



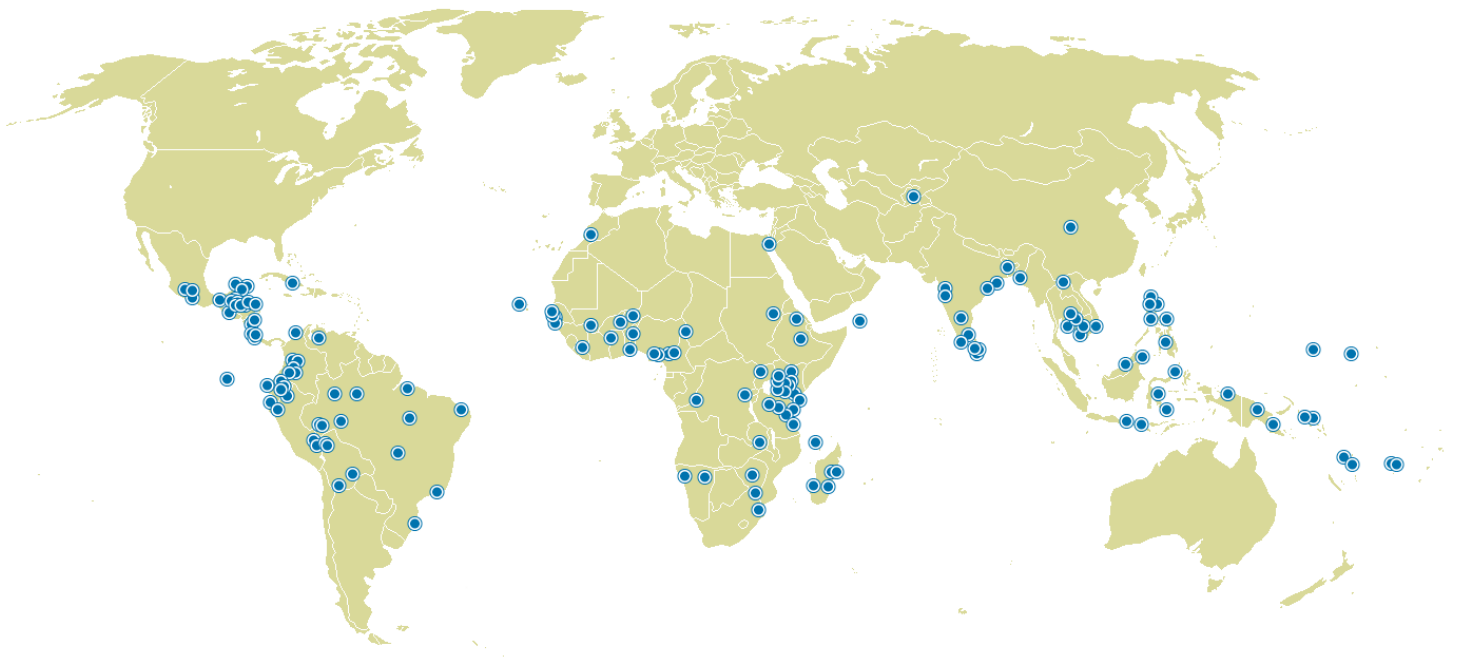
Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to [*'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize'*](#), a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.



Click on the map to visit the Equator Initiative's searchable case study database, where you can find more Equator Prize winner case studies.

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SISI INITIATIVE SITE SUPPORT GROUP

Fiji

PROJECT SUMMARY

Sisi Initiative Site Support Group manages natural resources around the periphery of the Natewa Tunuloa Important Bird Area. The organization has established a 600-hectare community protected forest and developed alternative livelihood options for the area's indigenous landowners. Developed in response to illegal logging, forest fires, overgrazing, agricultural encroachment and invasive species, the organization uses an innovative incentive scheme to protect the globally important bird and wildlife species in Natewa Tunuloa. Communities signed a Memorandum of Understanding in which they agreed to protect the community forest and refuse logging concessions.

In return, the initiative provides alternative livelihood training and projects in beekeeping, poultry, handicraft and jewelry-making, bakery and pastry-making, and sustainable agricultural. The group's model farm and tree nursery also help to reduce deforestation. The initiative has been used as a learning model for community-based conservation and forest management across Fiji.

