



The

# GREEN

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# Birds are indicators of our environment

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**D**uring the industrial 19th century it was the practice of coal miners in Europe, whenever they descended to the pits, to take with them, as part of their equipment, caged canaries.

The reason for this was simple: these tiny, elegant creatures were much more sensitive to changes in the environment they shared with the miners than were the miners themselves.

Canaries could sense the presence of dangerous gases before those gases had a chance to suffocate the miners. If your canary dropped dead in its cage, you got out of there fast until conditions were safe for you to go back.

The analogy to birds in our region today is as obvious as it should be startling. Our endemic bird species are more than just bright and beautiful creatures, ornamental, ceremonial, inspirational, deeply ingrained in the cultures of all of us, representing prophesy, birth, love, peace, religion, peoples and many of our more admirable attributes and virtues.

But above all, birds, like the canaries down the mine, are the most visible and ubiqui-

tous indicators of the state of our natural environments, both terrestrial and marine. They are the canaries of our age and, like the miners of yesterday, we ignore what they are telling us at our peril.

Some quick figures: since the year 1500 when a sailor visiting the island of Mauritius maliciously clubbed to death the last remaining survivor of the biggest species of pigeon ever to share our planet, its very name now a metaphor for extinction, 129 more bird species have followed the unfortunate and innocent Dodo to its fate. Lost forever. Never to be seen again.

Of the surviving 9,800 species of birds on our planet, 1,213, or 12 per cent, are classified by IUCN as Threatened. Of these, 356 are Endangered with 180 of those classified by IUCN as Critically Endangered, which means that they are but one step away from extinction.

It gets worse for us. For it is an appalling fact that the Pacific region has the dubious distinction of recording the greatest number of bird extinctions of any other region of the world.

Sixty-three of the 129 bird extinctions recorded globally since 1500 - an incredible 50 per cent - are known to have occurred here. 289 of the

endemic birds to be found in this region are classified as Endangered - 24 per cent of the world's total. Of these, 37 are Critically Endangered, that is teetering on the brink of extinction and if nothing is done actively to save them, they will go the same way as the Dodo and its unfortunate followers.

What a terrible record. We should all be ashamed.

The reasons for this awful state of affairs are well known. There is no mystery about it. All endemic species evolved on our islands in isolation and in the absence of predators. What is now devastating them are the twin, human-induced threats of invasive alien species and habitat loss.

Rats, in particular, but other pests as well, are destroying entire, defenceless species of birds before our very eyes while we continue to help these predators in their successfully destructive efforts by cutting down the last of our terrestrial birds' forest habitats in the name of unsustainable logging and equally unsustainable agricultural practices.

At the same time, we are also devastating marine bird species by the use of intensive and destructive fishing techniques. We are actively

destroying the places where our birds have lived peacefully since time immemorial and they now have nowhere else to go. How can we do this? How can we allow it to go on?

We know what is happening. We know what must be done. All the evidence is there. The need now is to do something, to implement conservation actions on the ground across the region before it's too late for the very survival of our 37 Critically Endangered bird species.

Next month, in Papua New Guinea, SPREP and BirdLife International will jointly convene a special meeting on regional bird conservation ahead of the Eighth Conference on Nature Conservation and Protected Areas.

This meeting will review the conservation status of all Pacific birds, based on studies conducted by BirdLife International, SPREP and Government agencies, will summarise their threats, what work has been undertaken and what still needs to be done, and will use this information to place recommendations to the Conference to assist with the development of the birds' sector of SPREP's new Action Strategy.

Once that strategy is adopt-

ed, it is essential for the very survival of our threatened endemic bird species that the strategy's actions become just that: actions and not just more studies or words.

That means actions by everyone here today, governments and NGOs together: actions on invasive alien species, actions on unsustainable and destructive logging, forestry, agricultural, urban development and fishing policies and practices.

For, if we don't do this, and do it now, we will lose those 37 species before this century is over. My dream, and it should, I hope, be yours, too, is for my grandchildren and their children to be able to regard with wonder and awe the remarkable and unique species of wonderful birds with which this region has been blessed.

My nightmare, and I hope it is yours too, is for my grandchildren and their children to ask, accusingly, why didn't granddad's generation do something about it when they had the chance?

Dodos or canaries? Dreams or nightmares? The choice is ours and our time is running out fast.

This is part of an address by Mr Stewart of BirdLife International to the South Pacific Environment Program.