

Title A voluntary group of local landowners from Fiji has been awarded a prestigious Equator Prize for 2012. A representative of the group, Silio Lalaqila, received the award at a special ceremony last night co-hosted by actor, Ed Norton and Brazilian actress and environmental advocate, Camilla Pitanga. The ceremony was also attended by heads of states, U.N. representatives and a list of celebrities, and held at the U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development (also known as Rio+20) which currently underway in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Sisi Initiative is a BirdLife Fiji project. the group is named after the Sisi bird ? also known as the Silktail *Lamprolia victoriae* - which is found only in the Natewa Tunuloa Peninsula on Fiji?s second-largest island of Vanua Levu. This peninsula is one of the 14 Important Bird Areas in Fiji identified by BirdLife International as globally vital for conserving biodiversity. However, the birds? old-growth rainforest habitat is being encroached upon by forces such as illegal logging, forest fires, overgrazing, agricultural expansion and the spread of invasive species. In response to these threats, the Sisi group has been working with communities to wisely use and manage their natural resources in order to conserve the endemic bird while at the same time improving their own way of life. Actively managing more than 6,000 hectares (almost 15,000 acres) of forest, six villages are turning to income-generating activities that are compatible with conservation, including beekeeping, jewelry-making and ecotourism.



Silio Lalaqila ? a representative of Fiji?s Sisi Initiative ? accepted the Equator Prize on behalf of the community group at a Rio+20 award ceremony. (© CI/Photo by Kim McCabe)

Receiving the award Wednesday, Silio was overwhelmed by emotions, having traveled from his day job as a farmer, across the globe to receive the award in front of many world leaders. ?I felt proud to be a Fijian receiving this award on behalf of all the communities in Fiji that are actively engaged in conserving their natural resources", said Silio. "It was more special getting the award in front of my own Prime Minister, Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama". ?I am so thankful to BirdLife International for all the help they gave us to manage and conserve our natural resources", he added. The Equator Initiative is a partnership that brings together the U.N., governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to build capacity and raise the profile of local efforts towards sustainable development. "The Sisi project is an example of strong partnership with the local communities", said Miliana Ravuso - Programme Coordinator from the BirdLife International Pacific Secretariat. ?Over time, and with much dialogue and awareness-raising conducted by BirdLife and other stakeholders, the communities have realised the importance of protecting the Silktail and its habitat, and recognized the potential for an ecotourism birding venture". "The communities understood the destructive impacts of unsustainable logging and land-management practices, and realized that they could better manage existing natural resources and still derive income from them through alternative livelihood projects,? said Milly. The work of the Sisi Initiative has been kindly supported by the GEF Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP ? implemented by UNDP), Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), UK Darwin Initiative and Australian Government Regional Natural Heritage Programme. ?We are proud to support organisations such as the Sisi Initiative group, which empowers indigenous communities to protect, manage and steward the natural resources in their communities, said Patricia Zurita - Executive Director of CEPF. CEPF unites six global leaders who are committed to enabling nongovernmental and private sector organizations to help protect vital ecosystems: L?Agence Française de Développement; Conservation International; The Global Environmental Facility; The Government of Japan, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; The World Bank. **Subscribe to The BirdLife Pacific [Quarterly E-Newsletter](#)**