

SAVING PARADISE

CONSERVATION OF TETEPARE

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Rangers patrol the Marine Protected Area (above). Clownfish in the Tetepare Lagoon (page 23, above left). Marine monitors conducting Reef Check on Tetepare (page 23, above right).

Tetepare rises from the depths of the Pacific Ocean like a slumbering dragon.

A long, rugged island cloaked in rainforest and fringed with biodiverse reefs, Tetepare is one of the conservation jewels of the Solomons Islands.

Abandoned by its people 150 years ago, Tetepare is an island forgotten by time and swathed in mystery.

This vast isle in the Western Province of the Solomons remains the largest uninhabited island in the South Pacific.

But what makes this island truly extraordinary is that in a country where timber is the primary source of revenue and export earnings, Tetepare remains unlogged. In a country where swathes of forests have been decimated by commercial logging and fragile environments destroyed, Tetepare is proof there is a better way.

Six years ago, when the threat of logging loomed over Tetepare, it was the descendants of the very people who abandoned the island who came together to save this last wild island of the Pacific.

The thousands of descendants, spread out across the Western Province, formed an alliance to become the Tetepare Descendants' Association, or TDA. The goal was to protect and conserve the island for the benefit of all descendants and future generations.

In the six years since it formed, the TDA has transformed from a fledgling landowners organisation with big dreams, to a world-class community-based conservation organisation responsible for one of the largest integrated land and marine conservation initiatives in the country.

Now, the TDA is expanding its conservation program with the help of international donors, and hoping to inspire communities across the Solomons and the Pacific to follow in their

footsteps.

The Tetepare project, funded by the European Union and the WWF, is a leading example of how a conservation program championed by a foresighted local community can succeed in Melanesia and achieve great things.

THE LAST WILD ISLAND

A raised coral island of superb natural beauty and rich biodiversity, Tetepare has received international recognition for its conservation and archeological significance.

Experts from around the world, including renowned ornithologist and author Jarrod Diamond, have recommended the island be conserved.

A dazzling variety of plants and animals make their home in the island's 120 square kilometers of primary lowland rainforest – some of the last remaining in the Melanesia.

A total of 73 bird species, 24 reptile, four frog and 13 mammal species have been recorded including several rare and endemic bird and bat species. And scientists are still discovering new species on Tetepare. In recent years, researchers discovered three new species of fish, one new fish genera and one potential new fish family in the freshwater rivers that wind through the forest, beneath the towering canopies of Tetepare's banyan trees.

Three years ago, scientists found 33 new taxa of butterflies and a recent bat survey indicated there are likely to be as many as 18 different bat species on Tetepare.

Other species flitting through Tetepare's skies include the Tetepare white-eye – found nowhere else in the world – as well as hornbills, pygmy parrots, sea eagles, kingfishers and a population of horseshoe bats.

Frigate birds are regularly seen soaring above the island and fishing in the surrounding waters



and large flocks of Island Imperial and Nicobar pigeons can be spotted winging their way from Tetepare to nesting areas on the adjacent Hele Bar islands.

Of particular note is the absence of cane roads and scarcity of cats and dogs on Tetepare, which may account for the nesting records of the rare ground nesting white-throated nightjars.

Underwater, Tetepare is no less remarkable. Three species of marine turtles, including the critically endangered leatherback and hawksbill and the endangered green, nest on Tetepare's volcanic black sand beaches.

Sharks, dolphins, crocodiles and an extraordinary diversity of colourful fish species make the island's reefs their home. The coral reefs of the region support one of the highest diversities of fish and coral in the world, second only to Raja Ampat in Indonesia.

Luxuriant seagrass meadows in the island's sheltered lagoons provide a nursery for juvenile fish and food for resident dugongs. Nine of the 10 species of seagrass known to occur in the Pacific have been recorded in a single lagoon in the Western corner of Tetepare.

Dugongs are frequently seen in the Tetepare's coastal waters. These rare creatures feed on seagrass in the shallow lagoons, either singly or in small groups. Numerous recent sightings have been made of mother and calf pairs. Dugongs can live up to 70 years and a threat to their survival is siltation of seagrass beds by logging and mining.

Culturally important tambu sites are scattered across the island along with burial shrines and abandoned village sites, remnants of the time when Tetepare was home to settlements of people with a unique culture and language.

No one knows why the people of Tetepare

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fled their island 150 years ago, but local people and archeologists believe headhunting and disease played a role.

THE TETEPARE DESCENDANTS' ASSOCIATION

The descendants of the people who fled Tetepare are now spread out over the Western Province of the Solomon Islands. More than 3000 descendants have joined the Tetepare Descendants' Association, making it one of the largest landowners associations in the Solomon Islands. These people are recognised as the legal owners of Tetepare Island.

The TDA is a registered Solomon Islands charitable organisation with an Executive Committee of elected representatives. The TDA constitution states the organisation aims to unite Tetepare's landowners to manage and conserve Tetepare and its natural resources for the benefit of present and future generations descended from Tetepare Island.

