

Move to halt Pacific bird extinctions - interview with Don Stewart

Title Read the Radio Australia interview between Don Stewart (BirdLife Director for the Pacific Partnership) and presenter Jemima Garrett. STEWART: The Pacific region contains about one quarter of all the critically threatened bird species known. Critically endangered is a definition that means that unless active management is taken the species will become extinct. GARRETT: So what are the main threats? STEWART: Well, there are 2 main threats of about equal significance. They are habitat loss or destruction, which is caused by a range of things such as logging, for instance, clearance of forests and other lands for agricultural purposes and for building etc, and the second, is the introduction of alien invasive species, which are a range of creatures which have been brought in to the Pacific Islands by settlers as they've come around. The biggest single threat to birds and biodiversity is the introduction of rats on islands and there is quite a lot of work going on right now to try and deal with that. GARRETT: In fact, you've had some wins on the board with rats, eradicating them from 18 islands in Fiji, Palau, New Caledonia and French Polynesia. What is the focus of this renewed commitment from Birdlife and SPREP? STEWART: We did a demonstration project in Fiji about 4 years ago to show that this could be done. There's absolutely nothing new in the science but it hadn't been tried in the Pacific before, and that is eradicating rats completely from one island so, as I said, we have now done about 18 such islands and we have another 18 or so, in our sights. There are a number of funding organisations that have taken notice of this, including the European Union and the Packard Foundation in the United States and a couple of others, who have come up with funding for us to undertake more rat eradication on islands around the region and these are islands that are critical to the survival of colonies of breeding seabirds, in the main. Also, we are going to branch out into other areas; it's not necessarily eradication but control measures. There some introduced creatures that we don't think we'll ever be able to eradicate but control measures are needed; these include deer in New Caledonia, pigs in Fiji and New Caledonia and mongoose, which is a real threat here. In Fiji, we are going to assist the local authorities with quarantine measures to ensure the mongoose doesn't get to islands where it hasn't got to yet. GARRETT: You are also working with SPREP on a wider conservation strategy that will bring in more Pacific countries. What are you hoping to do with that? STEWART: Yeah, well, we have amassed a certain amount of knowledge and expertise on birds in the region and worldwide. I probably need to point out that this emphasis on birds is really an emphasis on wider biodiversity issues because we use birds as indicators of what is going on in the wider environment because birds are the most ubiquitous and the most studied creatures on the planet I guess. Everybody can see them so when the birds are in trouble you know the environment is in trouble. We've done some detailed work in the 8

countries in which we have Birdlife NGO partners but there are many more countries where we don't have partners but are members of SPREP, and SPREP has considerable influence in those countries and we have come together with SPREP and agreed that we will work on a joint strategy to extend conservation measures to those other countries through the designation of 'Important Bird Areas' in the first place and through developing a region-wide birds and biodiversity conservation strategy, so we are working with SPREP on both those issues now. GARRETT: What role can Pacific community organisations play in this effort to save Pacific bird life? STEWART: We happen to think conservation is essentially community activity. Now, in fact, we'd go further and say conservation isn't going to work without the active support of communities. For example, here in Fiji where our regional headquarters is based, we work extensively with communities here because around 86% of all land here is owned by communities, in traditional ownership. So nothing here is going to work unless the communities get behind it and want it to work. Now, that can be a slow process of education and consulting with people but it is absolutely essential and, given time and the right approach, we are convinced it works and I believe SPREP is also similarly convinced. Source: [ABC](#).