



JACQUI BARRINGTON

Invasive weeds are a major threat to the Cooks' environment. Balloon vine – a local version of old man's beard – has the potential to destroy Rarotonga's inner lowland forest. Recorded from the 1920s, it only really took off after cyclones in 1987, when widespread stripping of trees allowed more light into the forest and enabled the wind-borne seeds to become widely established. No control is known.

a small patch, the size of a house section and the last stronghold of the kuramo'o, is left at the northern end.

The northern crook of the lagoon by the airport, supposedly protected as a fish spawning ground, has recently suffered wholesale bulldozing of all waterfront vegetation, including ngangie, a plant that shades and cools the water and is the local ecological equivalent of the mangrove.

Government plans are afoot to triple the number of available hotel beds on Aitutaki over the next ten years.

Many islanders do not want this kind of development. They fear the atoll cannot sustain it either environmentally or socially. There is already much resentment at Air Rarotonga's day trips onto the lagoon which come direct from the main island, putting further stress on local resources, while adding nothing to the island's economy.

As the old systems have broken down, the fragile environment of the Cooks hangs in the balance. The following anecdote perhaps epitomises the paralysis.

Fishermen on Aitutaki caught a large turtle, bound it up and put it on sale in the market to be eaten. One of the enlightened locals, working in the tourism industry, bought it to save it, having the notion to ship it back to an uninhabited

island. Until transport could be arranged, it was put in a cage in the polluted lagoon. Days became weeks; weeks became months. Five months went by and the turtle languished, weed growing on its shell, its eyes turning red, fungal infections invading its skin. Direct action finally came to the turtle's aid and one night it was liberated. The unofficial rescuers tipped over the cage, and without a second's hesitation the turtle began swimming strongly in the direction of the reef channel to the open sea and freedom.

The question is whether the political will and the funds to save the lagoons from further degradation can be found, and how long they will take to recover. New Zealand aid and advice should be geared towards a sustainable future for both the Cook Islands economy and that country's unique species. ♦

JACQUI BARRINGTON is Forest and Bird's northern field officer. She has had a long love affair with tropical islands and lived in the Carribean for seven years.



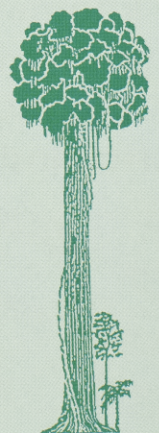
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