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KEY FACTS

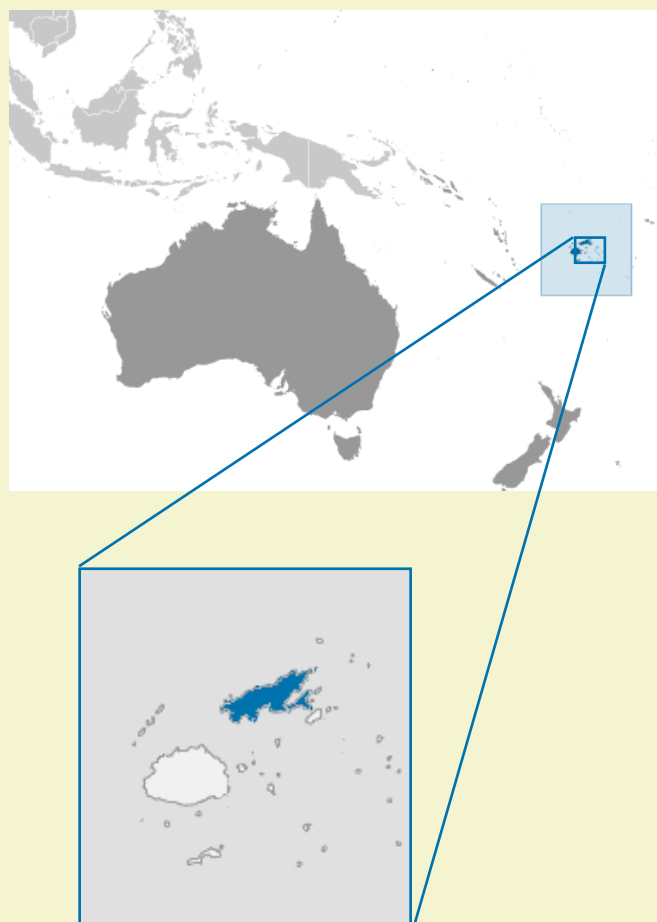
EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2012

FOUNDED: 2005

LOCATION: Island of Vanua Levu in Fiji's Northern Division

BENEFICIARIES: Traditional clans (*mataqalis*) of Natewa

BIODIVERSITY: Natewa Tunuloa Important Bird Area (IBA)



Background and Context



Sisi Initiative Site Support Group was established in late 2005 to conserve the Natewa Tunuloa Important Bird Area (IBA) on the island of Vanua Levu in Fiji's Northern Division. It is a community-based volunteer group that works with a range of stakeholders to develop sustainable, environmentally friendly initiatives for communities living in and around the IBA. These initiatives – which have included sustainable agriculture projects, ecotourism, and bee-keeping – have afforded community members a means by which to live in greater harmony with their natural environment, reducing threats to the forest and securing it for future generations.

Natewa Tunuloa Important Bird Area

The Natewa Tunuloa IBA contains within it most of the remaining tracts of native forest on the Natewa Tunuloa Peninsula. Communities living in the vicinity of the IBA have traditionally depended on agriculture for their subsistence and income, and rely heavily on forest resources for firewood, hunting, timber, medicinal plants and wild foods. In recent years, however, the rate at which resources have been extracted from the forest grew to unsustainable levels, threatening the integrity and biodiversity of the forest.

Natewa Peninsula houses a unique array of birdlife, including a number of threatened and endemic species. Seven of the nine subspecies endemic to the island of Vanua Levu are found on the peninsula. The peninsula is home to the Shy Ground Dove (*Gallicolumba stairi*), classified as a vulnerable species, and the near-threatened Silktail (*Lampromia victoria*), ornithologically unique in the region due to the absence of Giant Forest Honeyeaters or Blue-crested Broadbills that are otherwise widespread across Vanua Levu and neighboring Taveuni. The Natewa Peninsula was assigned the status of "Key Biodiversity Area" by Conservation International in 2005. It has also been identified as a "Site of National Significance" in Fiji's National Biodiversity Action Plan, and received the designation "Important Bird Area" in 2005 from BirdLife International. Despite this recognition of the area's natural significance, however, the peninsula does not have official protected area status and remains vulnerable to the threat of deforestation.

Deforestation, soil erosion and water insecurity

Excessive logging, human-induced fires and overgrazing have historically been the main threats to the peninsula's forests. Large areas of native forests were cleared for mahogany plantations (although this practice, for this purpose, has since ceased) and extensive and unsustainable logging continues to degrade the forests adjacent to the IBA. Since much of the flat land on the peninsula has been converted to coconut plantations, agriculture tends to encroach on the forest. The resulting deforestation leads to soil erosion and water insecurity, as well as threatening birds and wider biodiversity.

