



Takitumu Conservation Area tour guide Mataiti Mataiti leads a group of tourists and local kakerori fans on a nature walk through the conservation area. “I’ve been interested in conservation since I was a kid,” he said. “It’s what my grandmother taught me.”



warrior bird, warrior people

three clans cooperate and save a species in the cook islands

In 1989, the Rarotonga Flycatcher was fighting for its life, its numbers reduced to a mere 29. Today, 241 of these tiny orange and grey birds are alive and well in Takitumu Conservation Area on Rarotonga, the largest of the Cook Islands. Three landowning clans — the Kainuku, Karika, and Manavaroa families — are working together to save the bird, known locally as kakerori.

“In the late 1980s, the three extended families had no idea that a critically endangered bird found nowhere else in the world existed in their forests,” said Ian Karika-Wilmott, 51, conservation area support officer. “Most had never heard of biodiversity or ecotourism, and almost all believed that when the government said conservation, it meant taking away their rights to their land.”

a wee warrior

Weighing in at around 22 grams, each bird adds up to barely a mouthful. “Kakerori is a little, wee bird. You can hold it in your hand, it’s so small,” said Margaret Karika, 82, high chief of the Karika clan. Kakerori (*pomarea dimidiata*) is not threatened by human hunters, but by an introduced predator, the ship rat, which first made its appearance in the Cook Islands in the mid-1800s.

In spite of its size, kakerori is a warrior when it comes to protecting its young. “When a rat comes into its nest, this feisty little bird stays and fights to the death,” said Ian. Building its nests out of moss under the forest canopy in trees

over valley streams, kakerori lays one to two eggs a year. About half survive.

The more mature birds, transformed to grey at around age four, tend to stay in their own territory. The bright orange youngsters are insatiably inquisitive, and they routinely soar up to the highest ridges to explore their world.

a unique place and its pressures

Kakerori has a discerning taste for habitat. Takitumu Conservation Area (Takitumu) lies approximately 800 meters from the main coastal road and extends over 155 hectares of forested ridges and valleys. Ferns carpet the inland forest, accompanied by Polynesian and Noded ground orchids and Rarotongan melicopes. Takitumu includes the headwaters of two major streams and basins of a third. Located on the wettest part of the island, the conservation area provides most of the island’s drinking water.

Although the area has been uninhabited by humans since just after missionaries arrived in 1823, kakerori has lots of company. At dusk, the ridge-top hums with the chatter of Rarotonga starlings, fruit doves, long-tailed cuckoos, and white-tailed tropic birds. From the sea, white terns and brown noddies dart about and join the conversation.

This bird haven is nestled in the southeastern hills of the bustling, cosmopolitan island of Rarotonga. The Cook Islands’ seat of government and home to more than half of the country’s

Above: The Rarotonga flycatcher (*pomarea dimidiata*) is one of the few species in the world to have improved its conservation status in the past decade. Three clans are working together to save the bird in the Cook Islands.

19,000 people, Rarotonga covers only 67 square kilometers. A circle road skirts a white-sand coast studded with palm trees, every tourist's fantasy of Polynesia. Tourism is, in fact, Rarotonga's main industry. Last year, 75,000 visitors came to forget their troubles in the Cook Islands. Tourists largely support Rarotonga's cash-based economy, but, as a result, adequate water supply and waste management are ongoing national issues.

In Avarua, Rarotonga's main town, mopeds buzz and sputter day and night. Visitors can choose from more than 30 tourist accommodations, ranging from small private beach bungalows to air-conditioned hotels with pools and hundreds of rooms. At their fingertips are cappuccinos, pasta, cell phones, internet cafes, T-shirts, sunglasses, CDs, Polynesian dancing, disco, karaoke, and two giant supermarkets.

old clans, new tools

Beneath the modern veneer of mowed lawns, abundant nightlife, and espresso, the clan system is rock solid. Each clan has a high chief, and extended families gather regularly to discuss issues. Decisions are by consensus, and reaching agreement takes time.

Basic land distribution hasn't changed much since the Maori first arrived 1,400 years ago. There are six original clans

Every Saturday, locals and tourists flock to Punanga Nui outdoor market in Avarua to buy produce, local foods, and handicrafts. Kapiri Tere, wife of a conservation area committee member, sells watermelon and vegetables harvested from her farm lands.

who still honor the land divisions established in these early days. "Families don't get along all the time here in Rarotonga," said Vavia Vavia of Cook Islands Environment Service, the government department responsible for environmental affairs. "Land issues are the biggest points of conflict. The preferred way to resolve disputes is through family meetings, but when this fails, we take our disputes to land court."

