

## BOOK REVIEW

### Mai Veikau: A Call for Action, Not Wonder: A book review

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The 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *Mai Veikau: Tales of Fijian Wildlife*, by Dick Watling, is a must read for anyone interested in “island life”. It is a well-researched, well-written and very serious, yet humorous collection of essays on the imperiled and neglected status of our rich natural heritage. Dick’s acute sense of detail and wonderful turn of phrase bring us face to face with and “humanize” the denizens of our forests, rivers, seas and air! When I read the first edition over 20 years ago, it was one of the most exciting and educational books I had ever read! Today, as I read the new edition, I realize I had not fully appreciated the deep insights it provides into the richness and fragility of our island plants and animals. *Mai Veikau* reconnects us with “real island life”, something that so many of us need, as we become increasingly obsessed with cell phones, video games, TV, virtual reality, sports and urban lifestyles.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition of *Mai Veikau*, Dick Watling shares with us his close observations and intimate meetings with many of Fiji’s most incredible animals and plants and the most up-to-date information derived from sophisticated DNA analyses, paleontology, archeology and biogeography to piece together the natural histories of these organisms, e.g., the recent iguana fossil finds in Asia that predate all South American iguana fossils and may shed new light on the origins of our endemic iguanas (*vokai*); the recent mass extinctions of our insectivorous cave bat populations; and the emergence of NatureFiji-MareqetiViti. These are liberally mixed with traditional Fijian perspectives gained from free-flowing stories over the ubiquitous *yaqona* (kava) bowl, the medium through which oral histories are preserved and embellished. The result is a rich collection of stories on the origins, roles, behavior, ways of life and conservation status of and beliefs associated with many of our most charismatic animals and plants.

Most are animals or plants we have seen or heard of, and, in some cases, had too-close encounters with, but know very little about them . . . and, perhaps most importantly, what we can do to ensure their survival. Although, I’m sure he doesn’t expect you to commit them to memory, Dick gives us the correct scientific (Latin) and local Fijian names, for his subjects, something that any budding naturalist need to learn, if he/she wants to probe, as *Mai Veikau* does, the intimate links between the *kai veikau* (the people of the forest) and their living world.

As stressed in the opening chapter, although Fiji’s unique (endemic) and culturally important plants and animals have been under threat since the first settlement of Fiji by indigenous voyagers over 3000 years ago, they are under far, far greater threat today due to merciless and near-sighted overexploitation, deforestation, pollution, introduction of alien plants, animals and diseases, AND ignorance or neglect. *Mai Veikau* provides a clear message “from the forest”, the richest, but most threatened habitat we have on Earth: **if we don’t protect forests, there will be neither forests nor the animals and plants they harbor for future generations!!** Watling notes that most of the current generation, who have grown up on deforested and infested islands, really have no idea of what a “natural” forest or a natural Fiji look like; and that: “It is distressing to see our youth arriving at the universities, with most of them virtually ignorant of their natural heritage.”

He highlights prejudices, superstitions, myths and misinformation that have been perpetuated, both good and bad, about many animals, such as insects, snakes, geckos, owls, bats, that creates aversion, when in fact most are extremely beneficial and constitute intimate threads in fabric of sustainable island life. It is stressed that, in the past, most animals, plants, forests and other geographical features had names, were respected, well-known and many recognized as Fijian ancestral totems (*icavuti*), kindred souls, deities, or scared places, something that is still strong in many parts of Fiji.

There is much humour in the stories and many of the characters are given personalities that highlight favorable traits, such as monogamy, fidelity and curiosity. Whether it’s *balolo* sea worms, frogs, toads, wood swallows, mynahs, cicadas, mud-dauber wasps, hornets, sea turtles, iguanas or sago palms, courtship and reproductive strategies are paid particular attention . . . for the wood swallows he says promiscuity is just “good clean fun”, while for others it’s the most vulnerable phase of their lives. He points out that the mass nesting or spawning behavior of many species, such as turtles, sea birds, cicadas and sea worms, makes them particularly vulnerable to overexploitation, something that didn’t occur to the degree it does today, before the commercialization of many species and the degradation of important habitats, something that is spiraling out of control with increasing wealth and insatiable commercial demand, particularly from Asia, for island products

and resources. The reproduction of the monocarpic Fiji sago palm, a primitive reproductive strategy that happens only once in the palm's 25-year lifetime; the 8-year reproductive cycle of the Fiji cicada (*nanai*); and the long seasonal migrations of our sea turtles and migratory sea birds are stark examples of the complexity of long-evolved reproductive strategies.

