

tree frog, which is somewhat smaller than the ground frog. The tree frog is still found on Viti Levu in damp forests near streams but the ground frog has declined dramatically since the introduction of the mongoose. A lesser known creature is Fiji's "bolo", or burrowing snake. It is a member of the cobra family, and though quite timid is nevertheless poisonous. It lives in areas of loose soil and leaf litter and grows to only 40cm. Very little is known about Fiji's only endemic snake.

Fiji also possesses a variety of very ancient plants. It is the home of *Degeneria vitiensis* (masiratu), which is the only member of the family Degeneriaceae. Authorities place it second on the list of the most primitive flowering plants known.

Conservation in Fiji

The conservation of representative (or any) natural areas in Fiji is sadly lacking. There is only minimal sensitivity to habitat protection although a wide range of areas call out for preservation.

Although relatively large areas of rainforest remain, much of it has been logged at some stage. There still remain, however, extensive areas of untouched forest that adorn the jagged peaks and steep valleys of the misty interior of the two largest islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, not to mention the large forests of the Garden Island, Taveuni.

Of Fiji's land surface (18,376 km²), only 6266 ha is legally protected. Fiji has no national parks, but does have a few nature reserves and sanctuaries. Legislation exists to protect wildlife and habitats, but as yet it has not been greatly effective in landscape preservation, although it lies latent as a potential vehicle for conservation in the future.

A strong argument for conservation can be based on the needs of the country's native animals, such as most of the land birds which are unable to survive in logged areas. Remaining areas of virgin rainforest have escaped exploitation thanks to their inaccessibility. One such area of virgin dakua forest is an isolated valley adjacent to Fiji's highest peak Mt Tomanivi, but local landowners want to log it.

One success story has been the granting of funds to protect 120 ha of dakua forest on Vanua Levu. New Zealand aid money was made available early in 1987 for the establishment of the proposed Waisali Reserve. The milling company has agreed to surrender its claim to this area provided the landowners are compensated.

Attitudes towards logging of native forests are somewhat ambivalent: people of the coastal areas and towns appeared to have little affinity for their forests, perhaps because they simply have never set foot into the interior and therefore remain unaware of its natural beauty.

I spoke to one forester who was working for the Fiji Pine Commission. He seemed quite sure that most of the native forests would eventually disappear, taking the wildlife with them. He expressed a sadness about this, but accepted it as a fait accompli. I asked him about the steepest country, and he said: "They will be in there with the cable haulers."

The forests are a source of income for the people of the interior (kai colo pronounced

kai tholo) and the value of the land is often measured in its anticipated royalties from logging. It is important to recognise that this potential income is a major asset to the village or clan (mataqali — pronounced matanggali), and attempts to preserve these forests must also take into account the monetary needs of the people who are dependent on this land.

Indigenous Fijians own 83 percent of the total land area, the remainder is either crown land or leasehold land. The Native Lands Trust Board is an organisation that has in the past helped counteract the most destructive aspects of development on native-owned land, but still in many cases has failed to be effective in preventing a great deal of habitat destruction.

Conservation programmes require high degrees of sensitivity in observing the needs of local peoples as their interests in the land are first and foremost. There is certainly room however, for common ground to be reached in the conservation issues of these South Pacific landscapes.

Despite the recent Fiji coup, we should not turn our backs on our Pacific neighbours and their forests. Conservation is above politics; Fiji's moist and mystic forestscape has an intrinsic beauty and innocence that should not be ignored.

Born in Fiji, Sean Weaver lived there during his early childhood, and although now a New Zealand resident, regards Fiji as his second home. He is now studying towards a PhD on forest dynamics and conservation biology.