The TDA has built a field station on Tetepare and established the largest contiguous marine protected areas in the Solomon Islands – a 13-kilometre no take zone. The marine protected area or MPA supports healthy populations of fish species, large and small, as well as species such as the green snail and giant clam, which have disappeared from many parts of the Solomons today.

Rangers and marine monitors are employed to patrol and monitor the marine protected area,

and conduct scientific research, monitoring and conservation programs.

The TDA, with funding from the EU, has created an ecolodge on Tetepare for tourists, which employs local people and raises money to assist the conservation program. Ecotourists come from around the world to enjoy Tetepare's pristine beauty and unique wildlife. Visitors are inspired when they see the conservation project in action. They write enthusiastic comments in the visitors' book at the end of their stay.

"Thank you very much for a wonderful stay in a unique location," wrote one Australian couple last year. "It is a glorious unspoilt island and is a treasure for the Solomons. Its pristine environment is a credit to its caretakers."

"What a wonderful place with wonderful people," wrote another visitor from Sydney last September. "Where else in the whole world can you walk through virgin equatorial rainforest and then swim in a lagoon and see turtles, barracuda, bumphead parrotfish, sharks and even dugong, in crystal clear water? Tetepare is unique and will be ever more unique and cherished as much of the world deteriorates environmentally. Congratulations to the TDA for their foresight and commitment and increasingly evident success. The world is indebted to you."

Visitor numbers to the Tetepare ecolodge are growing every year.



Tetepare's freshwater rivers (far left) where new species of fish have been discovered.

Walking the forests of Tetepare (left).

Rangers conducting turtle tagging to monitor turtle populations on Tetepare (right).

Rangers conduct awareness with harvesters (far right).

COMMUNITY BENEFITS FOR CONSERVATION

The success of the Tetepare project lies in its ability to provide real benefits to its communities. And one of the most tangible benefits is employment opportunities. The TDA employs two permanent full-time staff members – the Program Coordinator and a Hospitality Coordinator. The TDA employs 10 rangers who work in rotating shifts, four marine monitors, four female seagrass monitors, three boat drivers, and about 30 casual hospitality workers including cooks and guides.

Many more community members have benefited through casual work in construction on the island, and through the sale of vegetables to the ecolodge.

As the conservation program expands, so too will job opportunities for community members. The TDA is currently recruiting for several new positions, including a new full-time Field Station and Conservation Manager for Tetepare. In the coming year, the association also hopes to employ a local Sustainable Livelihoods Coordinator as well as a Financial Officer.

In recent years, in a bid to expand benefits for its members, the TDA has begun to focus on sustainable livelihoods activities. In addition to the ecolodge, the TDA runs a ngali nut program, buying nuts from women in villages on Rendova, and then shipping the nuts to a buyer in Honiara. The program aims to empower women in income generation.

The TDA has developed a sustainable livelihoods strategy and is working to create more livelihood opportunities for TDA communities across the Western Province.

TDA Programme Coordinator Allan Tippet Bero, who has been at the helm of the TDA since 2002, says the association realised early on that the two most important requirements of its people living rural areas were food to survive and money to meet their basic household and educational needs.

“And where do they get them from? Basically, they get them from the surrounding natural resources,” Mr Bero says.

“As local populations grow, so too does the demand for food and money, depleting natural resources,” he says.

“Because of this, TDA has decided to conserve the resources on Tetepare.”

Mr Bero says communities will reap the rewards from protecting their environments and establishing no take zones, but these benefits, in the form of larger harvests, often take between five and 10 years to eventuate.

“That is a very long wait,” he says.

“When people become desperate for food and income, they become ignorant and poach the restricted areas, disrupting all conservation efforts. This is why TDA believes that a successful conservation program is one that meets the needs of today.”

“The law of commonsense applies here,” he says. “That is, supplementing one thing for another to balance the situation’.

“The TDA knows that food and money are the immediate issues and it believes they can be acquired through sustainable livelihoods projects. This is why TDA has integrated sustainable livelihoods activities with its conservation program.”

“One of the prohibitively expensive household commitments that most TDA members have struggled to afford each year is school fees for their children. The TDA has responded to this need by initiating a secondary school and Vocational/Tertiary Educational Scholarship Scheme.”

In the wider TDA community, more than 130 children have benefited from educational scholarships funded by donors since 2005. The number of scholarships offered is growing every year, as the conservation project expands. This year, the TDA is offering 70 secondary school scholarships and five Vocational/Tertiary Educational Scholarships - the largest number

of scholarships ever offered by the TDA.

Community members also benefit financially from the conservation program, through incentive programs, such as the leatherback conservation incentive program on neighbouring Rendova Island. This program rewards members of local communities for finding, recording and protecting leatherback turtle nests on their local beaches.

But the benefits of the conservation program for local communities go beyond direct monetary rewards.

Descendants benefit from having access to a healthy marine ecosystem on Tetepare – this is particularly important for local communities who depend on artisanal fishing resources.

All over the world, fisheries are collapsing. But in the waters around Tetepare, healthy fish populations still exist, thanks in part to the ranger-enforced MPA.

While Tetepare's MPA is a permanent no-take zone and cannot be fished, the area acts as a nursery and refuge for fish, and ultimately helps to boost fish numbers outside the protected area. Regular marine monitoring has shown Tetepare's reefs and fish numbers are healthy, both inside and outside the MPA.

Descendants come to the island regularly to harvest resources. They fish, dive for trochus and crayfish and hunt pigs. The island, with its abundant resources, is seen as a larder for feasts, where people can access good stocks of resources, thanks to the sustainable management practices of the TDA.

The TDA hopes to lead by example – to show people how conservation can be a benefit rather than a burden. The association holds regular awareness meetings in its member communities to explain the Tetepare project activities, as well as to educate and empower members to sustainably manage the natural resources in their own local areas and conserve their environments. TDA staff members are also encouraged to teach their own communities



more about conservation.

The TDA has worked hard to ensure women are actively involved in the Tetepare project, and included in training programs and employment opportunities.

The TDA has run several workshops for women from TDA communities, including a WWF-funded Women in Fisheries workshop on Tetepare, for women from Rendova Island, about the sustainable use of fisheries resources, and a Small Business Management course for women from Rendova run by the College of Higher Education. TDA women have also received training in cooking, guiding and hospitality and are employed in a range of roles within the Tetepare project, including hospitality, guiding and conservation monitoring. A team of female seagrass monitors conducts an annual Seagrass Watch and giant clam survey on Tetepare.

The TDA constitution mandates at least three women must be included in the executive committee of local elected representatives who oversee the project.

EDUCATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Tetepare's staff members have a unique opportunity to develop scientific and technical knowledge that can help them to protect their own natural heritage.

Rangers and marine monitors receive ongoing training from experts working as technical advisors to the TDA, as well as the project patrons John Read and Katherine Moseby, Australian-based biologists who visit the island at least once a year to provide advice and guidance.

Two technical advisors, Australian marine biologist Anthony Plummer and myself, a marine biologist and journalist, are working with the TDA through Australian Volunteers International. We are currently living on Tetepare helping with the conservation and ecotourism program for 18 months. Another AVI volunteer, Gabe McGhee, is working with

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the TDA in the Munda office, providing expert advice on sustainable livelihoods opportunities for TDA communities. The TDA and its staff have had the benefit of technical advisors from Australia and Canada since the project began. These advisors have included wildlife biologists, ecologists, and rangers.

TDA Rangers, marine monitors and guides also work with visiting scientists – archeologists, bat biologists, fish biologists, ornithologists, botanists - learning new techniques and skills in conservation and scientific monitoring.

With assistance from outside organisations such as SPREP and WWF, the TDA's teams of rangers and marine monitors have developed the expertise to conduct an array of monitoring and conservation programs on Tetepare, including turtle nest relocation, Reef Check surveys, coconut crab monitoring, trochus, seagrass and forest surveys, and harvesting pressure surveys.

Staff members working on Tetepare have received training in first aid, outboard-motor maintenance, leadership and conflict resolution, hospitality, and computer training.

The TDA's Program Coordinator, Mr Bero, regularly attends and presents at international conferences, gaining and sharing knowledge from Tetepare's experience and of other experts and projects around the world.

There are many challenges, but the Tetepare project is steadily growing and achieving its goals of conserving the island, helping its communities grow stronger and ensuring its children are better educated. These are great accomplishments for an organisation that is just six years old.

But perhaps one of the TDA's greatest achievements is its ability to inspire other communities in the Solomons to follow in its footsteps.

By teaming conservation with ecotourism and sustainable livelihoods, the TDA has pioneered a successful model for community-based conservation in the Pacific. In the Solomon Islands, which has seen most of its forests fall, Tetepare's old growth trees still stand. It's waters and its skies brim with life.

The TDA has welcomed groups from across the Solomons to visit Tetepare on look-and-learn trips to draw lessons and inspiration from the Tetepare project's success. Among the people visiting Tetepare on such trips are groups from Roviana, Choiseul, Marovo and East Rennel and the Solomon Islands Locally Managed Marine Areas Network.

Now, using a grant from the EU, the TDA has begun working with Conservation International, the American Natural History Museum, and Solomon Islands Community Conservation Partnership, to replicate its successful model of community-based conservation across the Solomon Islands.

There is much we can all learn from Tetepare - a place that shows us how people can exist in balance with their environment, a place that proves conservation can provide tangible and sustainable benefits for communities.

Tetepare's story is one to inspire communities and conservationists across the Pacific – the story of a wild island and its lost people who found a way to stand together to conserve one of the world's truly magical places.