The IBA is the source of the peninsula's rivers and of the drinking water for all of its villages. Unsustainable logging has impacted water quality, disrupting ecosystem functioning and the water cycle, which in turn has affected the availability of drinking water and even the health of marine resources in Natewa Bay. The impact on drinking water quality in particular was severely affecting the living conditions of peninsula communities, and this provided the main impetus for community leaders to partner with BirdLife International in developing a programme of forest conservation.

Genesis of the Sisi Initiative

Following designation of the 17,600-hectare IBA in 2005, local communities started to work in partnership with BirdLife International on a plan to conserve the forest. The first of many awareness-raising workshops followed, and included participants from local government, the Cakaudrove Provincial Council, and the Departments of Forestry, Agriculture, and Land Use. Over the course of these workshops, local community representatives were nominated to form a "Site Support Group". Out of this process, in October 2005, the Sisi Initiative was formally established as a community-based volunteer group charged with leading efforts to conserve the IBA. The initiative is named after the Sisi, a Fijian silktail bird and a characteristic species of the area found only on the peninsula and on the neighbouring island of Taveuni. (The silktail of Natewa Tunuloa is roughly 20 per cent smaller and more iridescent than its relative on Taveuni).

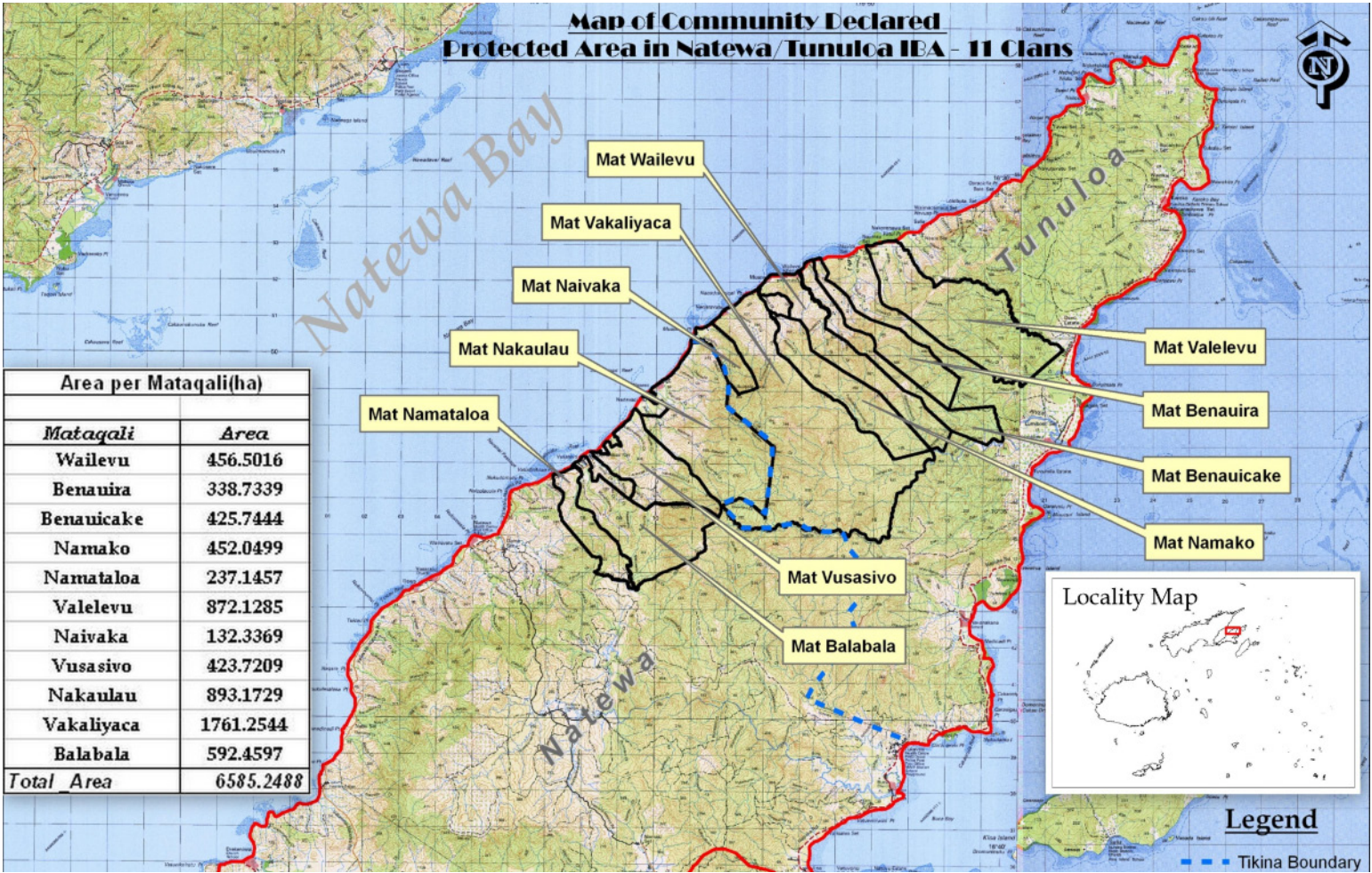
The primary challenge faced by the Sisi Initiative at the stage of organizational inception was commercial logging, the second greatest source of income (after agriculture) for local residents and a cornerstone of the local economy. For conservation efforts to succeed, it would be necessary to identify and develop economic alternatives to logging. Again, a series of consultations were held with local community representatives, technical experts from government departments, and other relevant local authorities. Out of this process came the innovation at the heart of the Sisi Initiative: a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) under which eleven landowning clans agreed to conserve the forest and avoid logging for ten years in exchange for support with a suite of village-based alternative livelihood projects. The MOU was signed at a workshop in Navetau village in 2009 and resulted in the declaration of a 6,000-hectare community-managed forest.

