Conservation news

First commercial timber harvest from a community-managed forest in Tanzania

After over 20 years of policy development and implementation the first commercial timber harvest has taken place in a community-managed forest in Tanzania. The timber was felled during September and November 2009 in a Village Land Forest Reserve managed by Kikole village in Kilwa District, south-east Tanzania. This forest is covered under a Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certificate—the first for a community-managed natural forest in the whole of Africa. Kikole were assisted in this endeavour by the Mpingo Conservation Project, an FFI partner, which also administers the FSC certificate on behalf of member communities.

Kikole received a payment of TZS 2,400,000 (c. USD 1,800) in return for 15 m^3 of African blackwood *Dalbergia melanoxylon*. Previously the community would only have received TZS 100 (USD 0.08) per log. In all Kikole were able to realize an income nearly 400 times more than they would have received previously on the 63 logs sold. Kikole intend to spend the money they have raised on improving the road to the village, improving market access for impoverished farmers and providing local employment.

The harvest, whilst being a considerable achievement, is the start of a long process from forest to completed product. Other community forestry projects around the world (*Small-scale Forest Economics, Management and Policy*, 2, 327–341) have struggled because the timber available has not met market demands. Issues can include species, wood quality, quality of sawing, and quantity. Mpingo Conservation Project, and its partners Environment Africa Trust and FFI, have therefore worked to address these concerns from early on in the project. Funding came from the Darwin Initiative, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, WWF and Comic Relief.

African blackwood is exported to developed countries in the form of sawn billets to make musical instruments—an industry that is extremely demanding in terms of quality such that often $>$ 90% of timber entering a sawmill is wasted (15 m^3 of logs is sufficient to make c. 1,000 clarinets and oboes). Mpingo Conservation Project and its partners resolved this issue by partnering with an existing sawmill in Tanzania, Sandali Wood Industries, who already operate profitably in this market and have a reputation for delivering high quality products. Sandali Wood Industries' management was open to the idea of collaborating in a scheme with significant potential environmental and social benefits and succeeded in obtaining a Chain of Custody certificate from FSC.

Meanwhile, in the UK, Environment Africa Trust and FFI investigated the supply chains and market opportunities involved in delivering blackwood to British and Irish musical instrument manufacturers, and the subsequent retailing of woodwind instruments. Potential partner manufacturers were identified and approached, leading to the first orders for FSC-certified blackwood in December 2009. Environment Africa Trust are providing technical assistance to partner manufacturers through the process of obtaining their own Chain of Custody certificates from FSC, which will allow manufacturers and their retail partners to sell the final product under an FSC label. The billets will need to be properly seasoned, a process that takes at least 1 year. It is therefore anticipated that the first FSC-certified blackwood instruments will be on sale mid 2011.

To kick-start the market in a new product line no price premium was attached to the timber by Kikole, and Sandali Wood Industries expect to sell the sawn billets with no, or minimal, mark-up on their normal prices. However, once the first certified instruments reach the market, Environment Africa Trust and partners will launch a marketing campaign under the banner Sound and Fair to convince musicians of the merits of buying FSC-certified instruments. Market research suggests that, once the issues have been explained to them, musicians are prepared to pay 5–25% more for ethically labelled instruments. On high end instruments that commonly retail in excess of USD 5,000 this will yield substantial additional income for collaborating sawmills, manufacturers and retailers. For villages such as Kikole, who could eventually earn USD 40,000 per year or more on sales of African blackwood, the returns will amply justify the investment in the project. For more information see http://www.mpingoconservation.org

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Rediscovery of the Taveuni blind snake

Much of the herpetofauna of the two main Fijian Islands (Viti Levu and Vanua Levu) has been decimated by human-induced habitat modifications and the introduction of exotic predators. Cats, rats and mongooses are the major predators on terrestrial reptiles and on those arboreal species that frequently descend to the ground for feeding or movement. The mongoose is a major driver of extinction or near extinction. Its level of lizard predation is readily seen by contrasting the density of the ground-living white-bellied striped skink *Emoia cyanura* on Viti Levu (mongoose present) and Ovalau (mongoose free): $<$ 5 individuals ha^{-1} versus $>$ 1,300 individuals ha^{-1}, respectively.

Of Fiji's three native terrestrial snakes the elapid *Ogmodon vitianus* occurs only on Viti Levu, and is strongly subterranean. The Pacific boa *Candoia bibroni* is moderately abundant on many mongoose-free islands and survives only at very low densities on islands with the mongoose, in well forested areas where presumably it is nearly fully arboreal.

The situation for the blind snake is enigmatic. The original report derives from the Secretary's report of the 27 October 1897 meeting of the Linnean Society of New South Wales. Therein, he reported that "Mr Edgar R. Waite exhibited (1) examples of *Typhlops aluensis*, Blgr., from Wai Obi, Vuna Pi [Waioba, Vuna District], Fiji, where they are known to the natives as 'Naota'". No additional specimens of *T. aluensis* (now a synonym of *Ramphotyphlops depressus*) have been reported from Fiji since then, and no subsequent detailed description of Waite's specimens confirms the validity of the Secretary's report. Because Mr Waite had an avid interest in blind snakes and was employed by the Australian Museum (AMS), the voucher specimens should reside in that collection. Glen Shea, a research associate at the museum, reported the presence of three AMS register entries for '*Typhlops* sp.' from the above locality. However, one specimen was destroyed and the other two cannot be located.

In 1998 a report of a blind snake in suburban Suva, Viti Levu, led to the discovery of a recently introduced population of the parthenogenetic blind snake, *Ramphotyphlops braminus* (otherwise known as the flowerpot snake). *R. braminus* is now common in the Suva area, although it has not yet been reported elsewhere in Fiji.

One of us (DW) has persisted in the belief that in the absence of the mongoose the blind snake reported by Waite should still occur on Taveuni. In 2006 a comment by a Taveuni resident living close to Waioba offered the first substantial evidence that the Waite-reported blind snake is a valid record and survives. Encouragement by DW led to the securing of a specimen and confirmation that the Waioba blind snake was not *R. braminus*. An immediate search by DW was unsuccessful. However, local knowledge of a burrowing snake was widespread and was sufficient to encourage the offer of a reward for specimens. This offer resulted in nine specimens (USNM 558260-268) collected during 2008–2009. Their arrival at the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, USA) in June 2009 allows us to confirm that the Taveuni blind snakes are *Ramphotyphlops* (based on the presence of retrocloacal sacs and coiled retracted hemipenes in USNM 558264) and can be inferred to be the species reported by Waite in 1897. The Taveuni blind snake, however, is not *R. depressus*, which occurs in the Solomon Islands. Its morphology indicates it is an endemic species and a member of the *Ramphotyphlops flaviventer* group, differing from *R. depressus* by the presence of a well-defined longitudinal dorsal stripe in contrast to the indistinct stripe in *R. depressus*. Other traits support the uniqueness of the Taveuni population.

The flowerpot snake has proved to be an extremely successful invader and now has a near pantropical distribution in disturbed habitats. It usually travels to new localities in root masses of ornamental plants and, being parthenogenic, a single individual can establish a new population. Presently there is no evidence that its presence threatens the survival of native blind snakes. However, its possible translocation to Taveuni adds another conservation concern for the native Fijian snakes.

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CCF Symposium January 2010

The Annual Symposium of the Cambridge Conservation Forum (CCF; http://www.cambridgeconservationforum.org.uk/) was held on 8 January 2010, a seemingly inauspicious date, but in reality getting to Murray Edwards College on that day entailed a snow-bound, numb-fingered cycle ride. Happily the first talk carried the audience beyond the icy conditions into the realm of crystal ball-gazing, as Bill Sutherland described some of the emerging big issues for conservationists, including microplastic pollution and large-scale international land acquisitions, as identified through a horizon-scanning programme at the University of Cambridge. The forward-looking aspect of the new decade was further endorsed by Peter Herkenrath, who outlined some of the key events occurring this year under the auspices of the International Year of Biodiversity and emphasized the opportunities engendered by this Year, such as the chance to promote biodiversity among the wider public. A later talk returned, in passing, to the significance of the Year, with a discussion on biodiversity indicators.

Consideration of the future, for conservationists at least, inevitably brings the spectre of climate change to the fore, so Humphrey Crick's discourse on how we should plan for a warmer climate, in the face of 'global weirding', was salutary. The current interest in ecosystem-scale conservation should provide more resilience than the previous conservation paradigms of species protection or nature reserves, although questions such as how to assess the health and resilience of an ecosystem, as well as the importance of connectivity and permeability in habitat networks, still require attention. Climate change was further dealt with in the informative mini-round table (disappointingly held along a rectangular table rather than an undersized piece of furniture) entitled REDD: climate solution or red herring? The three speakers during this session provided a concise and clear account of the Copenhagen conference, a call for