Kia Orana, Kotou katoatoa, teia te nuti no Tiurai 2019.

Welcome to the July 2019 edition of our newsletter.

CITC Last Straw Campaign

For the month of July, CITC ran a campaign to rid Rarotonga and Aitutaki of plastic straws. They invited members of the public to drop unused plastic straws into collected bins at various CITC outlets for the month of July.

CITC banned the importation and sale of plastic straws last year, leaving its two pallets of unsold plastic straws stockpiled. Not wanting these to end up in the Arorangi landfill, they arranged for the straws to be shipped to New Zealand for recycling. The straws collected from the Last Straw Campaign will be added to the recycling shipment. CITC staff report they are pleased with the public response.

Congratulations to TIS’ Gold Corporate member for yet another great sustainable initiative.

Global Environment Facility Workshop in Fiji

TIS Project Officer Kate McKessar attended the Global Environment Facility (GEF), Expanded Constituency Workshop (ECW) in Nadi, Fiji this month.

A number of Cook Islands Government participants were also in attendance. The ECW was focused on the Pacific region and was designed to keep key stakeholders, including civil society, up to date on GEF strategies, policies and procedures and to encourage coordination. This was the first year that two civil society representatives from each country were invited to attend, where previously it had only been one.

Field trip to the Natutu village in Fiji with the Global Environment Facility.

The workshop provided a great opportunity to meet other representatives to discuss priority issues and share lessons and experiences from the development and implementation of GEF projects throughout the Pacific region. Specifically, the main topics focused on Biodiversity, Desertification, Climate Change and Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs).

Te Ipukarea Society has been the recipient of several grants through the GEF Small Grants Programme. These include the current Community Based Climate Change Adaptation Project in Tokelau, Niue and Aitutaki; the 2018 Suwarrow rat eradication project and the 2017 National Waste Management Project.
Tourist chooses volunteering over holiday

New Zealander Saskia Wagner shares her recent experience volunteering at the Takitumu Conservation Estate while on holiday in Rarotonga.

When I decided to go to Rarotonga for a holiday, I knew that I didn’t want to spend my time solely relaxing in paradise. Coming from the Coromandel Peninsula in New Zealand I have been working in pest eradication with the Department of Conservation (DoC) and also with other environment groups on conservation projects. I knew I wanted to connect with this place, find out about its conservation projects and how I could become a part of it.

A week on from contacting the Te Ipukarea Society (TIS), I arrive in Rarotonga. Being my first time in Rarotonga, I don’t know what to expect but TIS has put me in contact with Ian Karika who picks me up with his electric van and off we go to the Takitumu Conservation Area (TCA).

The TCA was established in 1996 by the 3 families that owned the land where most of the birds were located, in order to offer greater protection to the bird known as Kakerori, a small endemic flycatcher. The TCA received funding support from the regional South Pacific Biodiversity Conservation Project (SPBCP) until 2001.

We leave a wide plateau of orange trees behind as we head up a winding track until we reach a gate. Before entering the TCA Ian offers a prayer. I had arrived a couple of days ago from New Zealand and I haven’t seen nor heard any birds other than Myna birds. Luckily this was about to change.

We enter the gate and after a few steps I could perceive a different call: “TCHEE-KAKEROR”. It feels like a magical place, a sheltered and protected valley not that far from the sea. Is this where the conservation movement in the Cook Islands began? The story of this little bird - the Kakerori.

Whilst walking up the hill clearing tracks with our machetes, Ian tells me the story of the Kakerori and how it went from nearly extinct to no longer critically endangered. He picks up a half-eaten coconut and says “they’re very active again”. Ian is talking about the rats, the main predator of the little bird on the island. With a declining population of just 29 Kakerori birds in 1989 the National Environment Service (NES) and DoC New Zealand decided to start an intensive programme of rat poisoning and nest protection. This included cutting a network of tracks, setting up bait stations and putting out rat bait on a regular basis from the first week of September.

NZ volunteer Saskia Wagner
through to early January each year. Since the introduction of the programme, Kakarori breeding productivity has been recorded annually and bird numbers are now up to around 460 birds, proving the programme has been a great success.

Over the next few days we replenished the bait stations within the 155 ha of forested hill country that make up the TCA. We hiked up and down the hills, clearing tracks for the September rat bait operation, had coconuts for lunch, all while being amazed at the views over the valley and the reef. What else could anyone ask for?

Being part of this movement, even if it was only for a couple of weeks, was a special experience. Meitaki ma’ata lan for sharing your knowledge and your stories. I have to take off my hat to you.

Te Ipukarea Society President attends the Oceania Regional Conservation Forum.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) was Created in 1948, and has evolved into the world’s largest and most diverse environmental network. It is composed of both government and civil society organisations and provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. Te Ipukarea Society is the only member of IUCN in the Cook Islands.

Our President, Teina Mackenzie, represented the Society at the IUCN Oceania Regional Environment Forum in the last week of July, in Suva, Fiji. The event is held once every 4 years, and brings IUCN members and commission members together. The IUCN Regional Conservation Forum is held as a lead up to the IUCN World Conservation Congress, also held every 4 years. It provides a platform to receive progress reports from the Oceania Regional Office on the implementation of the 2017-2020 Programme. It is also an opportunity for the region to provide input on the Global Intersessional Programme and the Regional Implementation Plan 2021-2024, which will be launched in June 2020 in Marseilles, France, at the World Conservation Congress.