The next step in the initiative was a draft community management plan for the forest. As part of this plan, the Site Support Group was adjusted to ensure equal representation of each of the landowning clans in the conservation programme. Fiji is particularly well-suited to this land (or resource) management approach, as over 80 per cent of the country's territory is owned by indigenous peoples who are organized in land-owning units or clans known as *mataqalis*. In consultation with the statutory body that oversees management of land tenure issues in Fiji, these clans ultimately decide how land is used. Membership in the Site Support Group – that is, representatives

of participating clans – grew from six members in 2006 to fifteen in 2012. Members are nominated by their respective *mataqalis*. To maximize community participation and promote inclusive decision making, membership is not limited to a set number of individuals, but varies depending on interest. Membership, however, is limited to clans that own land within the community-managed area (and not simply within the IBA), meaning that decisions pertaining to the management of resources within the managed forest rest solely with the landowners.

Governance and institutional structure

The Site Support Group includes a Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer, and its activities are guided by Terms of Reference which state that the aim of the group is ‘the conservation and sustainable management of the forests for the benefit of land-owning communities’. Within these same Terms of Reference, the roles of landowners are clearly defined. All decisions of the Site Support Group are raised at village meetings to allow other members of the *mataqali* and the wider community to have their voice heard. The initiative and its governance are guided by a strong partnership with BirdLife International, which has invested heavily in raising awareness of the value of biodiversity in the peninsula. This innovative approach to natural resource management in Fiji demonstrates the value of partnering with local landowners and including them in resource governance decisions.



Key Activities and Innovations



The Sisi Initiative has developed a number of alternative livelihood projects in villages that fall within the community-managed area. The top priorities in all areas of activity are providing local communities with sustainable sources of food and income, and guiding the local economy away from dependence on local forests, as was previously the case. Where logging concessions used to constitute a high percentage of the local income base and local economy, the Sisi Initiative is aiming to create new income-generating opportunities. In parallel, the initiative is working on a community-based forest management plan and intends to expand into ecotourism.

From logging concessions to alternative livelihoods

Alternative livelihood projects have provided the local community with sustainable sources of income that do not rely on felling local forests. The suite of alternative livelihood projects offered through the Sisi Initiative also helps enhance forest conservation efforts. As one example, model farms have been established to bolster village food security and reduce encroachment of agricultural land into the forest. The farms are specially designed and cultivated to mitigate soil erosion and enhance the water and nutrient retention functions of the soil. Vetiver grass is being planted to prevent erosion, while pineapples and vegetables provide new sources of food. Nurseries have been established to cultivate yam and taro varieties, while sandalwood farming has been proposed as a complementary activity that would further mitigate pressure on forest resources. A Participatory Land Use Planning Survey, coordinated by Fiji's Department of Land Use, reported a significant improvement in sustainable agricultural practices at the site thanks to the Sisi Initiative.

