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LAU

SEASCAPE

NEWSLETTER

CI Fiji's Community Connection

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INTERNATIONAL
Fiji





BULA VINAKA

As we edge closer to the close of the year, it is with a profound sense of gratitude that I reflect on the support and collective efforts that have propelled us forward. It's heartening to see the unity and commitment that resonate through our actions and the milestones we have achieved together. This includes the ongoing work and progress in the Land Use Mapping and Marine Spatial Verification project, a key part of the Lau Seascape Initiative, which is crucial for sustainable resource management and environmental protection. Additionally, the valuable insights and collaboration from the Lauan Diaspora will be instrumental in our biodiversity conservation efforts.

The pivotal discovery of the largest known roost for the endangered Pacific Sheath-tailed bat on Vanua Balavu shines as a symbol of hope. It's a nod to the dedication to environmental conservation that thrives within our communities and extends its influence beyond our Pacific shores. The local guardianship of our cherished ecosystem has been instrumental in this accomplishment.

The Lau community's initiative in hosting the inaugural Lau Yaubula Festival has strengthened the ties that bind us. This celebration of our unique cultural and environmental heritage is a tribute to the vigor and collective spirit of our people. The success of this event has eloquently showcased our communal resilience and passion.

Our workstream in conducting the Environmental DNA (eDNA) research have been significantly enhanced by the Lau community's energetic participation. The leadership and commitment demonstrated in gathering crucial data will significantly contribute to broadening our understanding of Lau's Seascape's diverse life.

With the Lau Seascape Symposium and the iYaubula Reps Workshop on the horizon for December 2023, the prospects of what we can achieve together are boundless and bright.

In extending my heartfelt thanks, I must also acknowledge the invaluable partnerships and the support from the Fiji government that have been pivotal to our endeavors. Hand in hand, we are curating a path toward sustainability and environmental conservation that honors our heritage and secures a vibrant future.

Thank you once more for the steadfast dedication. May the year ahead amplify our successes and bring prosperity and joy to all our communities and their families. Here's to a holiday season filled with happiness and a new year brimming with promise.

Mere Lakeba
Senior Director Fiji Program and Regional Fisheries





LARGEST KNOWN PACIFIC BAT ROOST FOUND IN LAU

A significant discovery on Vanua Balavu island in Fiji has sparked new optimism for the endangered Pacific Sheath-tailed bat. In April 2023, a team led by Conservation International, in collaboration with the Australian Museum and the University of Adelaide, identified the largest known roost of the species, with an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 bats.

Chief Scientist Professor Kristofer Helgen, who spearheaded the bat-centric part of the mission described the discovery as the most substantial population and roost of these bats in the region to date. This finding suggests a more widespread distribution and larger population than previously recognized.

The species, critical for ecological balance due to their role as pest managers and biodiversity indicators, faced a concerning decline in Fiji, with numbers dropping to just a few hundred from approximately 2,000 in the span of a year. The new roost, along with additional smaller caves identified as bat habitats on Vanua Balavu, emphasizes the island's strategic significance in the species' conservation.

Mere Lakeba of Conservation International in Fiji highlighted the discovery's importance in shaping local conservation efforts, strengthening the necessity for ongoing exploration and research.

With the Pacific Sheath-tailed bat listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and a priority for Bat Conservation International, this discovery shifts conservation priorities and shines a light on the bats' vital role in the environment.

Read more here:
Visit: <https://bit.ly/47URyZf>



LAU YAUBULA FESTIVAL STRENGTHENS COMMITMENT TO CULTURE AND CONSERVATION

On June 29, 2023, the Lau Yaubula Festival was held at the National Gymnasium in Suva, showcasing the Lau community's dedication to safeguarding their rich cultural heritage and natural resources.

The festival, which was a celebration of Lau's natural resources, demonstrated an innovative blend of culture, heritage, community, and conservation in the Lau Seascape. The festival aimed to solidify the commitment of the Lau Seascape Strategy to preserve not just the ecological richness, but also the vibrant cultural heritage of the island.



Excellency President Ratu Wiliame Katonivere shared a critical sentiment.

I was presented the opportunity to peruse your Lau Seascape Strategy 2018-2030, and was deeply concerned with the threatened [red] status of one of the 10 strategic targets - Cultural Integrity.

Today's milestone event is one step towards moving the needle from red to green.

The preservation of Cultural Integrity will restore the critical social-cultural elements that are of significant value to guide conservation and sustainable development in Lau.

The event, organized by the Lau Provincial Office, Matabose ni veika-vakavanua, and Conservation International, received commendation from President Ratu Wiliame Katonivere for its initiative to protect cultural integrity, in line with the Lau Seascape Strategy.

Mere Lakeba from Conservation International highlighted the festival's alignment with sustainable practices and the critical role of the land and ocean in the livelihood of Lau's people. The festival provided a stage for the 13 Tikinas of Lau to exhibit cultural practices and local handicrafts, reinforcing their commitment to environmental and cultural preservation.

