Effort to preserve lory population shows success

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A long-term plan to preserve the Rimatara lorikeet by restoring an extirpated population of the species on a neighboring island that is free of predatory ship rats is demonstrating the importance of this kind of protective program for the sustainability of endangered bird species. A case study published in the *International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) report Global Reintroduction Perspectives: 2018—Case Studies from Around the Globe* sums up the results of an effort that began in 2000.

"The important thing about any conservation program is the ability to demonstrate that a species can be saved over the long term," said Alan Lieberman, retired director of field conservation programs for the Institute for Conservation Research, San Diego Zoo Global. "It is easy to get excited during the initial steps, but you don't know if you have succeeded until a decade or so later. In this case, we started with 27 birds captured on Rimatara and then translocated to Atiu Island, and we now have a population of well over 300."

The Rimatara lorikeet is considered to be an endangered species by BirdLife International and IUCN. Although originally distributed over the Cook and French Polynesia islands, its numbers were severely reduced and it disappeared in prehistoric times from most islands due to hunting for its bright red feathers.

Blue and ultramarine lories have been extirpated, as ship rats have invaded more islands in French Polynesia. The last natural population of

the Rimatara lorikeet could easily be destroyed if ship rats invaded Rimatara, via cargo or a shipwreck. Nearby Atiu had similar habitats to Rimatara and was still free of ship rats, so it was an obvious choice for the establishment of a reserve population.

The complex negotiations required for a transboundary reintroduction were undertaken over several years by the Cook Islands Natural Heritage Trust and the Ornithological Society of French Polynesia (MANU). An important part of the effort to create a backup population on the island of Atiu was a veterinary survey of the birds selected for introduction onto the new island.

"Any time you are catching a wild animal, you create some level of stress that can complicate any existing health issues an animal may have," said Bruce Rideout, DVM, Ph.D., wildlife disease specialist for San Diego Zoo Global. "To ensure the newly translocated population had the best chance for survival, we gave each bird a comprehensive health check, working to ensure that the population would be free of diseases and other medical challenges."

The project, which also included educational outreach to residents of both Atiu and Rimatara, hopes to build understanding and respect for the species and gives conservationists a road map for similar programs in the future. The paper details the actions that the authors believe were particularly valuable in establishing a successful reserve population. Included in this list was dedicated funding (provided by BirdLife International, Air Rarotonga, San Diego Zoo Global and the governments of French Polynesia and the Cook Islands, as well as private donations), a diverse and experienced field team and the support of the Atiu community in taking steps to help protect this species on their island.

Bringing species back from the brink of extinction is the goal of San

Diego Zoo Global. As a leader in conservation, the work of San Diego Zoo Global includes on-site wildlife conservation efforts (representing both plants and animals) at the San Diego Zoo, San Diego Zoo Safari Park, and San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research, as well as international field programs on six continents. The work of these entities is made accessible to children through the San Diego Zoo Kids network, reaching out through the internet and in children's hospitals nationwide. The work of San Diego Zoo Global is made possible by the San Diego Zoo Global Wildlife Conservancy and is supported in part by the Foundation of San Diego Zoo Global.

Provided by Zoological Society of San Diego

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