Reducing plastic waste in the tourism industry

As many readers are aware, Te Ipukarea Society, with the support of the Tourism Industry Council and Cook Islands Tourism authority, has launched the Mana Tiaki eco certification scheme for tourism operators. To attain the “green tick” you need to be operating with a strong emphasis on limiting the impact of your operation on the environment.

Since the launch in April this year 35 businesses, including accommodations and tour operators have achieved eco-certification. We are encouraging more tour operators to join up and this month hosted another training workshop to help support businesses to apply. A massive thanks again to TIS
corporate sponsor Nautilus for the venue and catering!

One of the major sources of plastic pollution from tourism is the packaging for toiletries. Many of the hotels are still providing shampoo, conditioner, shower gel etc in small disposable plastic containers. There are more than 2200 rooms available for tourists in Rarotonga and Aitutaki. If only half of these are providing 3 small bottles of toiletries in this manner, and assuming a 70% occupancy rate and the containers are replaced at least twice in an average stay of one week, that is approximately 250,000 mini plastic bottles, many half full of leftover products, ending up in our already overflowing landfills every year.

The good news is there are more environmentally friendly alternatives that can help your business achieve the “green tick” by minimising this waste. There are a number of local retailers selling shampoos and other liquid toiletries in dispensers which can be refilled from bulk supplies. Even better, there is at least one local entrepreneur now making shampoo, conditioner, and other toiletries in solid form, which require no plastic wrapping at all. The other good news is that this “green” approach is likely to reduce your operating cost, as buying in bulk will be less expensive than providing these products in small plastic containers.

So, to any accommodators out there who are not yet signed up to Mana Tiaki. If you are still using small plastic bottles of shampoo, conditioner, shower gel etc in their rooms, now is a good time to rethink. You will not be alone in helping save the planet, but would be joining a host of overseas hoteliers who are going green. Inter Continental Hotel group has recently announced is removing all small plastic toiletries from 843,000 rooms in 5,600 hotels by 2021. But here in the Cook Islands, we can do that by 2019!

If you would like any information on attaining Mana Tiaki certification, and where to obtain these more environmentally friendly alternatives, or if you are a supplier of these alternatives and would like us to help promote your products, please come and see us at Te Ipukarea Society next to Bamboo Jacks, or contact us on 21144 or info@tiscookislands.org


The new Seabed Minerals Act was passed on June 14th 2019. This was particularly disappointing, as, despite a consultation period lasting approximately 6 months, a number of key issues remained in the Act as passed. Te Ipukarea Society and Korero o te Orau had commissioned a comprehensive independent legal review of the draft Bill, and had made numerous suggestions for improvement. Only a few of these were made in the final draft passed by Parliament. The correct process would have been for Parliament to appoint a select committee to consider the final draft, before it was passed. This would have given additional time for further negotiation and clarification on controversial issues.

Letters to the Editor

This is a new section for our newsletter. Just a trial at this stage, to see if any of our readers would like to provide some feedback on our work. To kick this off, we have a letter from Dr Philomene Verlaan. Apologies to Philomene that this has taken so long to publish, due to some mis-communication during staff travel and sick leave!
Dear Editor,

Kia orana.

The March 2019 TIS Newsletter quoted from para 2.3 p.4 of Iorns Magallanes’s legal opinion on deep sea mining as follows:

"The dumping of the waste and unwanted material back to the seafloor typically produces large sediment plumes which can interfere with light and thus photosynthesis for marine algae and thus disturbance of whole food chains, as well as the clouds of waste dust (etc) affecting visibility and purity of the water itself, driving fish and other marine animals elsewhere."

Unfortunately the highlighted part of this sentence is incorrect as written. Even in the clearest open-ocean waters photosynthesis can only take place in the upper two hundred meters of the water column. The nodule fields of interest are found on the seafloor at several thousand meters depth. No photosynthesis occurs here.

Thus should unwanted nodule-related detritus (referred to in the Law of the Sea Convention Annex III(17)(2)(f) as sediments, wastes and other effluents (SWOE)) be returned to the seabed ("dumping" is a legal term which must be used with great care, as it is addressed by at least three international Conventions and several regional Conventions), photosynthesis by photosynthetic organisms (which include more than marine algae) at the surface will not be affected.

Sedimentation associated with nodule mining is correctly viewed as an environmental concern, but it is much more complex than indicated in the quoted sentence. Developing environmental and commercially approaches to addressing sedimentation issues is possible, but doing so requires careful and accurate characterization of the potential environmental consequences, so the real problems can be identified and tackled. This emerging industry is trying to get it right, and it needs all members of civil society as fertile sources of creative problem-solving to help it do so. But these warmly welcomed imaginations must be unleashed on actual environmental issues related to nodule mining. These do not include possible effects on photosynthesis from SWOE return to the seafloor.

Happy to provide further information if needed. Keep up the good work with this excellent newsletter.

All best wishes,

Dr. Philomene Verlaan JD PhD FIMarEST
Visiting Colleague, Department of Oceanography,
University of Hawai’i
Trustee, Advisory Committee on Protection of the Sea (ACOPS)

Meitaki ma’ata for reading our newsletter and for your continued support. Please be sure to check out our sponsors page below!

Kia manuia,

The TIS Team