

Forum calls on Pacific people to value all species

Pacific Islanders must make every effort to understand and value the various species of plants and animals and natural environments that make up our island homes. This is the call from the scientists, local to global experts and conservation practitioners who gathered at the inaugural Pacific Islands Species Forum last week in Honiara, Solomon Islands. IUCN Oceania Regional Director, Taholo Kami, concluded the forum by reiterating Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, Gordon Lilo's opening speech calling for "extraordinary action" to be taken by decision makers to ensure species and intact ecosystems are conserved and managed in a time of rapid development. "It is time to sit with the Government, big developers, mining companies, agriculture, fisheries and logging interests in a national forum and discuss how we ensure big development will also result in big environment wins". Over the three day forum, more than 70 participants, including BirdLife, shared a diverse range of information on Pacific Island species including data gaps, results of implementation on the ground, lessons learned and the way forward in determining the status of species, their conservation needs and how regional policies can protect them. Presentations and discussions highlighted the incredible diversity of terrestrial, freshwater and marine species in the Pacific, including endemic birds, dragonflies, rare plants, snails and fishes. A large percentage of communities in the region rely directly on the contribution of species for their livelihoods, and despite the social, cultural and economic significance of these species, they are still under-valued. The devastating impact of invasive species such as rats and ants was repeatedly highlighted as a threat to many species on isolated island ecosystems. "50-67% of extinctions of land species on islands have been caused by invasive species", said BirdLife's Dr Mark O'Brien. Other significant threats such as logging, mining, habitat destruction, the conversion of land for agriculture, and the potential effects of climate change were also recognized as barriers to the survival of many species. On a positive note, many success stories were highlighted, including the increased recognition by governments of the need for environmental policies, the strengthened involvement of communities and landowners in carrying out on the ground action, and increased awareness of the importance of biosecurity in our islands. The forum recognized that a great deal of work is already taking place at the research level. However, many challenges exist in ensuring that data, including traditional knowledge, reaches the decision and policy makers and translates into national as well as regional policies and strategies. The need for improving capacity of local graduates and researchers for carrying out field work was also identified as a priority area. Underpinning this is the need to recognize the true value of our species and ecosystems, and ensure that all members of society - government representatives, community leaders, educators, private sector, researchers and the general public - commit to working together towards conserving our species and ensuring their survival for future generations. **Subscribe to The BirdLife Pacific Quarterly E-Newsletter**