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Peer reviewed

**WAGNER DE SOUZA TAVARES
AND RANI ULI SILITONGA**

ComCard Pacific Phonocards and Presentation Folders from the Republic of Nauru

Abstract

This research note describes ComCard Pacific phonocards from the Republic of Nauru as well as phonocard presentation folders. Eighteen phonocards are identified and classified into five thematic groups based on the images they feature. Their varying visual themes suggested that issues such as wildlife conservation, religious values, and immigrant communities were central in Nauru from the mid 1990s through the 2000s. The article also describes two phonocard presentation folders that promoted tourism and wetland conservation in the Republic of Nauru in 1995.

Keywords: *phonocard art, calling cards, Oceania, Pay-Tel Australia Pty Ltd, ComCard Pacific, phonocard collecting, Nauru, popular culture*

Introduction and Overview

This research note discusses phonocards from the Republic of Nauru, which are quite rare due to their limited production and circulation in the 1990s and 2000s, and aims to introduce this little-known form of visual culture in Oceania.¹

A phonocard is a credit-card-size plastic or paper card with pre-paid credit that can be used to pay for telephone calls at a public payphone that has a card reader.² Phonocards were invented in 1975 as a more modern, efficient, and reliable alternative to telephone tokens, one that also had lower operational costs for telecommunication companies.³ They were first put on the market in 1976 in Italy and were eventually used worldwide, mostly from the 1990s to the 2000s.⁴

Many people around the world collect phonocards. Of greatest interest to collectors are phonocards with a specific visual theme.⁵ Phonocards printed with series of images—of cultural attractions, entertainment figures, flora, fauna, technology, and transportation, as well as advertisements—first appeared in 1990s and circulated around the world.⁶

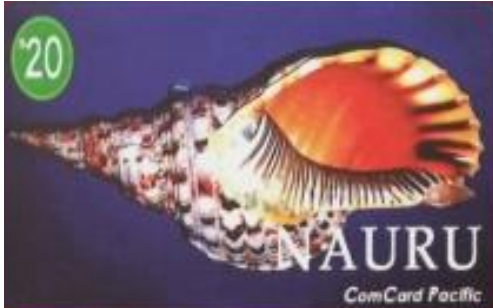
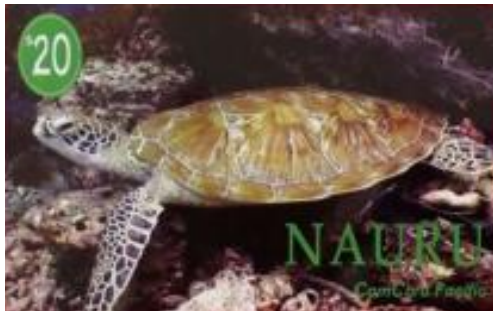


Figure 1 (left). ComCard Pacific phonecard with an image of a giant triton sea snail (*Charonia tritonis*), Republic of Nauru, 1995. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022



Figure 2 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecard with an image of a green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), Republic of Nauru, 1995. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022



Figures 3 (left) and 4 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecards with images of sea turtles, Republic of Nauru, 1995. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022



Figure 5 (left). ComCard Pacific phonecard with an image of a sea turtle, Republic of Nauru, 1995. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022



Figure 6 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecard with an image of the Micronesian pigeon (*Ducula oceanica*), Republic of Nauru, c. 1995. Courtesy of the authors

Phonecard catalogs used by collectors include photographs of phonecards, descriptions of them, values, print-run information, standard catalog reference numbers, and additional notes.⁷ Information about phonecards from certain Oceanic territories—such as Christmas Island, the Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Norfolk, the Pitcairn Islands, the Republic of Nauru, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Wallis and Futuna—is lacking, as low numbers of phonecards were produced for public usage in these areas; some cards were produced only for trial purposes and some had restricted circulation because their production was controlled by other countries such as Australia and New Zealand. Phonecards from these areas are therefore difficult to obtain and have become valuable collectible items.⁸



Figure 7 (left). ComCard Pacific phonecard, “White Tern,” Republic of Nauru, c. 1995. Courtesy of the authors