"Like our ancestors, we still regularly do battle over our land," said support officer Ian Karika-Wilmott. "The difference is that now we do battle in the courts." Each land dispute is an intricate maze of history and relationships, and it's impressive that three clans have decided to join forces to save kakerori.

Takitumu Conservation Area, established in 1996, followed and built on an existing government program, the Kakerori Recovery Project, which started in 1987. At that time, the Environment Service was happy just to get permission from the clans to do species recovery on the land. Intensive rat baiting began in 1989, spearheaded by Ed Saul, a New Zealander who is so devoted to kakerori he has come to Rarotonga to lay rat bait for 13 years in a row.

an opportunity to make money and save the bird, too

It wasn't until the project became a candidate for SPBCP support that the government began to seek active landowner participation from the families. "The landowners were suspicious at first," said Anna Tiraa, the first support officer for the conservation area. "Government doesn't have a great track record in terms of the way it's communicated with landowners here in Rarotonga. Their first reaction was, well, if it's a nature preserve, if it's a conservation area, that means we can't use it any more."

Takitumu support officer Ian Karika-Wilmott gets interviewed by Channel 1, Rarotonga's first and only television station, for a story about an environmental issue. Channel 1 did its first broadcast in 1989.





Although Takitumu Conservation Area didn't fit many of SPBCP's criteria for site selection, the review panel was flexible and embraced the project because it promised to save an endangered species.

In 1996, after a year of meetings and discussions, the families took over project management and formed the conservation area committee. It's the first time the government has ever turned a project over to landowners. Each of the three clans chose two representatives to serve on what Ian likens to a conservation area board of directors.

"We questioned it at the beginning. Why should we care about this little bird?" said Philomena Williams, current chair of the conservation area committee overseeing Takitumu. "Then we realized we might be able to make some money and save the bird, too."

It's unusual for three families to collaborate like this in Rarotonga. "Normally, when it concerns land, we never come together here," said Tom Daniels, member of the conservation area committee. "The chiefs cling to the land; but to preserve this little bird, we agreed to agree. It's a milestone."

Family members occasionally complain that they aren't being kept informed. "I objected to the conservation area right from the start," said Elizabeth Wind, 72. "Just leave the bird over there for the Lord to take care of. Furthermore, I don't know where the money goes." These kinds of complaints usually brew for a while until the family calls its conservation area representatives to account in a family meeting. Ian, the support officer, attends these meetings, too, because he has ancestors from all three families, and people listen to him.

local involvement and benefits lead to self reliance

Like most people on Rarotonga, the Kainuku, Karika, and Manavaroa gave up subsistence farming more than half a century ago. Conservation area committee members are no exception: Ben is a planter, Tangi sells cars and appliances, Papa Kapu

Papa Kapu Joseph (left) and Tom Daniels greet Ben Tamariki at a quarterly meeting of the conservation area committee, composed of representatives from the three clans that own and manage Takitumu Conservation Area.



and Tom are retired, and Philomena is a government receptionist. Ian works half-time for the conservation area and half-time in construction.

"We are the support officer's boss, but he does all the work," joked committee member Tom Daniels. The support officer is in charge of fundraising and day-to-day management, but the committee makes all conservation area decisions. At a recent quarterly meeting, committee members discussed conservation area earnings and expenses and the financial reports showed that profits from Takitumu's nature walk business had doubled.

"I've developed a sense of pride," said Papa Kapu Joseph, 79, committee elder. "Even though the big funding has run out, this bird has become an attraction for tourists, and we are getting some income and a substantial amount of attention."

expanding habitat and reclaiming history

The most important task in the conservation area is saving the bird. To do this, staff and volunteers band new birds and conduct a bird census every August. Then, while the birds breed

September through December, project staff stock rat baiting stations on a weekly basis along trails that snake through the conservation area.

Because the growing bird population is fragile – one severe cyclone could take out the entire species – the conservation area committee decided to start a relocation programme. “The first time I brought the relocation idea to the committee, it got shot down in flames,” said Ian. “Initially, even I hesitated to relocate the birds, because having a second site would make our birds less rare. Kakerori is making Takitumu famous. In the end, though, we decided to do what’s best for the bird.”

Last year, the clans moved 10 birds to Atiu, a small island of less than 1,000 people located 200 kilometers northeast of Rarotonga. At least four have survived, and 10 more birds will make the journey this year. “I went to Atiu Island with the first group of birds,” said Margaret Karika. “After landing at the airport, we went with the chief and a group of landowners to an inland lake. We said a prayer, and we set the birds free.”

