ENVIRONMENT ASSESSMENT (SUMMARY)¹

1. With about 85% of the population relying on primary commodity production, sustainable environmental management is intimately linked to growth, social development, and poverty reduction. The environment and natural resources of Solomon Islands face severe threats. These include invasive species, loss of major land and marine habitats, overexploitation of natural resources, destructive harvesting techniques, climate-change-induced sea level rise, and more frequent severe climatic events.

2. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) uses country environmental analysis as a tool to assist with the incorporation of environmental considerations into country partnership strategies for its developing member countries. The country environmental analysis provides targeted information necessary for informed decision making on environmental constraints, needs, and opportunities, including those that impinge on poverty partnership agreements. The focus is on adding value to planned and ongoing development initiatives by (i) reducing environmental constraints, (ii) exploiting environment-related opportunities, and (iii) promoting actions that can lead to improved mainstreaming of environmental considerations into national economic development and planning processes.

A. Environmental Challenges

3. Major environmental issues in Solomon Islands include (i) unsustainable logging practices that result in widespread adverse environmental impacts (e.g., soil erosion and sedimentation, water quality impacts, loss of habitat and biodiversity, and loss of future opportunities for alternative sustainable livelihoods); (ii) inappropriate land use practices caused by slash-and-burn and steep-slope farming systems that accelerate land degradation (e.g., soil erosion, siltation, and loss of soil fertility); (iii) unsustainable fishing practices that are depleting valuable and fragile coastal and marine resources; and (iv) increased risks from extreme weather events resulting from climate change (e.g., increased intensity and frequency of cyclones, El Niño Southern Oscillation effects, extreme droughts and floods) that increase vulnerability, especially posing a threat to food security.

4. Deforestation. Deforestation has widespread consequences for rural living standards. With the depletion of forest resources, communities find it increasingly difficult to access forest products and materials for housing, food, and good quality drinking water. Much of the deforestation occurs on large tracts of steep land. This contributes to erosion, siltation, soil structure decline, and a loss of soil fertility. Ultimately, this results in a reduction in the production potential of the land and a loss in terrestrial and marine biodiversity.

5. Coral reef degradation. Coral reef ecosystems are vital to the food supply and economy of Solomon Islands. They are also one of the biggest tourist attractions in the country. Overexploitation of the fish stock, for both subsistence and commercial use, has resulted in severe depletion of several important food and commercial species. Two commercial companies are currently engaged in coral export but the monitoring systems in place are inadequate to ensure that the reefs are adequately protected.

6. Urbanization and pollution. Honiara, and the adjoining urban areas of Guadalcanal, represent close to 80% of Solomon Island’s urban population. Rural–urban migration is

¹ This summary is based on existing ADB knowledge products and the government’s National Development Strategy 2011–2020.
contributing to a growth in the urban population estimated at 6%–7% per annum. In Honiara alone, at least 75% of sewage flows through a piped collection system directly into the sea without treatment. Discharge from ships in the form of garbage, bilge water, and other pollutants is a major source of sea-based pollution. An increase in these forms of pollution is already a concern as more ships are coming into and using the country’s main harbors.

7. **Natural disasters and climate change.** Solomon Islands is particularly vulnerable to natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and tidal waves. These impact greatly on coastal environments and have contributed to a substantial loss of infrastructure, private property, and livelihoods. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has recently highlighted that the survival of Pacific island countries is at extreme risk from sea-level rise. The vast majority of Solomon Islands’ population lives within 1.5 kilometers of the shoreline and many islands are less than a few meters above sea level. Thus, an increase of as little as half a meter, along with increased storm surges, would completely inundate many critical areas and threaten their populations. In addition to requiring the relocation of affected populations, climate-change-related damage is expected from increased risks of coastal erosion and flooding resulting from wave and storm surges. Flooding is likely to cause a loss of coastal and industrial infrastructure (e.g., roads, settlements, and marine installations), particularly in low-lying areas.

8. **Institutional constraints.** Effective environmental management must cope with the nation’s fragility, ethnic tensions, and political instability. Other factors hampering sustainable management of natural resources include (i) rapid population growth and urbanization, which place heavy demands on a fragile natural resource base; (ii) institutional weaknesses in environmental and natural resources management at the national, provincial, and community level; (iii) policy and legal frameworks that need to be further strengthened; (iv) an absence of effective mechanisms for linking and integrating the customary land tenure system with modern systems for land management to foster sustainable land use; (v) insufficient political will and poor governance, which combine to hamper the enforcement of environmental rules and regulations; and (vi) data gaps that constrain effective and informed decision making and planning for sustainable development. These weaknesses create an environment in which abuses occur, resulting in significant and often irreversible depletion of natural resources.

B. **Government’s Environmental Strategy**

9. The principal environmental legislation is the Environment Act of 1998. The act defines the government’s environmental responsibilities and establishes a framework for an environmental impact assessment process. The act provides for a two-tiered environmental impact assessment process, and adopts the precautionary principle to maintain the health, diversity, and productivity of the environment for future generations. Solomon Islands is also a signatory to many international and regional conventions that are intended to address a range of environmental issues. These include the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. More recently, a national environmental capacity development action plan, 2008–2012 has been formulated, as has a national program of action to adapt to climate changes and rising sea levels. These describe, in detail, measures required to improve

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environmental sustainability and to adapt to the threats posed by climate change. Key measures include coral reef protection, climate-proofing infrastructure projects, integrating climate disaster risks in health and social service programs, encouraging more climate-resilient agricultural production techniques, and improving early warning systems to strengthen disaster risk planning and management.

