

Merritt's Trip Report

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Christmas Island, August 1975

M. L. Merritt, 1150, recently spent a week on Christmas Island (Lat 2° N, Long 157° 30' W) together with Dr. John Malik, LASL, and Dr. Allyn Seymour, University of Washington. Our purpose was to see how the island had changed since the DOMINIC tests of 1962, since Christmas Island is at one of the corners of the area of the Pacific Ocean contemplated for the Readiness Program, and also to make a radiological survey to compare with similar measurements being made at Bikini and Enewetak. So far as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony government was concerned, they wanted a current radiological survey to be able to assure the Japanese that the island is clean (more on this below).

When we were on Christmas Island in 1962, there was a group of 400 Gilbertese people (contract laborers for the copra plantation) at the village of London, a recently abandoned village at a place called Poland, contingents of British and American troops, and of course we who were carrying on the tests. We test people left the island before the end of the year. The British and American troops finally left in 1964 (with a dozen U.S.A.F. people returning about 1970 for a purpose that my informant did not know). The British Ministry of Defense had a "maintenance contract" with the plantation after that to care for the buildings and supplies, but this contract was discontinued in 1971.

There are at present about 700 Gilbertese and two Europeans on Christmas Island, in three villages, London, Banana (near the airport), and Poland. The trip to the island was sponsored and paid for by the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Development Authority (GEIDA); development is all the emphasis now, in preparation for scheduled internal self-government of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands by the end of 1976, and full independence by the end of 1977. (At that time also, guano deposits in the Gilberts will be exhausted, and it is hoped the coincidence will help in getting some continued subsidy from the British government.) Thus the party that flew down to Christmas Island from Honolulu included ten Europeans in addition to us, and three Gilbertese, to look at various aspects of the proposed development.

The development furthest along is raising brine shrimp (Artemia sp.). These tiny shrimp (about 3 mm long, max) are used dried by fish hobbyists, and their eggs are vacuum packed for use in fish farms in Europe and elsewhere. The saline lakes in the middle of the island were seeded with brine shrimp in 1971. To make raising them commercially profitable, lake salinity must be controlled in the face of tidal changes and great variations in rainfall. This project is being carried on by a group called Environmental Consultants, Inc., of Kaneohe, Oahu, Hawaii.

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The GEIDA proposes starting an airline to Christmas Island with weekly service from Honolulu. There are two air strips in very good condition on the island, but airport facilities need to be brought into better condition, and a refueling capability needs to be established.

A hotel is to be built in the midst of the old Main Camp for sports fishermen.

TRW is to construct a satellite tracking station on the island for the Japanese, who plan to launch satellites soon (why, I either did not find out or do not remember). Land for this use and support labor will be another source of income.

With all this, the island is much changed from what we remember from 1962. The villages, which were then constructed out of native materials, have been rebuilt using western materials, and - as indicated above - a third, new village now exists. Roads are in good shape, except that the Scaevola has not been trimmed back from the sides of the road and is growing out over it. The brine shrimp project has had a new building built, "Artemia House," at the intersection of the main road (A-1) with the SPAL road (the one over to Poland). Buildings, vehicles, and supplies left by the two military establishments are in pitiful condition. We were told that when the maintenance contract expired, the local people cannibalized the buildings for such things as roof sheeting, not taking all the sheets from one building before moving to the next, but taking a sheet here and a sheet there, letting in the weather to destroy whatever contents there were in them. Vehicles sit abandoned and rusted here and there on back roads. The flooring from the British Port Camp was taken up to make boxes out of. Children vandalized spare parts left in tropical wrappings. A stone chapel at Port Camp, a beautiful building in a beautiful setting, was broken up for supplies to build a new "maniaba" (a Gilbertese meeting place that looks like a roof on pillars over a concrete slab), which however is beautiful in its own right.

We three spent most of our time actually taking samples for the radiological survey, getting vegetation, fish, crabs, and langusta to take back frozen to the Seattle laboratory for analysis. Direct gamma measurements made with a survey meter showed, as expected, nothing above background, and the background is much lower than here in New Mexico. After the analyses, a report on the subject will be prepared, and sent among other places to GEIDA.

All in all, the island looks good and looks fertile. The plantation is profitable and well cared for. Although uninhabited

when the H. M. S. Resolution came upon it on December 24, 1777, under modern conditions the island appears capable of supporting several thousand people, and for a while relieving the population pressure of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands.