

Papua New Guinea declares first national conservation area

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The southeast Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea, home to some of the most biologically diverse ecosystems on Earth, has created its first national conservation area to preserve forever a swath of pristine tropical forest larger than Singapore.

The decision by the Papua New Guinea (PNG) government, in concert with local communities neighboring the newly established YUS Conservation Area, results from more than a decade of work with conservation biologists from Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle and Arlington, Va.-based Conservation International (CI).

Named for its three main rivers - the Yopno, Uruwa and Som of the Huon Peninsula - the YUS Conservation Area covers 187,800 acres (76,000 hectares or 760 square kilometers) of tropical forest stretching from PNG's northern coast to interior mountains.

A hallmark of modern conservation, the new protected area offers multiple benefits for both wildlife and people. The tropical forest stores huge amounts of carbon, so protecting it prevents the release of harmful greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. The lush forest ecosystem teems with life and provides countless resources and services that sustain the 10,000 villagers living in the surrounding YUS ecosystem. In addition, the forest is critical habitat for Matschie's tree kangaroos, a species listed as Endangered by the IUCN and one of Earth's more unique creatures with a bear-like head, bushy tail and marsupial's pouch.

"By creating the country's first national conservation area, the PNG government and people have established a much-needed safe zone for the irreplaceable biodiversity it contains," said Dr. Lisa Dabek, field conservation director at Woodland Park Zoo and director of the zoo's Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program. "Just as important, the protected area will contribute to long-term efforts to address the climate change threat by preserving critical forest habitat."

Woodland Park Zoo's Tree Kangaroo Conservation Program (TKCP), with support from CI and National Geographic, has worked with PNG landowners and the PNG government for more than 12 years to establish the YUS Conservation Area, which is the first to be declared under the PNG Conservation Areas Act of 1978. The new protected area also represents the first time the more than 35 indigenous villages of the region have come together in joint action to protect their forest homeland and the wildlife and ecosystems so vital to their culture and sustenance.

While the land remains under local ownership, villagers have formally committed to prohibit all hunting and development such as logging and mining within the conservation area. Previous declarations of wildlife management areas in PNG have been less restrictive, allowing logging, mining and other destructive activities. Protecting the tropical forests of the YUS Conservation Area will prevent the estimated 13 million tons of carbon stored in the forest biomass from being released into the atmosphere as carbon dioxide.

"This new conservation area shows how much good can be accomplished when governments and people work together," said CI President Russell A. Mittermeier, who visited the area last year. "Congratulations to Papua New Guinea and the communities of the YUS region for protecting such essential ecosystems and all the benefits they provide. Hopefully, other tropical forest nations will follow this example of simultaneously

combating climate change and conserving the ecosystems on which people depend, and the international community will embrace a climate change treaty that compensates the carbon sequestration value of such protected forests."

Conserving PNG's biodiversity is complex, due to the country's unique social and geo-political circumstances. PNG has a land tenure system whereby nearly all the rural land is owned by clans and local landowners. Under Dabek's leadership, TKCP has gained the acceptance and respect of landowners, who have set aside portions of their land as a pledge to conservation. Today, the YUS Conservation Area consists of land pledged by more than 35 villages, forming a continuous stretch from coastal reefs to the 4,000-meter (13,000-foot) peaks of the western Saruwaged Mountains.

In exchange for this commitment to conservation, TKCP works with community leaders to increase access to education and improve community health within the villages. TKCP also will assist in formalizing a local community-based organization, which will be responsible for managing the YUS Conservation Area as well as the community livelihood projects in the villages of the surrounding YUS ecosystem.

Preservation of Matschie's tree kangaroos first brought Dabek to the remote Huon Peninsula more than a decade ago. Today she is recognized as a world leader in tree kangaroo conservation. With support from National Geographic and Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) institutions, Dabek and TKCP have conducted long-term research on tree kangaroo ecology and mapped the area with YUS landowners to identify critical habitat areas for preservation.

"Creating this conservation area is a step forward for both Papua New Guinea and conservation worldwide," Dabek said. "What we have

accomplished here is more than just an act of environmental preservation - it's a sustainable model for community-based conservation that works."

Partners in the years of effort that culminated in creation of the YUS Conservation Area include the local communities, TKCP and its international staff, Woodland Park Zoo, CI, the Morobe Provincial government, PNG National Executive Council, and PNG Department of Environment and Conservation. TKCP and CI will continue to work with the PNG government and local communities to seek creation of additional conservation areas in the country, using the YUS area as a model.

The German government, committed to helping new protected areas around the globe through its LifeWeb Initiative, has provided a grant to CI and Woodland Park Zoo to support the YUS Conservation Area, PNG community development projects, and climate change research on species along the altitudinal gradient of the conservation area.

CI's Global Conservation Fund (GCF), which has provided more than \$1 million since 2002 to support TKCP's work with communities and landholders, now has pledged a grant of \$1 million more to be matched by Woodland Park Zoo to help establish a Conservation Trust that will provide long-term financing for the YUS Conservation Area.

A celebration of the YUS Conservation Area planned for April in the Teptep village will involve all the participating communities, along with PNG government officials and representatives of Woodland Park Zoo and CI.

"The conservation area will help the people of YUS better manage their natural resources," said Karau Kuna, Jr., a PNG national and GIS Mapping Coordinator for TKCP. "The YUS Conservation Area is part

of PNG's contribution to the worldwide community in the fight against global warming and other environmental issues we are all facing."

Source: Conservation International

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