10. The main national institution charged with environmental management and monitoring is the Environmental Conservation Department in the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Meteorology—a ministry created by the government in 2008. The ministry coordinates with other national-level departments and authorities that have specific sector responsibilities. The Environmental Conservation Department suffers from understaffing and insufficient budgetary resources. Very little funding is available to support the important functions of data gathering, compliance monitoring, and other field-based activities.

11. In addition, the government has issued a “devolution order” authorizing provincial governments to formulate their own regulations for devolved functions, including a range of environment-related functions. At the provincial level, town and country planning boards were formed to undertake a range of planning, regulatory, and resource management functions. Unfortunately, these bodies are insufficiently empowered to implement devolved environmental management functions effectively. This weakness is partially offset, however, through the activities of other institutions, especially nongovernment organizations, academia, and the private sector. Customary landowners also have a potentially large role to play in local environmental management.

12. Many development partners are active in support of sustainable environmental management. Through the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Solomon Islands has become the first country in the Pacific region, and one of four countries in the world, to qualify for the Adaptation Fund, a special international fund for projects that help nations gear up for climate-related changes. A total of $5 million has been approved in support of the project enhancing resilience of communities to the adverse effects of climate change in agriculture and food security, which includes an initiative to help build nurseries and germ plasma centers for crop varieties that thrive through changing climatic conditions and food storage units with durability for periods of extreme weather.

C. ADB Strategy

13. ADB assistance for environmental management and climate change has been integrated into its transport projects. Support has included building environmental impact assessment capacities through the Strengthening of the Ministry of Infrastructure Development Project and through transport initiatives such as Supporting Rural Transport Infrastructure Development and the Transport Infrastructure Project. ADB also helped design the 2006 National Transport Plan, key elements of which included integrated planning, protection of environmental and social sustainability, and increased resilience in the face of natural disasters. A good example of a climate-proofed project is the Second Road Improvement Project. It applies climate adaptation features such as watercourse crossings designed to accept higher floods and river debris loads, strengthened protection of roads, river training works, side slopes designed to prevent erosion.

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4 Details of ongoing ADB projects are in Table 9 of Country and Portfolio Indicators (accessible from the list of linked documents in Appendix 2 of the country partnership strategy). They are not footnoted when they are referred to in the text.
and rerouting of coastal roads exposed to waves and inundation.

14. ADB has also supported Solomon Islands’ response to the 2007 earthquake and tsunami disaster, which devastated parts of the nation’s western islands. ADB has assisted the government in coordinating preparation of the rehabilitation and reconstruction program in November 2007. Efforts since have focused on repairing roads and bridges and other post-tsunami rehabilitation work under the Emergency Assistance Project, cofinanced with the European Union (EU). Support has also been provided to build capacities in disaster recovery planning, which has been successful in improving disaster risk assessment and preparedness procedures.

15. While adaptation to climate change remains a key national priority, the area is comprehensively supported by other donors. Environmental sustainability and climate change considerations will, therefore, be incorporated selectively into ADB’s support for infrastructure and opportunistically under regional technical assistance. ADB-assisted transport projects will include climate-proofing of civil works and risk-based land use planning to help mitigate climate-change-related disaster risks. These will incorporate climate change adaptation into subproject planning and engineering designs and as part of the project’s environmental management plan. Development of renewable energy resources will substitute for the use of indigenous cooking fuels, directly contributing to a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Support will be provided to build the government’s capacity in environmental impact assessment, so as to strengthen the link between project preparation capacities and environmental sustainability.

16. Regional programs will play a major role in ADB’s response to Solomon Islands’ environmental challenges. Through the Coral Triangle Initiative, ADB will support five Pacific developing member countries (Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, and Vanuatu) in strengthening their marine and coastal resources management activities, with one component emphasizing adaptation to climate change. An ADB-supported study will (i) identify regional and national climate change impacts on coastal and marine resources, define options, and guide decisions for sustainable coastal and marine resources management; (ii) review and assess national policies, strategies, regulation, and laws to major environmental issues and trends in the subregion; (iii) engage and strengthen capacity awareness of multisector stakeholders for sustainable environmental management and climate change; and (iv) identify the interaction of factors shaping common threats and opportunities of the participating countries for environmental protection and climate change adaptation. The findings of this study will inform the preparation of follow-up projects designed to strengthen marine and coastal resource management.

17. A new regional initiative is designed to help Pacific island countries mitigate financial risks from the effects of natural disasters by improving the geophysical information system that provides information to decision makers on hazard exposure and risks. ADB is in the process of securing $1 million from the Global Environment Facility’s Least Developed Country Fund for climate-proofing transport projects and policies. In addition, ADB is working with the World Bank to assess the feasibility of establishing a Pacific Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility. ADB will mainly be responsible for setting up a database on the countries’ exposure to natural hazards, which will feed into the modeling work on catastrophe risk insurance. ADB’s participation in this project is through the technical assistance for Regional Partnerships for Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Preparedness, which covers eight countries (the Cook Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu).