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STRENGTHENING BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC



Ridge to reef conservation: Taveuni Forest Reserve with view on fringing reef, Fiji Islands (Photo: R. Hahn)

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Background

The FAO/GEF “Forestry and Protected Area Management” project includes the four Pacific Island nations of Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Niue. These four countries are located in two of the world’s 34 “Biodiversity Hotspots”, where the richest and most threatened reservoirs of plant and animal life can be found. Vanuatu is at the southeastern end of the East Melanesian Islands Hotspot and accounts for about 12 percent of the land area and contains 35 percent of the threatened plant and animal species occurring in this hotspot. Fiji, Samoa and Niue are at the southwestern edge of

the Polynesia-Micronesia Hotspot that covers most of the southern Pacific Ocean. They account for about 25 percent of the land area of this hotspot and 28 percent of its threatened plant and animal species.

In addition to the importance of these islands for the conservation of global biodiversity, the utilization of natural resources is a major component of rural livelihoods and makes a significant contribution to the economies of these countries. Furthermore, the maintenance of a high-quality environment supports other important sectors of the economy, such as tourism, and

contributes to the overall health and welfare of the people living in these countries.

The land area of the four countries comprises several large volcanic islands and numerous smaller islands of various types. A wide range of habitats are present, including: coastal vegetation; mangrove forests; freshwater swamp forests; lowland rainforests; seasonally dry forests and grasslands; montane rainforests and cloud forests; open woodlands and shrublands. Although most of these habitats contain a relatively low level of biological diversity compared to many other biodiversity hotspots, the remoteness of these islands and their geography has led to high levels of species endemism.

Table 1 presents some key statistics about the current status of terrestrial biodiversity conservation on the islands.

The number of species that are considered threatened is quite low. However, these threatened species account for a very high proportion of the endemic species present on the islands. With the

exception of Niue, the proportion of land in protected areas is relatively low and a number of important ecosystems (e.g., montane rainforests and cloud forests in Fiji and Samoa) are either absent or only minimally covered by the current protected area network.

Biodiversity threats and project rational

Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Niue account for a high proportion of the land area of the Polynesia-Micronesia biodiversity hotspot, where species endemism is particularly high and one-third of species are currently threatened with extinction. However, despite this globally significant biodiversity, conservation – whether in formally protected areas or the wider production landscape – is extremely weak. These weaknesses are due to a number of reasons that this project seeks to overcome, including: resistance to change in local communities; poor coordination between stakeholders; lack of capacity and resources; lack of experience with community-based approaches to conservation; and inadequate and out-dated policy and legal frameworks.

Table 1: Protected areas and threatened species in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Niue

Protected area and species data	Fiji	Samoa	Vanuatu	Niue	Total
Total Land Area (000 ha)	1,827	284	1,219	26	3,356
Terrestrial protected areas in 2009 (000 ha)					
<i>IUCN Categories I-II</i>	20	6	0	0	26
<i>IUCN Categories III-V</i>	1	7	0	0	9
<i>IUCN Category VI and unclassified</i>	23	11	16	6	56
Total area protected (all categories)	44	24	16	6	90
Total number of terrestrial protected areas	31	15	33	2	81
Protected area coverage (percent of land area)	2.4	8.4	1.3	23.1	2.7
Number of threatened species reported in 2008					
<i>Higher Plants</i>	66	2	10	0	76
<i>Mammals</i>	6	2	8	2	9
<i>Birds</i>	10	7	8	8	30
<i>Reptiles</i>	6	1	2	1	6
<i>Amphibians</i>	1	0	0	0	1
<i>Fish</i>	6	6	7	5	8
Total of above species	95	18	35	16	130

Source: Protected area statistics from the World Database on Protected Areas (<http://www.wdpa.org>), species data from the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2008 (<http://www.iucnredlist.org>).



Kauri (Agathis macrophylla) Forest Reserve on Erromango Island, Vanuatu (Photo: R. Hahn)

Project objectives

The project's development objective is to enhance the sustainable livelihoods of local communities living in and around protected areas. Its global environmental objective is to strengthen biodiversity conservation and reduce forest and land degradation. Global benefits from the project will include: increased representation of important ecosystems in the protected area networks in these countries; enhanced biodiversity conservation in production landscapes (through mainstreaming and marketing of biodiversity goods and services); increased financial sustainability for protected area management; and reductions in the barriers to sustainable forest and land management.

Development strategy

In order to achieve its objectives the project will address the identified issues and weaknesses by strengthening biodiversity conservation and sustainable forest and land management in these four countries.

For this purpose it has been structured into six technical components with the following anticipated outcomes:

1. Policy, legal and institutional arrangements effectively support biodiversity conservation and sustainable land management.
2. Effective and sustainable *in situ* biodiversity conservation areas established and/or strengthened.
3. Stakeholders have the capacity to plan, implement and monitor biodiversity conservation and sustainable land and forest management.
4. Sustainable financing of protected areas in place through a mixture of local income-generation, government finance and innovative measures.
5. Marketing of biodiversity goods and services and sustainable land management practices result in improved livelihoods of local communities.
6. Poor land-use practices and forest and land degradation reduced or reversed in target areas.

Stakeholders and funding

The major stakeholders of this project at the regional and national levels are donor and regional organizations and NGOs involved in conservation, national government agencies, private foundations and private sector organisations. Local stakeholders are the local government agencies, community members and landowners of the proposed protected areas.

The FAO/GEF-FPAM project is a four-year project with a total estimated budget of USD 18.0 million. Total project costs distributed by funding source are: (i) GEF - USD 6.3 million; (ii) national governments - USD 2.2 million, (iii) other co-financiers (NGOs, institutes, universities) - USD 8.0 million; and (iv) FAO - USD 1.5 million.

Landownership and development of Protected Area Networks

Land and its ownership is a vital and integral part of the societies in the South Pacific. Much of the land in the islands is under customary ownership, i.e., owned by tribes, clans, families or other native groups, rather than individuals or governments. The land ownership or land-use has to be adequately addressed in order to achieve a significant impact on the sustainable management of land and forests, the conservation of biodiversity and the establishment of a protected area system.

Currently the project supports the consolidation of 8 existing and the establishment of 15 new protected areas, which will increase the area under formal/legal protection from 30,000 hectares to 110,000 hectares. The land of all protected areas is under customary ownership.

References

FAO/Global Environment Facility. 2010. **Project Document: Forestry and protected area management in Fiji, Samoa, Vanuatu and Niue (GEFPAS-FPAM).**