

Adventures in Conservation

The benefits of conservation on Tetepare Island. Model for conservation in the Pacific.

BY MICHAEL AND JEANINE D'ANTONIO

If you are looking for some island style adventure in the South Pacific, look between 157 and 154 degrees east and 08 degrees south on a map. It is not a big place so look hard, it will be worth the effort. The name of this island is Tetepare.

Tetepare Island lies on the very southern edge of the western province in the Solomon Islands and is 120 square km of uninhabited adventure waiting to happen. They say that getting there is half the fun, well Tetepare is no exception. The only way to get here is by a 2-hour boat ride, from the town of Munda. A portion of the ride will require you to be tossed about a bit by waves that have traveled uninterrupted since they left Antarctica, several thousand miles away. When you arrive and get your feet back under you, your lungs will be filtering fresh sea air that has driven those waves the whole way. Only now it will be mixed for its first time with things terrestrial. Big things, green and brown things, things that crawl and slither and strangle. And certainly things that are ancient and accustomed to being left alone. Old habits die hard.

Tetepare Island has been left to grow and prosper on its own since its original

inhabitants abandoned it some 150 years ago. Displeased spirits are blamed in local legend for allowing disease and headhunting to destroy and scatter the population. This scattered population has grown and in the recent past has organized to reclaim and protect its heritage. Tetepare Descendants Association is the largest landowning



group in the Solomon Islands with over 2000 members, all of which must trace their lineage back to a survivor. TDA is working to provide an economic alternative to the unsustainable resource harvesting that surely would have been the island's fate had a few individuals not seen, known and acted. The alternative that TDA is providing comes in the form of an Eco-lodge and the shape of a

staffed research facility.

As soon as you set out to explore Tetepare you will begin to appreciate what it means to the natural world to be left alone for 150 years. The rain forest is thick and tangled with layers of life and death in all its stages. Unseen birds cry out as in surprise at seeing something so large and awkward in their home. The rain and the wind and the sun take it in turn to set the mood.

As a visitor seeking adventure you will not have to go far for it. You will be thrilled by the way our forest trails are like the routes of hunters, hardly visible through the thick bush and wandering as if on a scent. You will fancy yourself an explorer as you snake randomly towards your destination through tunnels of vegetation and over outcrops of up thrust coral. You will be able to climb in, on and even through, the roots of strangler figs and imagine you are entering the gateway to the fairy world of a wood elf. You will enter the world of the past as you look on the ruins of ancient settlements and learn about the culture that was here on Tetepare.

If you want a break from the bush, all trails on Tetepare lead to the sea. Tetepare Island is fringed on the south by a reef and associated lagoon, which provide a colorful

ON THE TRAIL



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diversion into yet another world. The world of black-tipped reef sharks and barracudas, giant clams, sea turtles, and dugongs. The reef is in a Marine Protected Area where TDA staff has been gathering data to support its existence. The efforts have been paying off as analysis shows more species and higher numbers than anywhere else this side of the Sydney aquarium. Conservation makes for good wildlife viewing.

As a scientist your appreciation of a functional and free ecosystem will deepen the closer you look. Jared Diamond, a well-known American geographer and ornithologist, recommended that Tetepare be designated as a bird reserve in the late 1970s. He has remarked that "there is no other place in the world... [Solomon Islands]... where biological phenomenon of speciation and population variation among islands are so obvious" (Diamond, 1976). Preliminary survey work has shown that Tetepare provides a locale where literally no one knows what you're going to find. The scientists that have looked closely, however, have suggested that new species of bats, butterflies, fish and birds are present. Population densities are high in both the marine and terrestrial environments and species

diversity is extremely high for an island of its size. Tetepare, with its untouched ecosystems, provides scientists a rare opportunity to analyze and collect in a truly natural laboratory, knowing that their science will contribute to a body of knowledge directly related to conservation.

Whether you are here to relax and explore or search out a new species, TDA and the Eco-lodge staff on Tetepare know what is important to visitors and are not afraid to blend laid back island culture with the western idea of adventure to provide it. The members of TDA are dedicated to conserving Tetepare Island and its' unique natural and cultural qualities. Let your adventure begin with our cause. 

• If you would like to find out more about Tetepare Island and conservation in the Pacific, please check out their website at www.tetepare.org. Mike and Jeanine D'Antonio are currently serving two year contracts as CUSO co-operands and have worked in protected areas throughout Canada, the US and Africa. They now make their home with their three-year-old son, Camas on Tetepare Island in the South Pacific.

