News from the Australasian Section of the Society of Conservation Biology

NICOLA NELSON

SCB-A regional Conference

KEEP an eye out for information on the 1st SCB-A Regional Conference 10-13 July 2007. We will hold a four day conference, including three days of meetings, with a one day break in the middle for field trips.

New members to the SCB-A Board:

Welcome to two new ex-officio members of the SCB-A board:

Wendy Jackson is a doctoral student in the Environment, Society and Design Division of Lincoln University in New Zealand; Sarina Loo is currently in the fourth year of her Ph.D. at Monash University in Melbourne. Wendy and Sarina will be sharing the role of the Student Affairs Committee chair.

Conference Announcement:


The interdependence of biological and cultural diversity are best demonstrated among the communities from the island of New Guinea. Natural systems cannot be understood, conserved and managed, without recognizing the human cultures that shape them. Together, cultural diversity and biological diversity hold the key to ensuring resilience and sustainability in both social and ecological systems. This interdependence is the theme of the 2006 New Guinea Biology Conference. The main theme is explored through the following sub-themes: Methodologies; Knowledge-base (Botany, Zoology, Ecology etc); Resource management strategies; Threats; Case Studies. Deadline for abstracts (250 words): 30th May 2006. Abstracts can be submitted to Jane Mogina (moginaj@ upng.ac.pg) or Rose Singadan (singadanz@upng.ac.pg).

Compiled by Nicky Nelson

Bula Column — BirdLife Pacific Partnership

I was recently promoting an idea of a book on endangered birds of the Pacific. A 900 page book documenting all globally threatened birds has been produced by BirdLife International, entitled The Threatened Birds of the World. My argument for a regional book being that the information on the Pacific’s threatened species is less accessible in this large volume, than in a regional book. I illustrated my point, by randomly opening pages, as I turned each page I realized an endangered Pacific species was described. Now, I do not think this weakens my argument for the advocacy and educational value of a regional book of threatened birds, but it does illustrate that the Pacific has a disproportionately large number of birds at risk of extinction.

In fact, the Pacific region has the highest extinction rate of birds in the world, the region is home to 289 species of globally threatened birds — 24% of the world’s total. 37 (14%) of these are Critically Endangered which gives the region the dubious distinction of recording the most extinctions of any region of the world. A large number of species are believed to have become extinct within the last few decades, for example Hawaii has nine species that are believed to have become extinct since 1960.

The main causes being the impacts of invasive alien species and habitat predators, rats, black rat in particular, feral cats and mongoose have the most severe and dramatic impact on island birds, and invasive species that contribute to habitat modification, such as herbivores and plants. In addition, but whole new cadres of alien species are appearing with the potential to contribute to bird extinction, including ants and disease vectors such as mosquitoes. It appears that in many cases the establishment and spread of IAS is facilitated or enhanced by habitat disturbance. It may well be the case that a bird species can prevail with one anthropogenic pressure, but the combined impacts of sub-optimal habitat with increased nest predation may result in rapid extirpation or extinction.

The BirdLife International Pacific Partnership is committed to halting bird extinctions in the Pacific region and reversing declines in biodiversity through the implementation of the BirdLife Pacific Strategy. Specific targets include the identification of sites of global significance for birds in the region. The development of a strong and effective partnership capable of competent advocacy with the capacity to implement grassroots, community-based conservation measures on these sites is critical for success. This includes working directly with Pacific Partnership of NGOs to build their capacities through technical training, project development, institutional support, guidance, networking with other NGOs through project development and helping Partner NGOs to secure funds for biodiversity conservation in the Pacific region, together with the development of fledging conservation NGOs.

The Pacific Partnership came in to existence with the first Partnership meeting held in New Zealand in 2001, and currently consists of eight partners: Birds Australia, Taporoonga Ipuakera Society, TIS (the Cook Islands), Dick Watling (Fiji), Société d’Ornithologie de Polynésie — MANU (French Polynesia), Société Calédonienne d’Ornithologie (New Caledonia), Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society (New Zealand),
Palau Conservation Society (Palau), Le S’iôsi’omaga Society (Samoa). In addition a small team of secretariat staff are located in Fiji, two are dedicated to the Fiji Country Programme and three to supporting the partnership.

Important Bird Area (IBAs) identification is a key prioritization process that informs effective avian conservation, strengthens advocacy and funding applications. IBAs are areas of international importance to birds based on proportions of endemic or restricted range species, or large aggregations of waterbirds, they are sites of sufficient size to support viable populations of target species, but small enough to act as discrete manageable units. IBA identification in the region was initiated in 2002, under a Darwin funded programme in Fiji and completed in 2005. Field based research to inform the identification and prioritization process was subsequently initiated in French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Palau, supported by and EC project. This project will also use desk based methods to identify IBAs in other Pacific island states where field work is not an option at this stage. Birds Australia initiated an IBA identification process in 2006.

The IBA process has produced a wealth of new information to inform conservation policy and action, but has also confirmed the regional data deficiencies. One "lost" species was rediscovered during the life time of the project, and new populations of numerous species located by field teams. In each country where work has been progressed, the field work is resulting in a large number of threat level changes, sadly, for many the move is to a higher risk category. Moreover, data on the ecological requirements and factors influencing population change are less well understood. Additionally, the IBA process has delivered stronger institutions, project teams armed with greater skill, knowledge and enthusiasm, it has raised awareness amongst communities and has been accepted as a credible and scientifically robust indicator for biodiversity site prioritization.

This is a strong platform, the challenge now is to turn inventory to action, and we need to do it fast and on multiple fronts, conservation action, research, education and capacity building. Projects and programmes are already being rolled out. In Fiji a community based project funded by the Australian Regional Natural Heritage Programme (RNHP) to work on four IBAs to produce management plans for protected areas, or to develop protected area status for undesignated sites, and site based community work is also being rolled out in Palau and French Polynesia, whilst New Caledonia has several initiatives supported by provincial governments. One exciting regional project has recently been confirmed, the British Birdwatching Fair fund in 2006 will support several regional partners on a project to conserve the regions small parrots. Aside from the clear conservation benefits, this also represents an unrivalled opportunity to raise regional and international awareness.

Can this so called biodiversity crisis, be turned around on Pacific islands, the task for birds alone is daunting, let alone other taxa. However, there is cause for optimism, from within the region, there have been several notable examples of almost certain extinction being prevented, notably the Rarotonga monarch in the Cook islands and New Zealand has made significant advances in endangered species recovery and alien species management. There are also positive case studies from SIDS from other oceans, in Mauritius bird extinction has been stemmed by the implementation of conservation intervention and in the Seychelles the combined efforts of civil society and governmental action has recently resulted in the threat status four endangered birds to be reduced. However, these island nations provide valuable lessons, advocating the benefits of capacity development, long running educational programmes, effective partnerships between civil society, governmental and private bodies, and given that conservation intervention was initiated in the 60s and 70s, that there are no magic bullets in the realization of zero bird extinction.

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