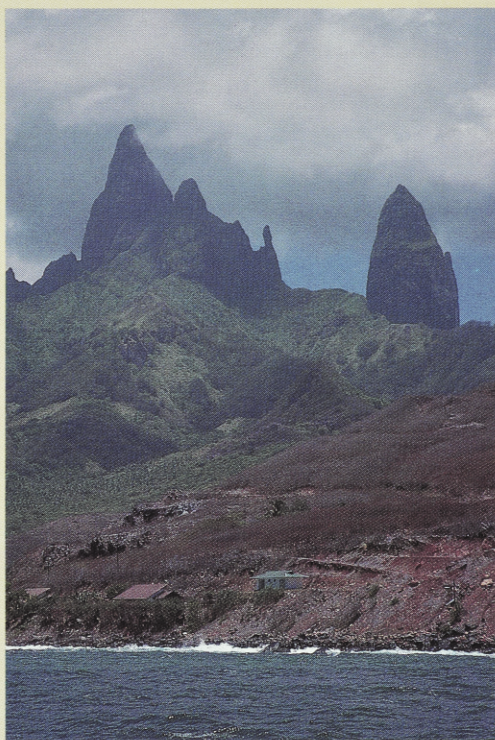


stepped up, and a full recovery programme is now in full swing, with the kakerori being the centrepiece of a major park proposal which will protect other endemic species such as the Rarotonga starling and fruit dove.

We also owe something to the species themselves. Because of the size of our population and our special capacity for modifying the environment, the human species has become the *de facto* guardian of the world's wildlife. Though extinction is a natural part of the evolutionary process, species are disappearing at a rate far beyond evolution's ability to replace them. These species have just as much right to exist as we do, but their welfare and very existence is in our hands.



*The rugged spires of Ua Pou Island, until recently home of the elegant pihiti or ultramarine lory. Unfortunately ship rats have invaded the island, placing a question mark over the bird's future.*

Finally, we owe it to the birds to find out about them. In the Amazon, species are disappearing at a frightening rate as the rainforests are chopped down and sold for short-term profit. Though the loss of the birds is in reality a relatively minor symptom of a massive problem, it is often the first indicator that something is seriously wrong. Understanding the loss of birds enables us to tell people of the wider problem. But merely knowing is not enough. Their plight should be broadcast from the rooftops of the world!

### What should we do?

- Stick up for endangered birds! They teach us a sensitivity to nature, and tell us about the consequences of our own misuse of the environment; lessons which we may not have learned without understanding the sacrifice of those species. As symbols, they also lead people into the wider conservation issues. Who knows how much influence the tiny black robin and the magnificent efforts on its behalf had on conservation awareness in general? Certainly, the Comalco "Cash for Cans" kakapo campaign illustrates how the plight of a single species can bring awareness and action on a wide front. There is a common misconception that if we put too much effort into endangered species, there will not be enough for other projects. However, the money available for endangered species is often given quite specifically and would not necessarily be available for other work. Also, the spin-offs of habitat protection or greater awareness go far beyond the welfare of the individual species concerned.

*Tropical seabirds such as this red-footed booby at Tetiaroa Atoll are important guides to help local fishermen find tuna.*

- Stick up for common species! There are not many birds which bear the label "pest", at least not to the extent that we could justify regarding the species as wholly undesirable. Given the recent history of our management of the Earth's living things, many of the common species may one day also be endangered unless we have respect for them and their habitats.
- Learn! Find out more about the ecology of birds, as a means of finding out more about the world's ecosystems and what our place in them should be.
- Acknowledge the cultural importance to us of birds and use them unashamedly as symbols of conservation, both for their own sake and as a means of leading people into an understanding of the wider conservation and environmental issues.
- Use our knowledge to make our lifestyles more compatible with that of the wildlife around us in order to complement the efforts we have made in protecting reserves. The challenge of conservation is far greater than just the creation and maintenance of parks and reserves.

We need to acknowledge that we are part of the natural community because, while we certainly have a great deal more influence than most other organisms on earth, we certainly do not have a great deal of control. It is time to understand what the plight of the birds is telling us, apply our knowledge and introduce some control.

Perhaps more than any other living creatures, birds touch our lives in both direct and symbolic ways. What are the qualifications to read the message they offer? Like the talk-back man, the child, the ferry passenger and the trampers, all we need is to be there. In the gardens as well as in the wilderness a message about the health of the planet is there if people are given some guidance to read it. When those messengers vanish, it is our world which has diminished both aesthetically and ecologically. ✎

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Mike Rudge, Alison Ballance and Tony Pritchard for helpful comment on this essay.

*Dr Rod Hay has worked for Forest and Bird on Kokako and South Pacific conservation. Formerly with DSIR Ecology Division, he is now working for the Department of Conservation on South Pacific bird conservation.*