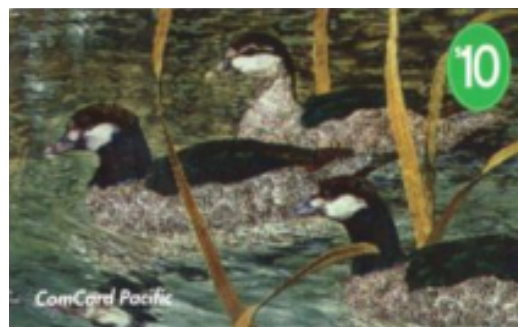


Figure 8 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecard “The Green Pigmy Goose,” Republic of Nauru, 1995. Artist: Robin Hill. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022

Phonecard Images in Nauru

The Republic of Nauru is a microstate island nation in the central Pacific Ocean with a population of approximately 11,000.⁹ In 1994, about 2,000 landlines and 450 cell phones were in use in the Republic of Nauru, with local and international radiotelephone communications provided through Australian companies and an Intelsat S.A. satellite earth station.¹⁰ In 1994, the Republic of Nauru hired ComCard Pacific to organize a public telephone system for the island on an experimental basis.¹¹ ComCard Pacific, in turn, selected the Australian public telephone system Pay-Tel Australia Pty Ltd for the trial.¹²

As discussed, the study of Nauruan phonecards is unique challenging because the cards—especially ones in new condition—are difficult to obtain. This

research note focuses on eighteen Nauruan phonecards from several sources: the authors' private collection, housed in Sumatra, Indonesia; ones published in a printed phonecard catalog by collectors Daniele Pitarresi and Alam M. Kilpatrick; and examples in two online catalogs, one maintained by Jan Van Rossum and another, Colnect Collectors Club Community (Colnect), founded by Amir Wald.¹³ Information provided by these collectors' publications includes face value (e.g., 15, 30, 60, 90, or 100 units), issue date (month and year), price at mint- and used-condition, phonecard type (e.g., advertising, complimentary), technology type (chip, inductive, magnetic, or optic), and chip type (e.g., Exiton, Gemplus, Incard, etc.)—on phonecards they obtained from collectors and production companies. Photographs of the phonecards and presentation folders photographs in this study were obtained with permission from online catalogs or were taken by the authors of cards in their collection.



Figures 9 (left) and 10 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecards commemorating the Year of the Rat from the Chinese zodiac, Republic of Nauru, 1995. Artist: Sophie Zhang. Courtesy of the authors

We classified the image themes featured on the phonecards and identified the phonecards' names, values, and production dates from information printed on the front and back sides of the cards. We also examined phonecard presentation folders as relevant objects of study because they are printed with images and often contain information about the images pictured on the phonecards.¹⁴

Phonecard image theme	Phonecard name	Date	Face value	Source	Fig.
Birds	White tern (with magnetic strip)	1995	\$10	Author's collection	7
	White tern (without magnetic strip)		\$10	Colnect (2022)	7
	Micronesian pigeon		\$20	Author's collection	6
	Green pygmy goose (with magnetic strip)		\$10	Colnect (2022)	8
	Green pygmy goose (without magnetic strip)		\$10	Rossum (2011), Colnect (2022)	8
Animals	Koala	1995	\$10	Rossum (2011), Colnect (2022)	19
	Sea snail		\$20	Colnect (2022)	1
Chinese zodiac	The Year of the Rat	1995	\$10	Author's collection	9
	The Year of the Rat		\$10		10
Sea turtles	Green turtle	1995	\$20	Colnect (2022)	2
	Sea turtle		\$20		5
	Sea turtle		\$20		3
	Sea turtle		\$30		4
The Pope	Pope John Paul II	2005	\$20	Rossum (2011), Colnect (2022)	11
	Pope John Paul II		\$20		12
	Pope John Paul II		\$20		13
	Pope John Paul II		\$20		14
	Pope John Paul II		\$20		15

\$= Australian dollar. Print run of cards from figures 6 and 7 is 1,200 units, while of those 8 and 19 it is 1,500 units. Source: Colnect (2022).

