

IUCN World Conservation Congress, Marseille 3-11 September 2021

Dick Watling – Honorary Member – Nomination Acceptance Communique

Well, I have to start by saying this nomination is a surprise, but certainly a pleasant surprise, and I accept it with gratitude, and with humility. I add with humility, because I know well that my professional life here in Fiji, has been dedicated to my wider environmental consultancy rather than to conservation, which is where I always thought it would be.

I would also like to take this opportunity to send my salaams to any of my old colleagues of the WWF Conservation Indonesia Programme from the late 1970s through the 1980s who may be at the Congress. Deteriorating correspondence is an occupational hazard of living in the South Seas, I am afraid to say, and I've lost contact with most of them. But I do know that several of them became IUCN stalwarts, and I would hope that some of our Indonesian hosts may be at the Congress too.

I have had little contact with IUCN since it set up its Oceania Regional Office in Fiji a decade or so ago, and so I am still wondering where the nomination may have come from. But I can say that I am pleased that the IUCN Regional Office is here and currently in its unique position, occupying the middle ground between the Governments of the region and the conservation communities which includes the BINGOs (or Big International NGOs). We have a few of these in Fiji with regional outreach, and unfortunately their presence is not wholly beneficial. As such IUCN plays an important role and I hope it will continue to do so.

I remember well and with great pleasure, my first major consulting role as team leader which was for IUCN preparing Fiji's first State of the Environment Report, and the Strategy that followed it (in the early 1990s).

My first thoughts were to use the 1992 State of the Environment Report as a baseline and provide some commentary as to how Fiji has fared in the intervening 30 years. There has been some progress, although not as much as I (and many others) would have liked. However, one thing that I have learned is that in confined spaces such as a small island nation, confrontational criticism of domestic performance in environmental and conservation management will not result in any improvement and may make things worse. I expect this to be especially so, in light of the current serious and the post-pandemic circumstances.

I learned this too, because a decade ago, a highly-respected Australian colleague of mine and a valued member of an IUCN Species Survival Commission Group used one of its Meetings in the US to comment with some vigour on the lack of response by Government to the illegally introduced Green Iguana here in Fiji. It evoked no official comment at the time, although a small, local NGO had to make use of lawyers to prevent officialdom overstepping its mandate. And meanwhile the iguana was happily on its way and is now firmly naturalised. Is there is any reason to doubt that its spread through the Caribbean will not be replicated in the south west Pacific ?

So I will turn attention to a larger and remoter issue and one that I know little about its mechanisms – International Financing for Conservation – because in Fiji’s case, and of this I am sure, it is missing the target.

Fiji’s primary contribution to international biodiversity resources is the remarkable level of endemism in its native forests which are the most extensive in Oceania. Loss of forest from a diverse variety of causes is now the most significant threat to the unique set of genetic resources which Fiji alone can conserve for mankind, let alone for its own future generations.

The fact that Fiji still retains significant forest resource can be attributed to its landowners. Over 90% of Fiji’s land remains as native land tenure and for the most part the landowners have been valuable custodians of the resource. But this is all changing, Fiji has a young population, development has by-passed rural populations and it is distressing to find rural landowners flocking to urban and peri-urban informal settlements to take advantage of the developing world and acquit their aspirations. Government is very well aware of the challenges it faces, severe socio-economic and social change issues being just one of them, and is making significant attempts to address the living standards and opportunities of the rural communities. Meanwhile, those back in the village are increasingly taking to the forests for short-lived cash-rich crops such as taro and now increasingly kava, as is their right – a right which they are very well aware of. But as a result of the unsustainable cropping practices that are being adopted the fertility of previously rich soil resources are being rapidly depleted.

What has happened to Taveuni, Fiji’s Garden Island, which for little more than a decade (~1995-2010) supplied almost the entire import requirement of Taro for New Zealand’s island- Pacific communities (c. 10,000 tonnes/pa) will be a legacy for years to come and a stark example of how quickly rich soils can be completely depleted at scale, and as such, what has to be avoided elsewhere. Taveuni is not alone, looking closer to Suva, indeed the first forest clearance schemes for smallholder farming at Lomaivuna and Waibau, have all but returned to subsistence cropping. While badly managed areas of sugar cane cultivation in Seaqaqa on Vanua Levu, cleared of native forest in the late 1970s with World Bank assistance, are turning to ‘Talasiga’ soil conditions with no future agricultural or reforestation potential. Much the same is happening to areas on Viti Levu where sugar cane was allowed (thanks largely to UK-EU sugar subsidies) to creep out of the flat lands into the foothills in the 1970s.

