place – both through the services we provide and through the impact we have on the world around us.

Talanoa Treks - Sustainability Policy

Talanoa Treks - Embedding sustainability

When we looked for guidance on how to write a sustainability policy we were struck by the fact that most of the available guidance discussed how to improve the sustainability (cultural, environmental, social) of the business. This implies that for most companies they start off down a certain path and then decide that they need to be more sustainable, i.e. that sustainability has always been a secondary objective to the company.

Our aim in establishing Talanoa Treks has always been to support the rural communities we partner with to access income to support their development needs. We believe that this is the only way that a hiking business in Fiji can be sustainable and we take it seriously.

Environmental sustainability

We have been personal members of NatureFiji-MareqetiViti (NFMV) since its foundation in 2007 and Talanoa Treks is now a proud corporate member. We used NFMV community facilitators during our initial consultations with each community.

Our environmental footprint

Our major contribution to environmental degradation is the emissions of our two vehicles. We monitor this through a simple emissions factor calculation and are currently exploring ways to offset these emissions through tree planting initiatives.

Our commitment as hikers

We have a “leave no trace” policy for all our walkers ensuring that anything guests bring with them (water bottles, food wrappers) is taken back home with them for appropriate disposal. The only exception to this is where communities can usefully recycle empty bottles. Information provided to participants in advance of trips emphasises this.

Environmentally conscious guides

Our guide training emphasises environmentally conscious behaviour as an important attribute of a Talanoa Treks guide. Some of our guides did not fully appreciate the damage that littering or lighting fires could have on the environment or how it would be viewed negatively by the tourists we bring and would detract from the overall experience. Peer to peer monitoring between guides is an important way of reinforcing this learning.

In Nubutautau village we are often invited to contribute to the youth church service and often focus the discussions on issues of environmental sustainability and health.

Protecting the places we visit

We visit the Wailotua caves as part of one itinerary which is a roosting site for the Fiji Blossom Bat. Our briefing includes the importance of minimising disturbance to the bat by keeping noise levels down and not shining torches at them directly. We are working with NFMV to provide the guides with more information on the blossom bat that she can share with visitors to the cave.

We facilitate links between partner communities and government departments, and conservation non-governmental organisations, such as NFMV, who can provide them with additional training in environmental conservation.

Community and Cultural Sustainability

Talanoa Treks seeks to create a tourism operation that builds genuine partnerships with remote communities and provides trekkers with an authentic insight into the real Fiji.

Through this partnership we provide the framework within which the communities can establish and grow their own enterprises to provide services to visitors, including guides, accommodation and meals. We conduct training, undertake marketing, provide overall trip logistics and quality control, and act as backstop as the communities improve their services. We are committed to supporting them develop their own enterprises and are in the process of recruiting a small business development adviser that will work with each community to provide advice on business development options. This should have wider benefits beyond our tourism operations but should also support agricultural enterprise management in the communities.

Community and Cultural Sustainability: Reflecting and respecting Fijian culture

Fijian culture, and the insight provided by our trips, is an important part of the experience and is what makes the trip so memorable for our guests long after the blisters have healed! We encourage the communities themselves to think through which aspects of their culture and their stories they want to share with visitors to their communities. Members of the community decide if they want to put on a meke or sing a song. This is not dictated by Talanoa Treks – and as such each visitor gets a slightly different experience. We facilitated a cultural heritage mapping exercise in Nubutautau in March 2014 with the Fiji Museum to ensure that some of the rich cultural heritage of that area is documented by the community. We have been proud that many of our guests during 2014 have been young professionals from Fiji who are keen to experience in a different way, their own country and culture.

Community development – an essential component of community and cultural sustainability

We believe that community tourism must be driven by the communities themselves. This means creating the space and the enabling environment for them to recognise the possible opportunities, identify their own training needs and the way in which the enterprise can contribute to community development, and shape the way the business operates and grows.

This requires a significant investment in understanding the community context, and working through the appropriate government and traditional governance structures. In our establishment phase we visited and held consultations with each Provincial Office relevant to our operations to ensure that the Provincial Office were supportive of the efforts and could provide guidance and advice to the communities and the company. They are also third-party signatories to our agreements with the communities and provide ongoing independent advice and support if required.

In 2014, our first full year of operation, we ran 39 trips ranging from one to five days in length, with over 400 guests. The communities and lodges received more than FJD 40,000 in income as payment for food, accommodation and guiding. Many of our guides are young men and women who have limited opportunities to earn cash income in their communities.

The communities decide how to spend the income they earn through the partnership with Talanoa Treks. Nabalasere have invested some of the proceeds to build a new dispensary and we were able to secure FJD 500 worth of medical equipment to stock the dispensary through the donations of previous visitors. Nubutautau have invested some of the funds in upgrading the toilets and installing a shower for visitors to the community including hikers.

All four communities use the proceeds to invest in community development initiatives and we are supporting them to develop appropriate accountability mechanisms to ensure full transparency in the use of funds. We regularly provide them with updates of the total payments made to each community so that they can reconcile this with their own records.

Financial sustainability and transparency

During our start-up phase (2013) we developed draft partnership agreements with 4 communities and 2 existing local lodges to provide guiding, accommodation and food to hikers. These agreements outline

We recognise the importance of financial transparency having seen many other community-based enterprises fail through mistrust about the distribution of benefits.

Don't take our word for it...

We believe the testimony of our guests articulates best reflects our commitment to sustainability.

"Loved my hiking with Talanoa Treks. Fantastic scenery, local guides with stories from the past and great company. Hiking through the highlands and stopping to eat and sleep at local villages was a great experience. I also learned a bit more about Fiji culture and was able to show my respect when visiting villages during the remainder of my stay in Fiji. To top it off, Talanoa Treks is also focused on sustainable development of the communities they work with to provide this unique experience. It was a good fit with my values so I'm happy to recommend them to others." - Martin Pritchard, Melbourne Australia

"This was by far one of the best things I have done so far in Fiji. The beauty of the interior is without words, and the time and thought spent in finding ethical and meaningful ways for people to share in that experience is wonderful. Truly great." - Tim Lafond, Australia