

A Sketch of the History of Banaba (Ocean Island)



The island of Banaba began as an underwater peak in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Polyps built a coral base on it in shallow sea water. When the island appeared above sea level, bird-droppings over centuries laid down a 40 feet deep guano covering. The guano changed into phosphate when the island went underwater. Thrust above sea level again, seeds of different trees and plants were dropped on the island by passing birds. Eventually the 1500 acre island stood 300 feet high near the equator, between Nauru and the Kilibati group. It had tons of the purest natural phosphate fertilizer in the world.

Albert Ellis discovered the phosphate in 1900. For almost 80 years the British Phosphate Commission mined the phosphate making enormous profit but destroying the island.

The Japanese occupied the island for three years during the Second World War and used its people as forced labor in other places. After the war the British decided to buy Rabi Island in Fiji with Banaban money from royalties. They resettled most of the Banaban people there on December 15th, 1945.

The Rabi Island Council of Elders took a legal case in 1976 to the British High Court against the Phosphate Company and the British Government. The Judge ordered the company to pay substantial damages and found the British Government morally, though not legally, negligent. Because of an outcry by ordinary British people after viewing a TV program on Ocean Island, the British Government offered an ex gratia payment of 10 million Australian dollars in mid-1977.