“We believe that our ancestors brought the bird to Rarotonga from the Marquesas around the 10th century,” said Tangaroa Teamaru, official keeper of the Kainuku family’s genealogy. “By spreading the birds out, we know the birds will live. If something goes wrong here, we can go over to Atiu and bring some of them back.”

The other main activity in the conservation area is a well-run nature walk and bird-watching venture. Rarotonga is an ideal place to start an ecotourism operation, because the island is already a popular tourist destination, and locals are skilled business people. Tested in 1997, the nature tours got into full swing in 1998. Although the business can’t pay all the bills, income from the nature walks and souvenir shop is helping Takitumu stay afloat. Committee members have just decided to add an “adopt-a-nest” program to raise additional funds, and they’ve given the support officer and Mataiti Mataiti, the conservation area tour guide, the go-ahead to design a self-guided tour in response to market demand.

a challenge and a compromise

The committee and conservation area staff have had their share of tense moments. One donor requirement in particular created friction. Committee members strongly objected to the idea

of working on the project for free. “In Rarotonga, people get paid a sitting fee for committee work,” said Ian. “In a cash-based economy, it’s unreasonable to expect people to take on so much responsibility for free. They are making decisions on behalf of their entire extended families, and if they make a decision that people don’t agree with, they can get in a lot of trouble.”

“Here we were with this big yearly budget, and committee members were putting in a lot of time trying to figure out how to manage this project, and getting no compensation for it,” said Anna Tiraa, the conservation area support officer from 1996 to 1999. “Of course they got miffed.”

Committee members almost mutinied, but Ian and Anna managed to get approval to give them the money that was budgeted for meeting refreshments and travel allowances in lieu of a sitting fee. Conservation area committee members now get a small fee for each meeting they attend.

the conservation area produces results

The conservation area project changed Ian Karika-Wilmott’s life. “I’m in construction, and I had always viewed environmentalists as a nuisance to development,” he said. “It’s ironic, because I’ve ended up being one myself.” At Trader Jack’s, a popular Friday night watering hole for tourists and locals alike, Ian’s construction buddies tease him about being a “tree hugger” over a raucous round of mixed drinks, and he laughs along with the joke.

“Before, the government did all environment work,” said Anna. “Now, for the first time, we have enthusiastic and educated people out there working for the environment who are coming up outside of government channels. They are part of a new breed of environmental warriors. When citizens see these regular guys on television, guys like themselves, they take notice.”

Anna, the project’s first support officer, is herself an environmental consultant and has worked on a number of regional environment programmes. She also serves as president of Taporoporoanga Ipukarea Society, a local environmental organization.

Takitumu Conservation Area’s success has prompted active interest from other places in the Cook Islands. Residents of both Mangaia and Mitiaro Islands have visited Takitumu to get

Margaret Karika, high chief of the Karika clan, leaves Cook Islands Christian Church after Sunday service. “Before the missionaries, no women could hold titles,” said Tupe Short, a member of the Kainuku family. “The missionaries said, if the head of England can be a woman, then a woman can be high chief of a family here in Rarotonga.”



ideas for protecting their own endemic species, and the Cook Islands Tourism Department frequently uses Takitumu's nature walk and bird-watching business as a case study in its ecotourism workshops.

looking ahead

Despite cutbacks since SPBCP ended, new funding is trickling in. The Environment Service awarded the project NZ\$25,000 from the country's innovative Environmental Protection Fund. Accumulated each year from a portion of visitors' departure tax, this fund supports environmental projects in the Cook Islands. More recently, the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency's Pacific Initiatives for the Environment has committed to funding some project staff salaries for the next three years.

In the office, the support officer is busy completing the paperwork to establish both a non-government organization (NGO) and a trust for Takitumu Conservation Area. "Part of the reason we want to form a trust is it gives individual donors confidence that we're not gonna just stuff the money in our pockets," said Ian. NGO status will also make the conservation area eligible for direct grants from international foundations.

In the field, Takitumu's size is becoming a limitation as the kakerori population reaches saturation point. "We have a healthy growing bird population," said Ian. "The birds have started to migrate out, only to get nailed by ship rats once they get out of the rat bait area." Kakerori is only halfway to the 500 birds required to sustain the species, so Ian is asking all three families to give more land to expand the conservation area.

"The real success will be measured if we can keep the conservation area going without SPBCP," he said. "The bottom line is that we keep up the rat baiting and keep the birds alive and multiplying. One thing's for sure, I'm in it for the long haul."

School children listen to a talk about kakerori, the day before their field trip to see the bird at Takitumu. Ever the strategist, the support officer is already looking for conservation area leaders in the next generation.