Another example: a poultry farm has been established and has quickly generated significant income for the local population. Within two months, the community had generated over FJD 1,000 (approximately USD 550) from the sale of chicks – a significant amount in a community where the average daily income is FJD 20 (around USD 11.) Similarly, a beekeeping project is generating income through the sale of honey, while enhancing food security by replacing or supplementing raw sugar in the local diet. The beekeeping project provides additional value as a reminder of the value of standing forests, as the bees source their nectar from forest plants.

The Sisi Initiative has also tailored a number of alternative livelihood projects specifically for local women. Among others, these projects have included training in handicrafts and basket weaving (using raw materials gathered from the forest), jewellery-making and screen printing, baking, and pastry-making. These projects include a specific component aimed at reviving local culture through traditional



dance and weaving. Many of these activities are being developed with the intention of incorporating them into a broader ecotourism strategy for the IBA.

Community-based forest management

Perhaps the most innovative dimension of the Sisi Initiative is its community-based forest management strategy. In return for the suite of alternative livelihood projects that have been developed, communities within the managed forest area have committed through the MOU to conserve and sustainably manage 6,000-hectares of forest. Under this agreement, participating communities agree to not only refuse logging concessions within the demarcated area, but also to undertake collective activities that will restore and enhance the remaining tracts of native forest. With technical guidance from Fiji's Department of Forestry – as well as catalytic funding from the UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme – a forest resources management plan has been developed by the community and participating landowners.

The management plan has been developed to guide land use and forest rehabilitation activities. It is also designed to guide and direct the sustainable management of forest resources, which is a key factor in maintaining water quality, ensuring adequate food supplies,

and mitigating flood risks. The management plan takes into account the impact of deforestation on fish populations, and allows for connectivity for migratory fish species to move between the saltwater (coastal) and freshwater (Buca River system) habitats of the peninsula.

Ensuring the clear articulation and effective implementation of the forest management plan has required an investment in local capacity building. Training has been provided to members of the Site Support Group in fundraising and proposal writing, which has important implications for the long-term financial sustainability of the initiative. This was also a critical step in securing funding from the UNDP-implemented GEF-Small Grants Programme, which was put towards the creation of two nurseries where native tree species and sandalwood are grown for deployment in the reforestation of degraded areas. Community youth groups in particular have been charged with reforesting degraded forest areas and planting vetiver grass to reduce soil erosion on degraded slopes. The sandalwood trees are also being cultivated as a source of income for the local community and a resource that can be sustainably harvested. Capacity building and training have also focused on environmental education and bird identification, so that community members are able to actively participate in monitoring the IBA.



“Protecting biodiversity is not just about protecting birds or plants, it’s about protecting what’s rightfully yours, your children’s and your children’s children’s. What type of planet will our future generations be living in by 2020?”

Mr. Silio Lalaqila, Treasurer, Sisi Initiative Site Support Group

Impacts



BIODIVERSITY IMPACTS

Prior to establishment of the Sisi Initiative, excessive logging in the Natewa peninsula forests was having predictably deleterious effects on soil quality, biodiversity, and drinking water. So disruptive was the logging to ecosystem functioning and environmental health that dramatic changes were noted in endemic birdlife, marine species and terrestrial biodiversity. The clearance of native forests was effectively destroying the habitats of endemic and vulnerable or near-threatened bird species, which were also under pressure from the incursion of invasive alien species. A lack of alternative livelihood options left peninsula communities highly dependent on logging concessions for income, while the limited availability of flat land drove agriculture ever further into the forest. The Sisi Initiative has mitigated this dependence on logging and provided a suite of alternative, sustainable livelihood options for the local population.

Forest conservation through local management

The initiative's MOU has secured the protection of a 6,000-hectare community-managed forest area. Under the agreement, land-owning clans (*mataqalis*) agreed to conserve and sustainably manage the forest in return for the provision of alternative livelihood projects in their villages. Through the agreement, and despite the absence in Fiji of an official legislative framework for the conferral of protected area status, the Sisi Initiative has effectively created a safe haven for birds and other biodiversity in the peninsula. The Department of Forestry has also demarcated the forest boundaries of the IBA as an area that needs to be protected for the survival of the silktail. Importantly, this has resulted in a decrease in the number of logging licenses issued for the IBA. As a result, reports have been received from communities of sightings of the silktail in forest areas closer to the village, a stark difference to few years ago where one had to walk deep into the forest to see the bird.