Table 1. Selected Nauruan phonecards grouped by image themes

We grouped the eighteen phonecards into five themes based on the images printed on them (Table 1): birds, animals, the Chinese zodiac, sea turtles, and the Pope. In our sample, images of Pacific fauna are printed on the most phonecards (Figs 1–8 and 19). Animals such as the sea snail (Fig. 1) and birds, including the Micronesia pigeon (Fig. 6) and white tern (Fig. 7), were likely printed on Nauruan phonecards because the island is known for its biodiversity.¹⁵ The green pygmy goose (Fig. 8), which is also found in Australia, Indonesia, and New Guinea, may have been selected because of its beauty and its high population numbers on

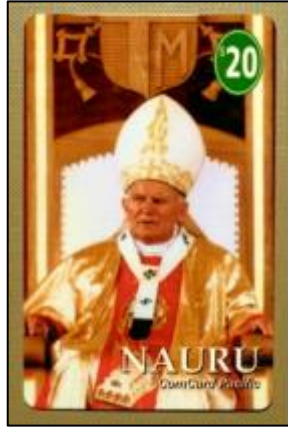
Nauru.¹⁶ A koala may have been chosen on a Nauruan phonecard (Fig. 19) because everyone loves koalas and as a reminder of the need to protect their natural habitat.¹⁷ In addition, bird-themed phonecards play important role as collectible items because the number of collectors of phonecards with animal images is high.¹⁸

We also classified the phonecards into three series/set categories (Table 2): those that are part of a larger series or set, those phonecards in a set that form a large picture when fitted together (i.e., like a puzzle) (Figs. 9–10), and individual phonecards. Telecommunication companies produced phonecards as sets or pieces of a picture puzzle to encourage phonecard purchases and collecting, with the idea that users and collectors would seek to complete the sets and picture puzzles.

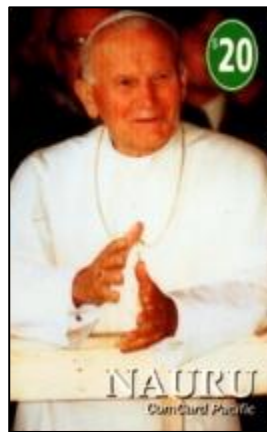
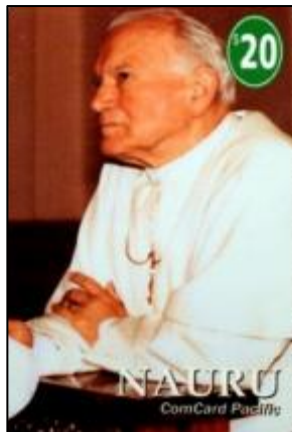
Classification	Phonecard image theme
A phonecard set forming a series	White tern and Micronesian pigeon; koala and green pygmy goose; green turtle and sea turtles; Pope John Paul II
A phonecard set forming a picture puzzle	The Year of the Rat
Individual phonecard	Sea snail

Table 2. Set/series classifications of the example ComCard Pacific phonecards from the Republic of Nauru

Within this study, Pope John Paul II appears on five Nauruan phonecards issued in 2005 (Figs. 11–15), the year of his death, and can be linked to the spread of Christianity across the Pacific over the last several centuries.¹⁹ Christianity is the main religion practiced on Nauru; additionally, 32.9% of Christians on Nauru are Roman Catholic.²⁰ Two 1995 phonecards with images representing the Year of the Rat (Figs. 9–10) suggest a tribute to Nauru’s Chinese immigrants and their culture.²¹ Approximately 15% of the people living in the Republic of Nauru in 1995 were of Chinese descent.²²



Figures 11 (left) and 12 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecards with images of Pope John Paul II, Republic of Nauru, 2005. Courtesy of Rossum catalog 2011



Figures 13 (left), 14 (center), and 15 (right). ComCard Pacific phonecards featuring images of Pope John Paul II, Republic of Nauru, 2005. Courtesy of Rossum catalog 2011

Phonecard Presentation Folders in Nauru

Much like postage stamps and commemorative coins, some individual phonecards and series were produced with presentation albums, boxes, folders, and packs so that collectors could display and protect their phonecards.²³ For example, in the 1990s phonecards from Australia had presentation folders printed with images of endangered animals and environments threatened by anthropogenic activities. The presentation folder “Endangered Species Marsupials” was produced by Telecom Australia to accommodate three phonecards, each printed with an image of an endangered marsupial species (the northern hairy-nosed wombat, the numbat, and the birdled nailtail wallaby) (Fig. 16).



