

No Flash in the PAN

Creating a protected area network to conserve one of Timor-Leste's most spectacular coastal and marine regions has taken a great deal of persistence and collaboration.

Bianca Thair talks to the people involved.

» **S**tretching over 68,000 hectares of land and 55,600 hectares of sea lies one of the most unique and picturesque terrestrial and marine habitats in Asia.

Dense tropical forests are inhabited by rare, endemic and critically-endangered birds such as the Yellow-Crested Cockatoo and Timor Green Pigeon. A lake perched 350 metres above sea level flows slowly into a rugged limestone mountain range, to disappear into a labyrinth of caves and underground streams. Along the coast, divers can witness the incredible biodiversity of coral and reef fish that inhabit the Coral Triangle.

Located at the far eastern tip of Timor-Leste, this tropical paradise holds a profound mythological and historical significance for the Timorese people. Known as the Nino Konis Santana National Park, it is the first park of its kind in the country and internationally commended for the conservation of its terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

Senor Manuel Mendes is Director of the Department of Protected Areas and National Parks, located within the Timorese Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. In his view, the National Park plays a critical role in preserving not only biodiversity but also Timorese livelihoods and culture. "These areas have many natural, cultural and historical values that have been lost in other places in Timor-Leste," he explains.

"Protection is also about land management for nature and rural livelihoods to protect air, soil and water. Conservation is not only to rehabilitate the land but to protect what is still remaining."

Calls had been made for more than 20 years to protect the natural and cultural resources in the park. Under United Nations administration in 2000, a regulation was passed to establish 15 protected areas but little happened on the ground until after the country gained formal independence.

In 2001, Timor-Leste's then Foreign Affairs Minister Jose Ramos-Horta approached Australian Greens Senator Bob Brown for advice on how to formally establish a protected area network (PAN).

After some discussion, the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change became involved and worked consultatively with the Timorese Government and local communities to develop a plan to move forward. Conservation agency BirdLife International assisted with a nation-wide survey of bird populations to identify national priorities for biodiversity conservation.

It has taken seven years of consultation, collaboration and surveys to establish the PAN and the park. AVI volunteer Cathy Molnar has played a significant role in the process.

Cathy, who had already spent several years doing environmental work in Timor-Leste with the UN administration, received a surprise invitation to join the project. "I received an email from BirdLife's Asia Division, asking me whether I would be interested in a short contract looking at the assigned protected areas and seeing whether much had progressed since the project commenced," she says.

Cathy soon discovered that the project was lagging considerably and chose to remain in Timor-Leste for an extended period, jointly supported by Australian Volunteers International, BirdLife and the NSW Department of Environment and Climate Change.

The first step in moving the project forward was getting local ownership, especially from the communities residing within the park. As Senor Mendes explains, "We cannot simply ban or change human activities; we must harmonise between conservation, sustainable livelihood practices and the rights of local communities."

For Cathy, this meant taking a gradual approach and ensuring that all interest groups were represented in consultations and planning.

"Consultation, collaboration and inclusion must happen from the outset and throughout all steps, and at all levels," she says. "A program that is overly conservation-oriented

without considering and involving local communities is inappropriate and likely to fail for lack of ownership.

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Another important step was the collection and analysis of data, to which BirdLife has contributed greatly. Richard Grimmett, head of BirdLife’s Global Conservation Division, became involved with the park while he was based in Indonesia. “We had been supporting some work in Timor-Leste prior to independence and realised that the country had some very important areas of forest and populations of wildlife – particularly birds threatened with extinction,” Richard explains.

Richard and Cathy have developed a solid working relationship and BirdLife hopes to continue its involvement long into the future. “The partnership is about conserving biodiversity and protecting important areas of natural habitat, because rural communities need resources like water and timber to survive. It’s about creating a balance, which isn’t something that will happen overnight.”

The Nino Konis Santana National Park was formally declared in 2007 and named after a hero of the Timorese independence

movement. The park is now being managed by the Timorese Department of Protected Areas and National Parks in collaboration with other government and civil society groups and local communities.

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As Senor Mendes believes, these communities stand to benefit from conservation of the area. “As well as cultural rights, there must be benefits from things like ethical tourism, more sustainable livelihood activities and, improved infrastructure like roads to ease access, and water and land management to protect soil and water.”

Several small-scale tourism developments are also under way; although, as Cathy explains, this can be a tricky proposition. “Tourism by its very nature is a business, the imperatives of which often move at a different pace to conservation, so getting the balance is critical.”

Richard agrees that tourism development should be approached with caution. “We do hope to encourage visitors and generate economic opportunities for local stakeholders in the near future. The coral and marine wildlife are in very good condition, so you always have to be careful to avoid any negative impacts on the park.”

Senor Mendes believes that the park can be an international example of Timor-Leste’s progress. “I think most people in the world don’t really know much about Timor-Leste. The National Park and Protected Area Network is our opportunity to show other countries what we have and who we are – and for them to understand about Timor-Leste and what we have to give to the world.”

Bianca Thair works as a journalist for a number of publications around Australia.

Opposite > *The forests at Mount Curi, part of the National Park.*

Top Left > *Bird survey training at Lake Tasitolu.*

Top Right > *The Vero River estuary.*

Photos > *Colin Trainor*

