

# Empowering Local Communities in Fiji

Title Fiji's Sisi Initiative Site Support Group was recently celebrated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) with an award ceremony in the Natewa Tunuloa Important Bird Area for winning their Equator Prize 2012. During the ceremony Sisi announced how their community protected forest is benefiting their fisheries, and how they are also starting an ambitious new project in their IBA. The prestigious Equator Prize recognizes innovation and leadership in community-based sustainable development approaches. This week, the UNDP Resident Representative Akiko Fujii handed the award over to Sisi Initiative members from the districts of Natewa and Tunuloa. While handing over the award at Vosasivo Village in Natewa, she said the achievement by the group had been outstanding. "I am very grateful to be here in the districts to hand over the award to a very hardworking committee that involves a group of youths from the villages," Ms Fujii said. The Sisi Initiative is one of 25 community initiatives that received the prize this year from around the globe, selected from 812 nominations submitted by communities in 113 countries. Speaking at the award ceremony, the Assistant Roko for Cakaudrove, Anare Drauna said: "the Award [Equator Prize 2012] is a big achievement for Sisi Initiative Site Support Group and it has opened doors for the benefit of the Natewa Tunuloa District. Not only has it put the district on the global map but Fiji as a whole." The Natewa Tunuloa Peninsula was designated an IBA by BirdLife International in 2005 as it supports an unique assemblage of endemic birds and is a habitat of the Fiji Silktail (known as Sisi in Fijian). The Sisi Initiative received a boost from the Small Grants Programme (SGP) of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) when BirdLife International's Pacific Partnership Secretariat received a grant to assist in the conservation activities on the peninsula. The Sisi Initiative SSG has established a 6000 +hectare community managed forest and developed alternative livelihood options for the area's indigenous landowners. Last week, during the awards ceremony, the villagers announced that they have seen a vast change in their fishing ground as a result of the community managed forest which has reduced the flow of siltation to the *qoliqoli* (traditional fishing ground). "We have seen a big difference to our *qoliqoli*," Naqaravutu Village Ecotourism Project Coordinator Petero Qaloibau said. "There are a lot of fish and the sizes are bigger as well". "The seafood we once thought were almost extinct are in abundant supply now and we are grateful to the other villagers and traditional leaders for their support," he said. He said villagers, at one stage, had to go out further to sea to fish for their meals. "That has now changed because we are preserving our forests and we have seen a big difference with our *qoliqoli* having so much fish and seafood in it." Sisi Initiative SSG is not stopping there and are once again on the global conservation map. Natewa Tunuloa IBA has been selected by the UNDP to be one of ten pilot sites around the world promoting sustainable landscapes as part of a two-year project entitled: Community Development and Knowledge Management for the Satoyama Initiative or "COMDEKS" for short. COMDEKS has been designed to collect and disseminate knowledge

and experiences from successful on-the-ground actions for replication and up-scaling in other parts of the world. In Natewa Tunuloa, Sisi Initiative and BirdLife Pacific Secretariat have just recently completed a baseline assessment of the IBA. ?This will provide information about the current state of the landscape, and will be instrumental for the development and finalization of a COMDEKS Country Programme Landscape Strategy?, said Miliana Ravuso of the BirdLife Pacific Secretariat. ?The assessment builds on work that has been carried out at the site by BirdLife International, and more importantly the outcomes of the baseline assessment will assist communities to develop project concepts with activities to maintain and rebuild socio-ecological production landscapes.? COMDEKS is a UNDP initiative in partnership with the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (MOEJ), the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (SCBD), and the United Nations University (UNU).