Figure 16. Australian phonecard presentation folder, “Endangered Species Marsupials,” with three cards, external covers (top), internal spread (bottom), 1993. Courtesy of the authors

The earliest presentation folder in this study is one in a half-fold format that was issued in July 1995 by ComCard Pacific to promote tourism in the Republic of Nauru (Fig. 17a). The folder included two phonecards that were prepared for trial use (Fig. 17b), one with an image of a Micronesia pigeon (see Fig. 6) and the other with an image of a white tern (see Fig. 7).

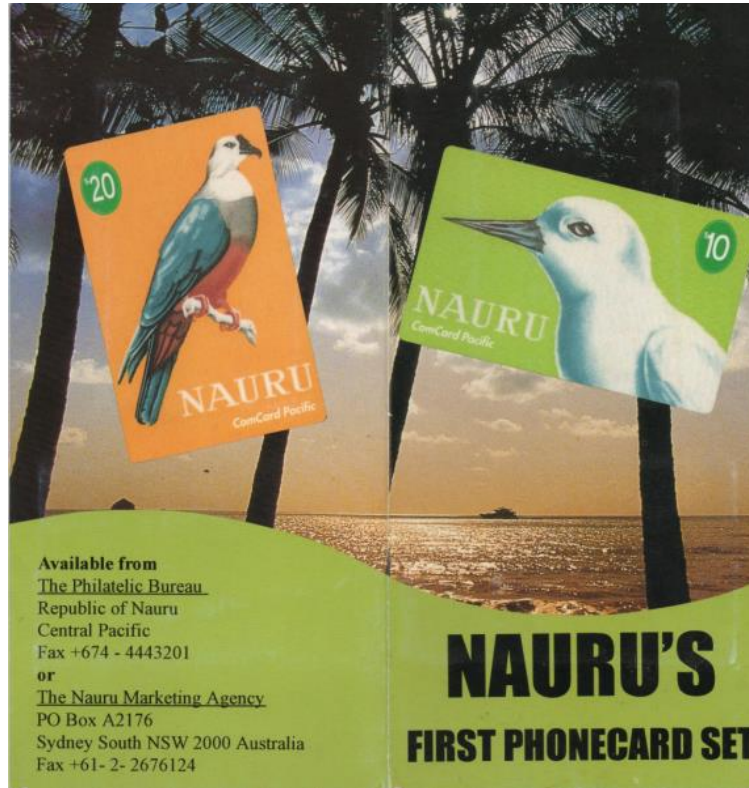


Figure 17a. Phonecard presentation folder "Nauru's First Phonecard Set," external covers, 1995. Courtesy of the authors.

