

# Scientist, chief help ease return of nuclear exiles

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*Advertiser Science Writer*

JAPTAN ISLAND, Enewetak. — The old man wearing the hat of a three-star general, two stars missing, broke into a grin as the boat drew near.

He had spotted Roger Ray among the small party arriving that morning. It would be an opportunity for the two of them to catch up on the latest news.

The pair gave each other a bear hug, then Chief Johannes Peter turned to welcome his other guests.

The backgrounds of the two men could not be more dissimilar. Peter is an iroij, a traditional chief of the

first 57 of some 460 Enewetak people returned to the atoll they had not seen for 29 years, partly because Ray felt that some of the former islanders should be present to help in radiation cleanup operations that have just started.

They chose to live on Japtan Island, among 12 judged already free of radioactive contamination. It's the only one of the 40 islands in the atoll remaining with any kind of life-supporting vegetation.

The early return of some of the population is part of the planning that began five years ago to assure the Enewetak people that they may return in safety.

The return of residents to the atoll of Bikini in 1979 was rife with misunderstandings, complicated by a cleanup operation that in retrospect may not have been as complete as necessary.

"We learned a lot of lessons from our experiences with Bikini, and we don't want to repeat our mistakes here," Ray had said during the ride over to Japtan.

"They have been isolated on Ujaleng," he said, "but the coconut wireless is an excellent communications system. People on the various



One of first Enewetak women to return home greets visitors in the middle of "downtown Japtan."

Enewetak people who had to take his people into exile in 1947 to the atoll of Ujaleng, 124 miles to the southwest.

Ray is a physicist, one of a hundred scientists who assembled the 43 nuclear devices that tore apart much of Enewetak from 1943 to 1958.

They are working together now to put the place back together.

In mid-March of this year, the

atolls get information over their two-way radios, and the field ships sent out by the Trust Territory to bring supplies. They get their information in surprising depth."

One problem is that the Enewetak people, although intelligent and familiar with the customs of Americans, have no words in their lan-

guage to describe the complexities of radioactive contamination. The closest word found to explain what the nuclear age has left on their atoll is "poison."

Ray commissioned a 30-minute film five years ago to explain the Enewetak cleanup operation, then

had it translated into Marshallese. He engaged interpreters to sift through the translation half a dozen times, asking for translations back into English over and over until he was satisfied that the people of Enewetak had a firm grasp of what

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# Enewetak exiles

Continued

they were being asked to come back to.

On the dock, a man had set out a model of a Marshallese sailing craft, considered among the finest in the world, to display for the visitors. Shy children giggled.

Ismael John, one of the Enewetak people and deputy district administrator for the Trust Territory, was the only person on Japtan this morning who could serve as an interpreter.

"We are fishing every day, but only for what we can eat tonight because we have no salt to preserve the fish," John said as the party strolled down the beach.

This came as a surprise to Ray, who got wrapped up in a conversation about how much salt would be needed, and what kind.

John said the people spent many hours on Ujaleng deciding who would be sent back as the first returnees. They decided on old people, who had lost the most and had the least time left to recover what the years had taken. And they decided to send children, traditionally often cared for by their grandparents.

Some young men and women have also returned. Ray had arranged the previous morning for 14 Japtan residents to work on Enewetak island with the 1,000 Army troops and civilians who will carry out the cleanup.

"The question in my mind is how their jobs on Enewetak will affect them after we've gone. We'll be paying them, and that's going to change a lot of the traditional structure of the people. They still

live in a mostly cashless economy on Ujaleng, and that's what they will mostly be doing after we've left. But at the same time, they should have a part to play in the cleanup operations."

After a tour of the church and school, housed in the same tin-roofed building, the visitors sat beneath a coconut tree with Chief Peter and John.

The islands have changed, the chief said. The buildings left behind are all right, "but the living isn't so good," he said. "It is not better than Ujaleng. There is no breadfruit, no pandanus. The coconuts are not too healthy. Ujaleng is better today because the food is much better. We like being here, but our lives are starting all over."

Another man in the meeting said there is some fear of eating fish from the lagoon because of the "poison," although extensive studies indicate they are safe to eat.

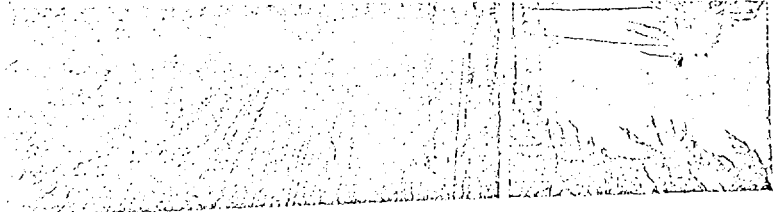
John became ill recently from eating dog-tooth tuna caught in the lagoon, but that apparently was a case of ciguetera poisoning that had nothing to do with radiation. Ciguetera is a poorly understood form of fish poisoning, and one of the peripheral problems in the cleanup is whether the plan to dump nonradioactive wastes into the lagoon will cause further ciguetera outbreaks.

As the brief visit ended, John was asked if he believes many of the people are uneasy about returning. "We have planned this with Roger and the others for five years. The movie helped a lot. I think the people understand that it's all right for them now. We want to come back."

Next: The burial at Runit Island.

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