If the bulk of Fiji’s native forests are to survive the next fifty years, then deficiencies in sustainable agriculture and Fiji’s protected area system must be quickly addressed.

Fiji’s protected area system is weak on paper and far weaker in reality. On the basis of experience to date and its current course there is no chance that Fiji’s international

commitments will be met, and the only insurance back-up for the assured conservation of Fiji's endemic genetic diversity will be lost.

Two areas are currently protected with Trust Funds, Sovi and Kilaka, they are a welcome vanguard and learning platform, but they are not enough. Catering for lost harvestable timber royalties alone is inadequate. Our forests and the ecosystem services and true value of the genetic resources they hold, amongst other values must be included in any sustainable financing mechanisms.

Addressing this need is quite simple, best-practice conservation must be recognised as a viable land use, as landowners will only engage if it is more attractive in an holistic sense, than other opportunities.

The transactional approach to payments for ecosystem services will always underestimate resource value and protection. But make adequate, long-term and predictable financing available to resource owners and I am quite sure that landowners with the appropriate information and advice from their Land Board and other Government and local NGOs will recognise the difference between adequate long-term assured benefits for present and future generations, and short-term, unsustainable cash-rich opportunities. As a result a mix of outcomes will eventuate.

To date, with some preliminary exceptions, the landowner imperative has not been recognised by passing administrations, other than in rhetoric. Whatever the reasons for this, it needs to be changed and international and domestic financing which I am sure is available must be frame-worked by Government to directly benefit landowners for long-term forest conservation and management.

Currently, as far as I can see, the most significant stream of international conservation finance available to Fiji comes from the multi-tranche Global Environment Facility Trust Fund projects, with GEF 7 Concept currently approved. There are many millions of dollars involved in each of these tranches.

There may have been some benefits and successful outcomes for Fiji so far, but as an interested observer and participant in the design of one of these, nothing has materially changed for landowners to date, or in prospect. I see benefits for multi-national bureaucracies, the BINGOs (alias the Big International Conservation NGOs) and consultants (such as myself). I see no commensurate management capacity improvement in the agencies (both government and non-government) responsible here in Fiji they remain under-resourced, technically and financially.

The GEF Trust Fund is a key resource but its current delivery needs a serious 'Make-Over'. It is a world run by projects with irrelevant timescales and managed and implemented through ineffective international agency and central government structures and partnerships.

There must be another way if we are to attain a protected area system legacy which Fiji's future generations and the international constituency will be proud of:

- We need programmes that place resource owners and their needs and aspirations at their centre, and trained people to implement them.
- We need to move away from a project by project approach – identify the areas of high biodiversity that need conserving, identify the appropriate structures that involve resource owners fully in their management that can support conservation priorities, and design appropriate financing mechanisms that support these structures through long term finance from multiple sources and partnerships.
- We need new and additional sources of finance including through partnerships with the private sector.
- We need to grow a young and knowledgeable conservation constituency schooled with field and marine experience rather than social media hype. Our current young conservationists strive to impact but are, for the most part, inhibited by their small number and lack of opportunities to progress.

I will sign off here with a digression into the marine environment, something which will be cause for mirth here as I am well recognised as a prejudiced landsman. However, I have had a professional life-long interest in the mangrove which I regard as a terrestrial take-over of the marine environment.

The advent of the Blue Economy has serious ramifications for the mangrove and the inter-tidal foreshore. Its novelty is a magnet, and an arena for new financial horizons, a playground for the BINGOs, multi-sectoral and bi-sectoral agencies and the private sector alike.....Is there any room for traditional users and rights owners ? Or will they be expected to face the consequences if it all goes wrong, as so much of mangrove management worldwide has to date ? Will Fiji and other Pacific Island countries learn from the international example ?

In this respect, I would like to commend the IUCN Species Survival Commission – Mangrove Specialist Group on their adept Position Paper '**Pause Before You Plant**' ...direct, simply put and restrained....it should be compulsory reading for all.

With that I wish you all well and a safe and productive Congress¹.

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