**Protecting Nabalebale**

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*View of Savusavu Bay from the Mountains of Wailevu. Photo: SOLOMONI BIUMAIONO*

The rain has just ceased and the skies are starting to clear. We had just left Labasa to head down to Nabalebale Village in Cakaudrove. I join the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) team that will be conducting a week long environmental conservation workshop for the tikina of Wailevu.

Myself, Iliavi from the Partners in Community Development Fiji (PCDF) and a Tongan lady, Ingrid from WCS were travelling together in a cab while Rebecca, Natalie and Ged were in another.

That Monday our flight was cancelled and the following morning we were up at four. After another delay everyone was edgy; we knew we would definitely miss the start of the workshop. Especially Natalie, who was due to give a presentation on the laws the villagers need to be aware of, when trying to protect their environment from exploitation.

Despite our hurriedness, our taxi driver Narendra was giving us his tour special, a narrative of the history of the Labasa-Savusavu highway; and he even stopped to buy bananas for us.

A bit past Lomaloma Village, as we passed into Cakaudrove, Narendra stops our cab and beckons to my left.

We were on the ridge of the mountains looking down straight into Savusavu Bay. The mist still hugs the land, stubbornly refusing to let go. The mountains and the valleys are freshly bathed with recent showers.

This breathtaking view is the first thing that you will see when entering the tikina of Wailevu.

Wailevu is probably one of the biggest districts in Fiji. It lies west of Savusavu Town, starting from Savudrodro Village and hugging the coastlines right down to Dawara Village before moving inland up the mountains that separate Cakudrove from Bua and Macuata.

This district covers some of the rich alluvial coastal plains on the windward side of Fiji's second main island and climbs up to the mountain ranges that are the water catchment for some of Vanua Levu's main rivers and streams.

In that respect, Wailevu is rich in mineral deposits and agricultural lands that have been extensively farmed and exploited in the past century.

Now the people of Wailevu are finally aware of how much of their natural resources are being washed away into the sea and how much marine and river fish they are losing by the day.

Intensive agriculture has been the main economic activity for the tikina, with a copra industry, commercial dalo and yaqona farming, logging and goldmining activities.

Wailevu tikina rep Iowane Larua admitted that it was only recently that the tikina Wailevu have come to realise the loss of their natural resources through bad logging practices, soil erosion, coral bleaching, overfishing and poaching and the introduction of alien fish species into their river systems.

Larua says this concern was initially raised by the Tui Wailevu Ratu Kinijoji Maivalili and efforts are now being made to conserve their resources.

WCS has now stepped in to help the tikina Wailevu come up with a plan to manage their natural resources.

WCS had just successfully implemented conservation plans for the tikinas of Kubulau and Wainunu in the province of Bua where villagers planned and are leading the conservation efforts.

WCS has now completed a resource plan management workshop for Wailevu at Nabalebale Village which was attended by 60 people from all the villages in the tikina.

This is a major step as the Wailevu people themselves have identified the kind of actions to take, in order to stop the destruction of their environment.

WCS director Stacy Jupiter says they have done their surveys and research to measure the extent of environmental damage in the tikina's coastal areas, reefs, fishing grounds, forests, farmlands and rivers.

"We've just provided the science to them and all this information has been compiled and we have given it back to them to allow them to draw up their plans on how to draw up their resource management plans.

"Of course we have given them some recommendations but that is all that is. It is up to the people themselves to put in place or adopt the measures they think will help them manage their natural resources better. So it's the people in consultation with their fellow villagers and through the Bose Vanua that the plan will be adopted and enforced at village level," Jupiter says.

Many workshop participants are already well versed with environmental conservation as some of them have existing projects already running in their villages.

Natuvu Village in Wailevu West will be harvesting about 21,000 beach-de-mers in three weeks time, which will be taken from a tabu area they had enforced two years ago.

The village's community facilitator Manasa Levaci says Natuvu had already harvested the seas outside of the tabu area twice and had built an evacuation centre and contributed to the setting up of the tikina's proposed Uluivalili Secondary School.

Another village Dawara is concerned with the recent efforts to re-open Mount Kasi goldmine, which sits on their land.

Maciu Kataleone, the Dawara community facilitator is adamant that if any future mining activity is to be carried out, its impact on the environment should be prioritised.

Kataleone says their past experience with mining at Kasi made them realise the negative impact such an economic activity can have on their river.

Kataleone says an environmental impact assessment should be carried out first to record the wildlife that will be impacted.

Other villages like Dreketi and Wailevu have also declared their foreshore areas as tabu and during the one week training, other villages in the East of the tikina are proposing their rainforest and foreshore areas to be declared tabu.

WCS marine biologist Akuila Cakacaka says this knowledge will help a lot because the villagers can easily understand what to do when they eventually put their resource management plan in place.

Akuila who has been around most parts of Fiji promoting resource management plans knows how much villagers understand about their environment.

"Most of the time, the villagers know exactly how to protect their environment but they do not know how to articulate their knowledge and also because of pressures of agricultural practises and economic demands, this knowledge takes a backseat," Akuila says.

A common thread in all the questions raised during the workshop is the fact of how they can balance their economic wants against the more pressing priority of stopping environmental degradation.

From the questions asked of the Agriculture and Forestry Departments, the main concerns raised from the villagers is how they can devise better ways of farming where they can earn money but at the same time, ensure their environment is not harmed.

WCS director Jupiter says this is understandable and says these are some of the factors that have to be considered by the villagers when laying down their plans.

"During the course of consultations, we will definitely let the villagers know that the resource management plan is going to be flexible. We're not here to dictate anything to them. I can say these plans can change according to their economical and financial conditions," Jupiter says.

In sharing their experience with their Wailevu cousins, the people of tikina Kubulau from Bua emphasised the need to have a proper administrative structure in place, to make managing their natural resources easier.

Kubulau Resource Management Committee chairman Paulo Kolikata says decision making will be clear and the people will know to follow the proper channel when raising their concerns.

The Kubulau committee have set up a scholarship fund, monitor their tabu areas and link with the business arm of the tikina to generate more funds from what they earn from the Namena marine reserve.

With success stories from Kubulau and other parts of Fiji, the Cakaudrove Provincial Office is now overseeing all environmental conservation plans within the province.

Roko Tui Cakaudrove Ro Aca Mataitini says his office will be monitoring the progress made by the villages in the province.

The provincial office will also be spearheading any environmental conservation effort within the tikina with the appointment of an environmental officer that will help guide all conservation projects planned to be undertaken within the tikina.

Apart from this, an officer from the US Peace Corp will be based in the tikina Wailevu, through the provincial office, to help in any envronmental conservation project the tikina plans to undertake in the future.

Ro Aca says the success of the Natuvu village project should only serve as a motivation for other villages within the tikina Wailevu to set up their own projects that will help generate income from their environment at a sustainable level.

Those present at the workshop will return to their villages to share the knowledge they have gained before they actually sit down with their elders to put a conservation plan together.