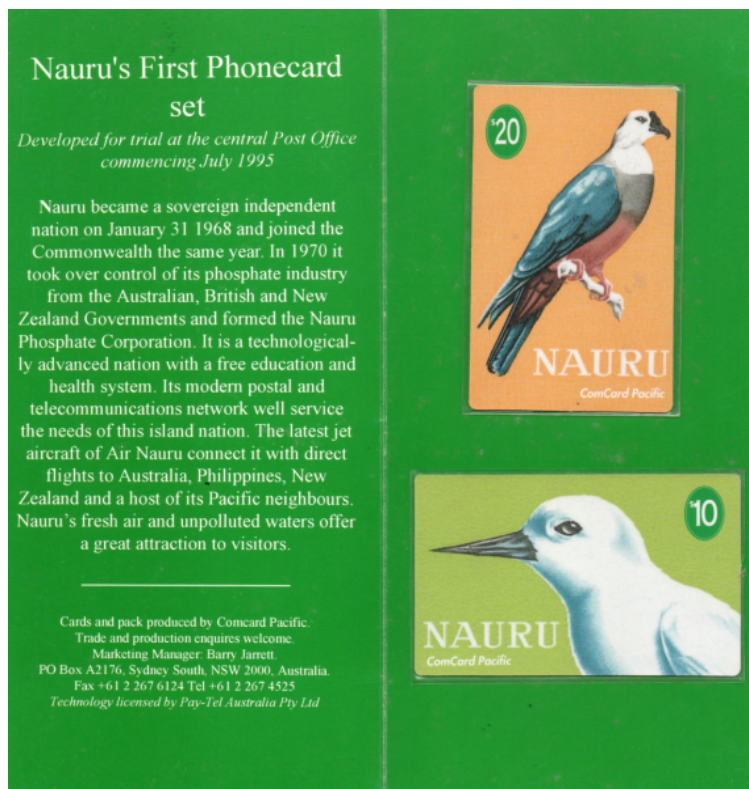


Figure 17b. Phonecard presentation folder, "Nauru's First Phonecard Set," internal spread, 1995. Courtesy of the authors.



Figure 18. Phonecard and stamp presentation folder promoting wetlands conservation by the Australian Wildlife Fund, external covers (top) and internal spread (bottom), Republic of Nauru, 1995. Courtesy of Delcampe website (2022)

The second phonecard presentation folder that we have identified is one in a tri-fold format produced by the Australian Wildlife Fund, in collaboration with ComCard Pacific, possibly in the second half of 1995 (Fig. 18). This folder has one phonecard (AUD10 face value) and one stamp (AUD15 face value), both items with the same image of a green pygmy goose, designed by Australian artist and writer Robin Hill (see Fig. 8). This presentation folder was created for phonecard

collectors to accommodate the card and stamp and to publicize the work of the Australian Wildlife Fund on the conservation of fauna and flora in the wetlands.



Figure 19. ComCard Pacific phonecard, "The Australian Koala," Republic of Nauru, 1995. Artist: Rosemary Woodford Ganf. Courtesy of Colnect catalog 2022

Summary

This research note has provided an introduction to phonecards from the Republic of Nauru and described all known ComCard Pacific phonecards and presentation folders. Despite their scarcity, further research of these cards and other smaller Pacific Island nations is merited.

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Notes

¹ Daniele Pitarresi and Alam M. Kilpatrick, *World Phonocard Catalogue. Specialized Edition 2000*, vol. 9: *Oceania 3, Australia (Telstra Magnetic) – Christmas Is. – Kiribati – Nauru – Norfolk Is. – Tuvalu* (Desenzano del Garda, Italy: MV Cards, 2000): 98–99.

² “What is a Telephone Card?,” TelephoneCardCollector.com, <http://www.telephonocardcollector.com/telephone-card.htm>, accessed May 5, 2022.

³ Wagner de Souza Tavares, “Revival of phonocard collection as a hobby in Brazil,” *Revista Brasileira de História da Mídia* 11, no. 2 (2022): 11–14, <https://doi.org/10.26664/issn.2238-5126.112202212760>.

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⁶ Wagner de Souza Tavares, “Phonocard-operated payphones in buses in Brazil,” *DATJournal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 119, <https://doi.org/10.29147/dat.v6i3.441>.

⁷ Dr. Steve Hiscocks produced the first printed phonocard catalog for collectors in England in 1988. “World Phonocard Catalogue United Kingdom 1,” TelephoneCardCollector.com, March 13, 2023, <http://www.telephonocardcollector.com/world-phonocard-catalogue-uk1.htm>.

⁸ Pitarresi and Kilpatrick, *World Phonocard Catalogue*, 98–99.

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- ¹¹ The number of public telephones that were installed in the Republic of Nauru at the time is unknown. Pitarresi and Kilpatrick, *World Phonecard Catalogue*.
- ¹² Pitarresi and Kilpatrick, *World Phonecard Catalogue*, 98-99.
- ¹³ Pitarresi and Kilpatrick, *World Phonecard Catalogue*; Jan Van Rossum, “Nauru Republic,” <https://pacifficard.tripod.com/nauru.htm>, accessed January 1, 2011; “Nauru,” Colnect Collectors Club Community, <https://colnect.com/en/search/list/collectibles/phonecards/g/nauru>, accessed May 5, 2022. Colnect is a website that allows collectors to manage their personal collections.
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- ¹⁵ Donald W Buden, “The Birds of Nauru,” *Notornis* 55, no. 1 (2008): 8–19.
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