Palau Conservation Society partners to protect biodiversity by Anu Gupta

Title International Day for Biological Diversity was marked in Palau by a presentation by Anu Gupta entitled: ?PCS and Communities: partnering to protect our terrestrial biodiversity?. Anu is the Director of Conservation and Protected Areas for the Palau Conservation Society (PCS), the BirdLife partner in Palau, and she tells us more? *Terrestrial biodiversity is the one thing that we interact with every day. When you reach out and touch your neighbour, you?ve just touched terrestrial biodiversity! Terrestrial biodiversity is part of our everyday lives. Palau is a special place, with more species, subspecies, and habitats than might be expected for an island of its size. The island is uniquely positioned in the Pacific ? close enough to other land masses to encourage coloniSation, yet far enough away to encourage speciation. And Palauans have always respected biodiversity, conserving and protecting it from harm. On the International Day for Biological Diversity I gave the presentation in a darkened room, using images of local communities and native biodiversity to regale the audience with stories of a wide array of species and habitats and their contribution to essential human needs. One of these stories related to Lake Ngardok, part of Palau?s largest Important Bird Area (IBA). Here, I remarked that local community members and researchers alike have noticed that the Micronesian Starling seems to be the only bird to spread the seed of the orredakl(Dracaena multiflora). Orredakl is one of the only native trees able to grow on bare and degraded areas. This initial colonisation can lead to the growth of a vegetation patch, which in turn can lead to the growth of new forest. This reforestation leads to decreased sedimentation, which leads to healthier reefs, more fish, and cleaner drinking water. Everything is connected and everything is important! There are multiple environmental threats within Palau that I highlighted during the presentation. Habitat loss, invasive species and over-harvesting fueled by illegal consumption are but a few of the threats to native biodiversity. To illustrate the impact of over-consumption, I brought up a figure showing the 40% decline that has been observed in the Micronesian Pigeon population, a hunted bird that is highly valued in cultural practices. But I also made a real effort to stress the message that although there are serious threats to Palauan fauna and flora, Palauans already have the capacity to protect this biodiversity. The next theme aimed to convey the collaborative nature of conservation efforts in Palau, illustrating the connectivity between local actions and global support. I gave the example that bird surveys had catalyzed a 2010 Executive Order mandating use of an endemic bird (the Palau Fruit Dove) as an indicator species for development decisions. Palau?s scientifically-derived indicators are informing development of indicators for the MicronesiaChallenge, a regional initiative (drawing on global financial support) that supports biodiversity conservation through local actions. I concluded the presentation by pointing out that PCS, as a membership-based organization, offers the public the opportunity to get involved with biodiversity conservation and to understand that there is no ?we? without ?you?. The event was also an opportunity for PCS to publicise its new 2010-2015 Strategic Plan, which describes management planning and actions in protected areas, coordinated development of criteria and indicators for the Palau Protected Areas Network, and use of good science to inform land use planning. We had a wealth of positive outcomes from holding this event, including inquiries from Governors interested in management planning, inquiries from consultants preparing a dossier for World Heritage status, and an appointment to meet with Palau?s President. The launch allowed an opening for all of PCS?s partners to highlight the commitment thatPalau?s new administration has towards biodiversity conservation. In addition to mandating standardized bird monitoring, Palau?s President, Johnson Toribiong, has declared Palau to be a ?Shark Sanctuary.? PCS will use the ongoing attention created as part of the International Year of Biodiversity to advocate for more effective conservation of species, sites, and habitats.* The launch was hosted and organized by the Palau International Coral Reef Center. Guests included Palau?s President and Vice President, and representatives from the Council of Chiefs, National Congress, Ministries, and Governor?s Association. Image Credit: Micronesian Kingfisher by Mandy Etpison.