Alternative livelihood activities reduce pressure on the forest by creating options for community members who previously relied on unsustainable agriculture or logging for income. In some cases, these activities have gone beyond risk reduction to interventions that are actually enhancing ecosystem functioning and forest cover. Model farms and tree nurseries, for instance, have reduced the need to clear forest for agriculture. According to a Participatory Land Use Planning Survey, coordinated by the Department of Land Use, there have been significant improvements in sustainable agricultural practices at the site thanks to the Sisi Initiative. In addition, the handicraft, jewellery-making and bee-keeping projects all provide income that depends on non-timber forest products, and so provide an incentive for the forest's conservation.

Building conservation capacity

Crucially, the Sisi Initiative has strengthened the capacity of the local population living in the community-managed forest and the larger IBA to sustainably manage and monitor their forest, empowering them to take responsibility for its conservation. Community members and local landowners were responsible for the development of the forest management plan, and the document gains legitimacy from this high degree of community ownership. Community members have been trained in bird identification and monitoring techniques so that they can take part in the monitoring of the IBA, while younger community members have been involved in reforestation and forest enhancement measures through community youth groups. By building community pride in the forest and highlighting the greater long-term value of standing forest over cleared land, the activities of the Sisi Initiative aim to ensure the conservation of the forest for generations to come.

SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACTS

The Sisi Initiative has empowered the communities of the Natewa Peninsula to pursue sustainable livelihoods that meet their daily needs without destroying the forest that supports ecosystem services and biodiversity.

Alternative livelihoods and improved food security

Importantly, several Sisi Initiative activities are enhancing and strengthening both the short- and long-term food security of local communities. In the short term, pineapples, yams and taro are being grown in nurseries and model farms, which provide household-level food security without requiring that the local population resort to unsustainable agricultural practices. In the long term, the shift to sustainable agriculture will ensure the preservation of the forest and the services it provides – the sources of food, water and resource security.

Beekeeping and poultry-rearing projects, too, are improving food security and providing new sources of income in place of logging concessions. The local communities now use honey from the beekeeping project to replace or supplement more expensive sugar in their diets, while the sale of surplus honey provides a new revenue stream. The poultry rearing initiative in particular has been highly successful, generating approximately USD 550 from the sale of chicks in the first two months of operations. Given that the average daily income of the community is around USD 1, this represents a significant new source of income.

Education, health and capacity building

A significant percentage of income generated through alternative livelihood projects is managed by village committees and is invested in community infrastructure, social services and meeting collective needs. Community profits are regularly invested in children's education and health services, while those profits accruing to individuals have also been directed towards school fees and medical costs. Additionally, the training provided through the initiative is equipping local people with the skills needed to diversify their income base and take a more active role in the governance and management of their natural resources. Training has spanned sustainable agriculture, alternative livelihoods, and biological monitoring and evaluation, the latter to improve management of the community forest and IBA. In addition, members of the Sisi Initiative Site Support Group have received training in fundraising and resource mobilization, proposal writing, small business development and management, and community-based ecotourism. Again, the range and variety of these programs is serving to diversify the skill base – which will ultimately diversify the income base – of the local population.

Traditional knowledge and local culture

In the management of the peninsula forest, the Sisi Initiative has opted to work through traditional channels, drawing from and bolstering local customs. The Memorandum of Understanding which established the community-managed forest area is based on tradi-

tional clan (*mataqali*) land management authority, whereby each *mataqali* has the right to decide how their land is used. This traditional system of customary rights is the cornerstone of both the Site Support Group and the forest management plan. Similarly, many of the alternative livelihood strategies promoted by Sisi Initiative are based on traditional knowledge and local skills. The group has also made concerted efforts to revive traditional cultural practices, such as mekes (traditional Fijian dances).

Meetings with the local communities have always been inclusive, with both men and women present. To allow for the fact that women might be hesitant to speak up in these meetings, separate meetings are held just for women, so that they too may have their say. The BirdLife International team that has partnered with the Sisi Initiative in coordinating its work is headed by a woman. Projects initiated by Sisi have taken gender considerations into account, and consequently, a number of activities were developed specifically with women in mind. Jewellery making, screen printing, baking and pastry-making, which are also being incorporated in the ecotourism strategy, are examples of these.

