

Land for Wildlife Goes to East Timor

Reprinted from *Land for Wildlife Queensland*, Volume 1 Number 4, August 2001, pp10-11

Wide Bay-Burnett Land for Wildlife coordinator Peter Sykes recently returned from East Timor where he volunteered some of his expertise to help out the struggling nation's ecotourism industry. Never one to miss an opportunity, he managed to fit in a little bit of unique Land for Wildlife work while he was there.

As a result of Australian involvement in the current United Nations security operation in East Timor, strong links are beginning to develop between the two countries. On a recent visit I saw first-hand just how big a challenge it will be to rebuild the ravaged and war-torn country.

My host for most of the trip was the director of tourism Vincente Ximenes. Mr Ximenes is currently working for the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), but when they pull out at the end of the year he hopes to be tourism minister in the country's first democratically elected government. His draft tourism policy developed with the assistance of the University of Queensland emphasises 'ecotourism' and community-based ventures

My objective was to try and come up with a plan that would help kick-start the country's backpacker tourism industry. While not officially on a Land for Wildlife visit, throughout the trip my day job as the program's Wide Bay-Burnett coordinator generated a good deal of interest from various UNTAET personnel. One environment officer I met was well-versed on the Victorian Land for Wildlife program and hoped I could come up with some ideas on how the program might be able to help East Timor. As a result, I promised to explore the possibility of 'goodwill registrations' over two of the country's

Protected Natural Areas (PNAs) – Lake Iralalero and Mount Matabai – which had emerged as key elements in my plan for a backpacker tourism trail through the eastern end of the country. I was further encouraged by UNTAET to cast an eye over the wildlife situation while I was there.

The PNA I visited soon after arriving in Dili featured outstanding coastal views, its main feature being a large mountaintop statue of Christ. Unfortunately, like much of the country, it was almost totally stripped of vegetation and overrun with weeds. Signs of wildlife were nowhere to be seen – not even a bird in the sky. During the quarter-century long Indonesian administration vast areas of the country were logged for firewood or commercial purposes. Firewood is still the main source of fuel for cooking, as the country's electricity supply is unreliable and most people cannot afford electrical appliances. While

try's serious weed infestation problem.

The University of Queensland estimates that East Timor's primary forests have been reduced to less than 15% of their original extent, with a conservative estimate of at least 700km² burnt in the last ten years of Indonesian administration [Carter, et al, 2001, p29]. These figures are in stark contrast to a pre-UNTAET advisory report [da Costa, 1997, p2] which concluded that the country's ecotourism industry had an "...undeniable advantage in terms of the variety and extent of unspoiled natural environments." Most recent evidence suggests that many areas are now beyond rehabilitation and the fauna of East Timor has seriously declined along with the demise of forest communities. An inventory of surviving fauna is badly needed.

Other problems include the fact that the country is still without phone lines, mail service or garbage collection. Toss in the fact that the water is undrinkable and a multitude of serious diseases are running rampant, and it is pretty obvious that East Timor is still a fair way from re-establishing an ecotourism industry. Consequently, wildlife conservation takes a low priority behind issues like health, education and jobs. At the local level the biggest problem for the fauna is that the people, including those who live in the traditional villages dotted throughout the PNAs, are accustomed to hunting wildlife for both food and recreation.

Under traditional Liurai hierarchical structures, the most powerful people in the country are not politicians or soldiers, but rather the village leaders – often a tribal chief or king who has abandoned his royal title in order to move with the times. Land ownership is not so much a matter of lines on a map as it is a matter of recognising the Liurai's authority to make decisions concerning use of land that is held in common by the community. If a person wants to build a house, for example, they must first approach the Liurai and seek permission to proceed with their plans. If a government wants to curb hunting practices within a particular PNA, it must



Loihuno village water source near the Mundo Perdido Protected Natural Area

most trees and forests are officially protected, in reality there is little UNTAET could do to stop firewood collection, even if they wanted to. Chemical defoliation and bombing of the countryside during recent military conflicts has further exacerbated the coun-



PNAs are dotted with scenic villages and traditional houses

negotiate mutually beneficial agreements with all involved village leaders. Coming to grips with this concept of land ownership has proven a major challenge for UNTAET internationals and potential foreign investors familiar with a more regimented approach to doing business.

A good example is the village of Tutuala on the eastern tip of the country. It is located within the Lake Iralalero PNA which contains the bulk of East Timor's remaining rainforests. The Rusa Deer (*Cervus timorensis*) which once roamed the area in large numbers has been hunted to the brink of extinction owing to its value as a food source. Other native animals such as the Northern common Cuscus (*Phalanger orientalis*) and Long-tailed Macaque primate (*Macaca fascicularis*) are hunted for recreation and may already be gone. The transitional government has proposed providing cultivated land and farm equipment in exchange for an end to the hunting of the deer, but as yet is short on ideas on how to curb the recreational hunting. Establishing an ecotourism infrastructure in the area might provide the answer, but the long-term benefits of such a move are difficult to sell to a village leader who has little or no experience with the industry.

Over two weeks I don't think there is too much of the country I didn't see – travelling mostly on winding roads with blind hairpin curves cut into the sides of mountains, usually with a drop of several hundred meters on at least one side. From what I saw, there is no such thing as wildlife that

is not locally endangered in East Timor. In addition to those already mentioned, native fauna known to inhabit the country (and hopefully still surviving in pockets) includes civets, a variety of bats, cobras, pythons, lizards, geckos and crocodiles. Over 200 species of birds, mostly non-migratory, have also been recorded – but as already mentioned, current information concerning the extent and distribution of all wildlife is sadly lacking.

After returning home and making a few phone calls I am happy to report that the signs are all good. There has been no shortage of local support for a UNTAET proposal to bring two East Timorese to Hervey Bay for some tourism and environmental management training. Hopefully the Wide



Lake Ira-lalero Protected Natural Area was a favourite hiding spot for Falantil freedom fighters

Bay-Burnett Land for Wildlife program will be able to help open a few more doors and make a significant contribution to the ecological revival of East Timor.

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