

GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTES

SITUATING THE *MERREMIA PELTATA* INVASION IN SAMOA

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Merremia peltata, a little-known vine of the family Convolvulaceae, has been identified as an invasive species of environmental concern in several Pacific Island nations, including Samoa, even though botanists regard the vine as native to the Pacific (Smith 1991; Whistler 2002). The South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) has targeted it for control, despite the fact that the declared intent of the program is the control of non-native species (Meyer 2000). To date the Samoan government has no official strategy for controlling *M. peltata*, and the only recommendations for managing it are contained in a report the U.S. Forest Service prepared for the government of Samoa (Space and Flynn 2002). The report's authors identify the plant as a native species behaving aggressively, indicate that comprehensive control would be difficult, and emphasize the importance of laws requiring the control of invasive species on privately owned and customary lands in rural villages. Given that management of this species involves the interaction of an international community of experts acting through local governments to effect change at the local level, social and political concerns can be expected to influence the effectiveness of implementing control measures. Because of the apparent contradiction that the nativeness of *M. peltata* poses, study of its invasion in Samoa can both elucidate the ecological aspects of the invasion and identify potential political pitfalls in the implementation of control measures.

This field note presents some of the preliminary findings of the doctoral research I have been conducting since November 2002. The larger research project centers on a biogeographical study of *Merremia peltata*, utilizing a random stratified sample of quadrats to analyze vegetation communities and environmental data by means of cluster analysis and nonmetric, multidimensional scaling. Here, however, I focus on the social and political dimensions of the invasion.

The primary study site is the village of Fa'ala on the island of Savai'i (Figure 1). The village lands—spanning littoral, lowland, and upland rain forest as well as managed lands—provide an ecologically and socially diverse landscape. The village council controls most of the lowland and upland rain forests; individual households control the managed lands. The village's lowland rain forest is largely vested in the Tafua Peninsula Rainforest Preserve (TPRP), a private contractual agreement between the villages of Fa'ala, Tafua, and Salelologa and the Swedish Conservation Society, facilitated by the O le Siosiomaga Society (OLSS), a local nongovernmental organization. The landscape of Fa'ala is an excellent site for my research because it

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