

Title
After years of planning a rodent eradication operation on Kayangel Atoll, Palau, has just been completed and is already showing early signs of success.

“So far, there have been no reports of rats on any of Kayangel’s four islands”, said Anu Gupta – Conservation and Protected Areas Program Director for Palau Conservation Society (PCS / BirdLife Partner). “Within just weeks of the operation there have already been reports that agricultural harvests have improved, with bananas and coconuts harvested without any rat damage. Although an official declaration of success will not come for at least a year, we are cautiously optimistic”.

Kayangel State is an atoll at the northern end of Palau. Four islands make up the atoll, including the Important Bird Area of Ngeriungs Island and three other islands of Orak, Ngerebelas, and Kayangel island. Together the four islands cover 160 hectares, and are home to Palau’s biggest population of Micronesian Megapode *Megapodius laperouse* – an Endangered bird on the IUCN Red List that triggered the rodent eradication project.

The rodent eradication operation was led by the PCS and involved distributing poison bait widely across the atoll. The greatest factor in the success of the project was the high level of voluntary community participation. A total of 60 community members from Kayangel – along with six volunteers, eight PCS staff and one BirdLife Pacific Partnership staff - participated in the field operations.

It was a very demanding and complex operation which carefully balanced the needs of the local people, endemic birds and unpredictable weather conditions. In order to manage it, half of PCS’s small staff relocated to Kayangel during the project.

“So far, the field component of the project has required 885 person-days of work”, added Anu. “PCS relied on Kayangel-based community leaders during the preparation and implementation phase and for treatment in culturally taboo areas”.

Community members have been vocal in expressing their support for the project. Rats, in particular, have had a huge negative effect on agriculture, and with them apparently now gone, the community has excitedly made plans to replant numerous crops, including corn, tapioca, cucumber, and other vegetables.

“Three decades ago Kayangel was known for its corn crop, and the state featured a specialty corn dish in cultural events. However, an explosion in rats in the 1980s led to a decline in corn crops. Kayangel community members are particularly excited about replanting corn and once again being able to make their unique dish”,



noted Anu.

In addition to distributing rat poison, the operations have also included feral cat trapping and a pet cat and dog spay and neuter clinic. Like rats, these animals also threatened the unique biodiversity of the atoll, and the trapping turned up a surprise for the PCS team. “The cat traps did catch two Micronesian Megapode, and both birds were released unharmed”, said Anu.

This is just the start for work on Kayangel. PCS will continue the bait station and cat trapping operations until complete, and will monitoring biological changes for the next year at least. Community members have also voluntarily taken on aspects of the biosecurity plan, such as inspecting incoming boats. Furthermore, additional conservation benefits have been realized through this project, including agreement by Kayangel’s leaders and community to nominate marine and terrestrial sites to the Palau Protected Areas Network, designate a new terrestrial protected area, and conduct island-wide management planning. A planning team has already submitted funding proposals to the National Government as part of its Protected Areas Network application.

"As a sizeable, inhabited, and remote Atoll, supporting threatened wildlife these characteristics presented many technical and logistical challenges to the removal of rodents and cats", said Steve Cranwell - Programme Manager BirdLife International Pacific Secretariat. "PCS are to be congratulated in their commitment to such a complex operation from which a tremendous amount has and will continue to be learned. With BirdLife Partners in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Fiji, and the Cook Islands all working on island restoration projects sharing, these lessons are a valuable contribution in improving opportunities for eradication success and the resulting benefits".

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