The event also served as an invitation to Lau's diaspora to reconnect with their heritage, emphasizing the community's resolve to uphold tradition while addressing modern challenges.

LAU SEASCAPE'S BIODIVERSITY TO BE MAPPED WITH SUPPLEMENTARY EDNA TOOL

Conservation International is currently conducting Environmental DNA (eDNA) study to deepen the understanding of biodiversity in Fiji's Lau Seascape. EDNA refers to all the tiny traces of genetic material that is left behind as living things pass through water or soil.



The study aims to enrich and broaden CI's past traditional biodiversity assessments in the Seascape by cataloguing a vast array of marine species and provide valuable insights into the marine ecosystem's health and diversity, establishing a strong data set of species present in the Lau province.

Community involvement is at the core of this study, as local residents are actively participating in collecting data, fostering a collaborative approach to updating the biodiversity inventory in the region. Community members have also been trained by experts in careful collection and documentation of the EDNA samples.

The EDNA study is a supplementary tool to CI's previous traditional biodiversity assessments.

The eDNA study, in particular, is anticipated to guide future efforts to preserve the rich marine life and support the resilience of local ecosystems, benefiting both nature and the community.



SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT MAPPING IN VANUA BALAVU

Under the Lau Seascape Initiative, our team has been doing Mapping and Marine Spatial work in the districts of Lomaloma and Mualevu in Vanua Balavu in Lau. The field work took place from August 31st to September 15th. It is a step forward in sustainable development and resource management for the region.

The project, a collaborative effort involving two government ministries, three non-government organizations, and five volunteers, was aimed at creating a comprehensive land use map for the two districts. This map is intended to guide future land management and development decisions in accordance with Vanua Balavu's governance policies.

Emphasizing inclusivity, the project team conducted consultations with a diverse group of 71 individuals across the targeted districts, ensuring a balanced representation of both women and men. This approach highlights the community's commitment to gender inclusivity and stakeholder engagement in environmental initiatives.

The findings from the land capability assessment revealed that farming is the primary livelihood for 50% of Vanua Balavu's population, with remittances and fishing also playing significant roles. Most farming is subsistence-based, with occasional trading of produce such as root crops and seafood with relatives in Vitilevu.

However, the assessment also highlighted sustainability challenges. Despite abundant land, food security remains a major concern. Traditional farming practices like burning and shifting cultivation, especially on steep slopes, pose risks of erosion and highlight the need for more sustainable practices and enhanced farming skills.

This initiative marks a pivotal moment for the Lau community, demonstrating a collective commitment to responsible land and marine resource management. The involvement of various government and non-government entities, along with the active participation of local residents, positions the Lau Seascape Initiative as a key driver for sustainable environmental stewardship in the region.



UNITING LAUAN DIASPORA FOR LAU BIODIVERSITY PRESERVATION

Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and Conservation International Lead Urban Consultations with Lauan Diaspora for Biodiversity Conservation

The Ministry of iTaukei Affairs, in partnership with Conservation International initiated a series of urban consultations with the Lauan Diaspora across Fiji between November and December 2023. The initiative, focusing on the Lau Seascape's rich biodiversity, aligns with the nation's commitment to the '30 x 30' conservation goal.

The consultations, held in the Northern Division, the Western Division, and Suva, have brought together members of the Lauan Diaspora. This engagement is pivotal in integrating the unique perspectives and deep-rooted knowledge of the Lauan community into the conservation strategies. The Diaspora's connection to the Lau region is invaluable, providing essential insights that blend traditional practices with modern conservation methods.

This ensures not only the preservation of the Lau Seascape's biodiversity but also respects and incorporates cultural heritage. By reaching out to the Lauan Diaspora in these urban areas, the Ministry and Conservation International are adopting a comprehensive approach. This strategy recognizes the importance of diverse viewpoints and expertise, particularly from those who maintain a strong cultural and emotional connection to the Lau region. The consultations highlight the significance of involving diaspora communities in environmental conservation, acknowledging their potential to contribute meaningfully to sustainable and culturally resonant stewardship of natural resources.

This collaboration sets a precedent in community-driven conservation efforts, emphasizing the role of diaspora communities in safeguarding their natural heritage. As this initiative progresses, it serves as a model for engaging diaspora groups in global environmental challenges, marking a significant step towards a sustainable and biodiverse future.



UPCOMING EVENTS

Lau Seascape Talanoa ni Yaubula Symposium

Monday December 11th
Grand Pacific Hotel

The Bose Vanua o Lau - annual meeting

Thursday 7th December. This is the Annual
Meeting of the 13 Chiefs of Lau

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[conservation.org/projects/the-lau-seascape](https://www.conservation.org/projects/the-lau-seascape)