POLICY IMPACTS

Although Fiji has a number of protected areas and nature reserves, their effectiveness is compromised somewhat by the absence of national protected area legislation. The existing legal framework in Fiji offers a range of mechanisms with the potential to support the establishment and management of terrestrial protected areas. However, community conserved areas, and those established purely on the basis of customary law – such as the Natewa Tunuloa community-managed area – are subject to certain limitations. In this respect, the Sisi Initiative Site Support Group has brought needed attention to both the importance of community-managed areas and the legal obstacles and hurdles they are up against.

The approach used by Sisi Initiative has been brought to the attention of the National Protected Area Committee, formed in 2008 to oversee the development of protected area legislation for Fiji. Since community-conserved areas do not retain legal powers of enforcement, the Sisi Initiative has shown that ongoing conservation efforts, partnership with government entities, and alternative livelihood options are required to support land-owning communities. The mechanism by which the Sisi Initiative established its community-managed forest area – that is, through an agreement with local landowners – provides a powerful demonstration of how this can be achieved.

BirdLife International, in collaboration with relevant government entities, highlighted the approach employed by Sisi Initiative at a 2010 forum of the Protected Area Committee. Consequently, Natewa Tunuloa has been recognised as a site where an informal protected area exists, and where legal endorsement of this status would cement community achievements. The Sisi Initiative is regarded as a leading example of what bottom-up action can achieve. Its experiences, together with similar community conserved areas throughout Fiji, are now being taken into account in the development of a national policy and legal framework for protected areas.

Sustainability and Replication



SUSTAINABILITY

The key to the sustainability of the Sisi Initiative is that it does not offer direct compensation to communities for conservation efforts, but rather helps them to develop income-generating activities that use locally available resources and which complement conservation objectives.

All components of the initiative are deeply rooted in community ownership. From its inception, the Sisi Initiative has prioritized a high degree of community involvement and engagement, beginning with the initial consultations and extending through articulation of the forest management plan. The authority on which the forest management plan is based comes from the communities themselves, recognizing the ownership and control of *mataqalis* over their land. Having this authority legally enshrined in a Memorandum of Understanding legitimizes and strengthens the system of community-based forest management. The *mataqalis* retain control over their land, and thus their continued involvement in the initiative reflects the value they see in continuing to conserve their remaining tracts of native forest.

Sisi Initiative Site Support Group members are nominated by their respective communities and represent the land-owning clans of the community-managed forest area. The Site Support Group delivers reports at village meetings to keep the wider community informed of its activities and to remain accountable to the people it represents. This system complements the traditional system of land ownership, and has gained the confidence of the *mataqalis*, who understand that the decision to sustainably manage their forest resources remains in their hands alone.

BirdLife International holds a long-term commitment to the people of Natewa Tunuloa and to the Sisi Initiative and will continue to provide support into the future, including through its Local Empowerment

Programme. Amongst other things, the NGO continues to provide capacity building training. These efforts have been very successful, notably the training in fundraising and proposal-writing, which resulted in the successful acquisition of a grant from the UNDP-implemented GEF-Small Grants Programme. Community members have also received training in sustainable agriculture and sustainable forest management, and are now successfully managing many of their own alternative livelihood projects. The initiative is legally registered, maintains its own bank account, and is well positioned to operate with relative autonomy. The Sisi Initiative also works closely with the Department of Agriculture (to address threats posed by unsustainable agriculture) and with the Department of Forestry (to address threats of deforestation and to curtail logging).

REPLICATION

The Sisi Initiative approach is rooted in local customs, culture and land management authority, so has a high level of potential for replication in Fiji and across the region. The project model has already, in fact, been applied to community-based conservation initiatives in Fiji. Since its establishment, five other Site Support Groups have been established in the country. Experience gained and lessons learned through implementation of the Sisi Initiative are informing development of these newer Site Support Groups.

BirdLife International has facilitated peer-to-peer exchange programmes whereby representatives of the Sisi Initiative share their expertise and experiences with counterparts in other local conservation groups. Further, outputs from these learning exchanges will be deployed in the establishment of Fiji's Permanent Forest Estate Framework, which is designed to empower local landowners to become part of Fiji's sustainable forest programme.

PARTNERS

BirdLife International has been the primary partner throughout development of the Sisi Initiative. BirdLife facilitated the MOU that led to the establishment of the community-managed forest, and drove development of the alternative livelihood projects. The Sisi Initiative has also benefitted from the support of BirdLife International's Local Empowerment Programme, which provides support to similar local organizations around the world. BirdLife International plays a mentoring and supervisory role in the implementation and management of Sisi Initiative's SGP grant. The NGO has a long-term commitment to supporting the communities of Natewa Tunuloa, and continues to work through its country partner, NatureFiji-MaregeTiViti, to further develop livelihood projects that are compatible with conservation.

The UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme provided a grant of USD 48,000 over two years to fund a projects associated

with the community-managed forest area. This support included the establishment of two tree nurseries and the development of an ecotourism strategy for the IBA (still to be implemented).

The Natewa Tunuloa communities and the Sisi Initiative benefitted from a three-year programme funded by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) and carried out in partnership with Fiji's Departments of Environment, Forestry and Agriculture and the Cakaudrove Provincial Council (the government administration unit that oversees all work undertaken at the site). The I Taukei Land Trust Board was also involved in the planning development of the community-managed forest area.

The Sisi Initiative has also received support from the UK Darwin Initiative, the Australian Government Regional Natural Heritage Programme and the United States Embassy's Small Grants Programme.



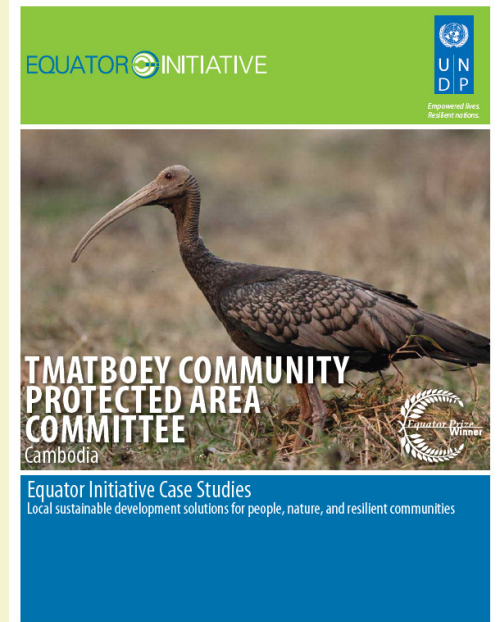
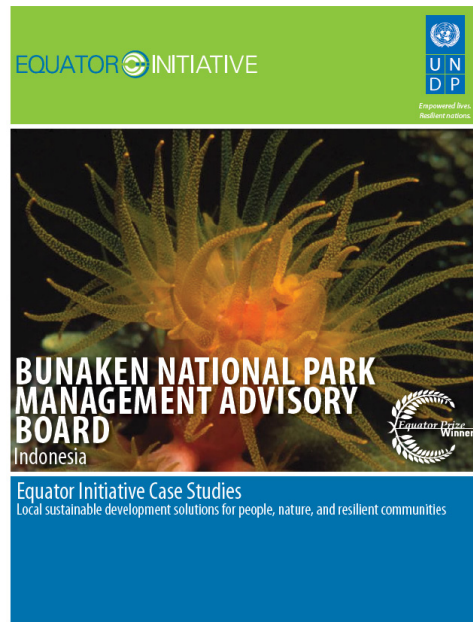
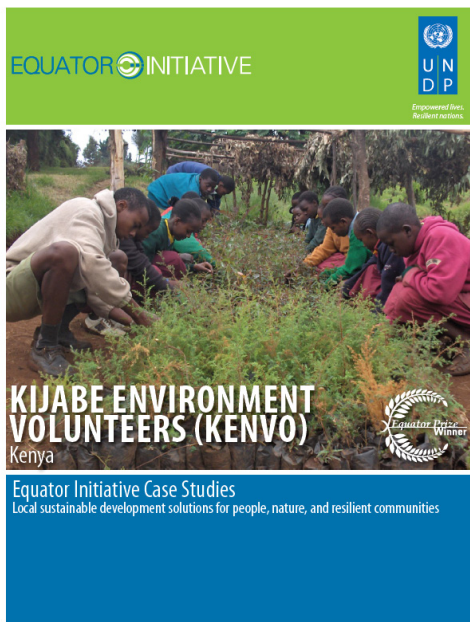
“Patience is a virtue and together with hard work and commitment, you’re sure to succeed & be recognized for the little things you do.”

Mr. Silio Lalaqila, Treasurer, Sisi Initiative Site Support Group

FURTHER REFERENCE

- Sisi Initiative Site Support Group Equator Initiative profile page: http://www.equatorinitiative.org/index.php?option=com_winners&view=winner_detail&id=140&Itemid=683

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