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## New grassroots approach helps conserve Fijian forest

29-06-2009

The people of Kadavu (Fiji) could become a model for other Pacific Island nations following a new BirdLife conservation initiative that is helping to protect forests in island countries around the region. "We have an exciting model for integrated forest and farm management emerging", said James Millett, Senior Technical Advisor to the BirdLife Pacific Division.

BirdLife staff are working with local communities around Nabukelevu (Mount Washington) Important Bird Area (IBA) on the Fijian island of Kadavu to tie a forest protection agreement in to training and support for sustainable agricultural practices that reduces the pressure on the forest. "This is a new approach for developing protected areas in Fiji", explained James. "Importantly it has raised a great deal of interest from the communities because it is practical and clearly linked to sustainable village incomes and reduces the pressure on their forest resources" he added.

Nabukelevu IBA is an iconic mountain that supports extensive old-growth forest and four species of bird endemic to Kadavu. It was identified as an IBA following a grant from Darwin initiative which documented 14 new IBAs - mainly in the remaining areas of old-growth forest.



James Millett - BirdLife

**BirdLife work is help to improve local people's livelihoods in the pacific, whilst also protecting threatened habitats.**

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### "It will make a real difference to village livelihoods"

—Mere Valu, BirdLife Conservation Officer

Most of the IBAs are threatened by the forest clearance for logging or subsistence agriculture and also by alien species. "The forest is threatened small scale agriculture has been increasingly impinging on the forested area", added James. "The main reason is because farming on steep slopes is not sustainable due to soil erosion, and new gardens are constantly being cut from the old-growth forest".

BirdLife staff are now training local people at a demonstration farm and tree nursery to use sustainable methods which reduces soil erosion, and therefore stops the need to clear new areas of forest. One method that is being taught is contour farming using Vetiver grass - a species of grass that has been used in Fiji for 50 years.

"Vetiver grass is so effective at trapping sediment it will eventually create terraces but it is not widely used in village gardens because farmers are unaware of the benefits" said Tuverea Tuamoto - BirdLife Conservation Officer. The demonstration farm also reintroduced traditional Taro varieties that are better suited to local conditions, and more resistant to disease than modern cultivars. "Taro is a root crop and the staple carbohydrate on Pacific Islands", added Tuverea. "Reintroducing old varieties will improve the production and reduce the risk of catastrophic crop failures from disease".

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### "This really is grassroots conservation"

—Tuverea Tuamoto, BirdLife Conservation Officer

The new methods, which balance sustainable farming with improved local livelihoods and conservation, were taught at a three day workshop organised by BirdLife staff with support of the Government of Fiji and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. The workshop was opened by the newly appointed Roko Tui Kadavu (Executive Head of the Provincial Council), Ratu Vunilagi Dawai.

Arboriculture was also taught and native tree saplings were planted out. Of special interest were Sandalwood trees that have high value timber from which aromatic oils are extracted. "Sandalwood is a valuable crop - it will make a real difference to village livelihoods but it is rarely managed sustainably", explained Mere Valu – BirdLife Conservation Officer who helped to organise the workshop.

"This has been a learning experience for us as conservationists, as well as for the land owners and I think we have an exciting model for integrated forest and farm management emerging, one that we will be show-casing in other sites where forest is threatened by agriculture", concluded James.

Additional funding for the workshop and sustainable farming training was from the GEF and NZAID co-financed GEF Small Grants Programme, implemented by UNDP. BirdLife International are especially grateful to The Land Use Division, The Department of Forestry and Secretariat of the Pacific Community for expert inputs and supply of materials.

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