Particularly interesting are the accounts of the incredible seasonal migratory flights from the Arctic tundra of the Pacific golden plover (*dilio*) (the "Russian connection") and other migratory wading birds that we marvel at as they comb the tidal flats for food, and the associated Fijian proverb about the search for the *dilio*'s egg; bats (*beka*) as the most successful mammalian colonizers of islands, their threatened status, their role as dispersal agents of a wide range of important trees and their pension for urinating on their wings as they hang upside down, as an alternative to sweating to cool themselves on hot tropical days; and, the irony of the introduction of mongooses to kill rats, after which they very rapidly eliminated, from the sugarcane fields, all the snakes, which fed almost exclusively on the rats and mice that reportedly destroyed 5% of the sugarcane, as well as devastating birds, reptiles and amphibians, crabs, land snails and beneficial insects.

Conservation is at the core and there are some clear messages:

- The importance of preserving as much intact natural forest as possible as the almost exclusive habitat of our unique endemic species.
- The extreme vulnerability of island animals and plants because they have evolved in isolation.
- The interconnectedness of island, freshwater and ocean environments and the complexity and vulnerability of the life cycles, breeding sites and migration routes of many of our animals.
- The serious threats posed by invasive alien species (living pollution), such as mongooses, rats, feral cats, goats, insects and diseases, to our wildlife, crops, food security and human health.
- The importance, as threatened species slip from the radar screen, of action-oriented modern conservations.

*Mai Veikau*, is not just talk. Dick Watling is no ivory tower academic and is well known for commenting that he retired from academia immediately after receiving his Ph.D. from Cambridge University. He is an active, hands-on, in-the-environment practitioner, and a natural historian who draws his inspiration from a lifetime of work in Fiji. He is notably absent from the cocktail circuit and bemoans the preeminence of workshops and plans over action. His response has been to catalyse the establishment of NatureFiji-MareqetiViti (NF-MV), a domestic conservation organization prioritizing national and, for the most part, little or unrecognized needs.

Appropriately, Dick Watling pays tribute to many of his mentors and sources of information, including, Fergus Clunie, Dick Phillips, Saula Vodonaivalu, Harold E. Moore, A. C. Smith, Ratu Filipe Lewanavanau, Marika Tuiwawa and many others, not forgetting the Bouma National Heritage Park community of Taveuni that manages Fiji's first and most successful forest park.

To me, *Mai Veikau* is an incredibly well-woven fine mat (*ibe*), the Fijian equivalent of a tapestry, replete with the finest parrot feathers, some from birds that are extinct or in threat of extinction, something that is sacred to all of us in the islands, with strands and colors that tie all of our islands and cultures together with feathers and adornment from as far away as Solomon Islands, Pohnpei and the distant islands of Hawai'i, French Polynesia and the Line Islands of Kiribati. It makes us aware of the connections, richness, imperiled status and the need to become more aware of and to protect our island species. Many of these have been lost forever, with many others likely to follow suit, if we don't re-embrace them, re-respect them and re-nurture them back to the centre of our island lives. To do so, just like good friends, we must know their names, faces, origins, stories, life histories and requirements for health and happiness. This is what NatureFiji-MareqetiViti is dedicated to and to which Dick Watling has dedicated most of his life and all of the proceeds from this wonderful new edition of *Mai Veikau*.

My only suggestion is that, given the advances in digital technology, the inclusion of selected digital photographs to supplement the wonderful drawings by the late Ian Rolls would add considerably to our understanding and appreciation of our rich island life. Fortunately, Nature-Fiji-MareqetiViti has produced a DVD on Fiji's endangered species that has been distributed to schools and is accessible on its website ([www.naturefiji.org](http://www.naturefiji.org)).

Again, *Mai Veikau: Tales of Fijian Wildlife* is a wonderful, educational and entertaining read, required reading for anyone who cares about the *vanua* (our land), its richest component, the *veikau* (our forests), and the many plants and animals that live there. I very strongly recommend it, to you and, if you are not satisfied and gratified, I will, personally refund your money, as well as giving an additional cost of the book to NatureFiji-MareqetiViti. As Dick Watling says, the conservation of Fiji's unique plants and animals "is nobody else's responsibility but ours"!!

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