

Crafting a Vision for the Future: Protecting New Guinea's TransFly...

By Christian Thompson

"When I was a little boy, you could walk into the bush about 2 kilometres and come back 30 minutes later with something you'd hunted", Yul explains nostalgically. "But now you have to walk for hours and hours, sometimes even days". This stark omen is the reason why Yulianus Bole Gebze, an elder from the village of Wambi in Papua province, Indonesia, has made the two-day journey to Madang, on the other side of the international border in Papua New Guinea.

We sit in the grounds of the Alexishafen Catholic Mission, on the palm-lined shore of the Madang lagoon, a global marine biodiversity hotspot renowned for its beautiful tropical reefs that are more abundant with life than the Great Barrier Reef. Dotted around the area are the relics of a bygone era – the rusted remains of a World War II tank sit among the overgrown grass outside the complex. We are joined at the Mission by 75 other delegates; community representatives, scientists, government officials and conservation experts from across Asia, Australia and the US, who have come to this tranquil setting to help craft a conservation plan for an area known as the TransFly.



The TransFly is without doubt a unique place on Earth – a landscape of grasslands, savannas, wetlands and monsoon forest habitats that spans 100,000 sq km across the international border of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, on the south coast of the island of New Guinea.

The area is truly a paradise. Millions of birds inhabit the floodplains of slow moving rivers, the biggest of which is the 800km Fly River, which flows across the two countries and gives the TransFly region its name. Over 50% of New Guinea's 800 bird species can be found in the area, including 80 species endemic to New Guinea. The TransFly is one of Asia-Pacific's largest, richest and most pristine savannah wetlands. The savannas and monsoon forests are home to endemic marsupial cats, flying possums and many stunning birds of paradise. "We have fruit bats, cuscus, freshwater and saltwater crocodiles, and black and white geese," Yul says.



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However, the future of the TransFly hangs in the balance. The riches of the area are under increasing threat from hunting, development and invasive species introduced by settlers. Transmigration, settlement and incoming large-scale development are perhaps the largest threats facing Yul's community, which is nestled in the heart of the TransFly and depends on the land for subsistence. "The majority of the people in Papua are from other islands and have moved here. They are yet to share the same view of the environment as we native Papuans," explains Yul, his brow furrowed. "We hunt deer, wallaby and cassowary, but only hunt what we need to eat. Sometimes we hunt to celebrate something, or for ceremonial reasons. However, the people that come onto our lands hunt to make money, and take more than they need," Yul says.

Illegal hunting is not the only problem his community experiences. Large illegal fishing nets are cast into his community's water to catch as many fish as possible. The replenishment of fish stocks is then hampered by fish that have been introduced into the area by settlers, such as the cannibal fish, which eats the eggs and larvae of other fish.

Gambir trees are being exploited on a large scale for their bark, which is exported in thousands of tonnes to lucrative markets in Java, China and Japan, where it's used to make glue. The gambir tree bears sweet fruit, which provides an important source of food for the cassowary, a flightless ostrich-like bird, which can grow up to 2m in height. "If there's no bark on the tree, the tree will die," says Yul. "The cassowary will go from the area if there is no food."

The cassowary is an important source of food for Yul's community, and the feathers of the bird are used for traditional headdress. "What's worse is that people eat the fruit as well, and if they can't reach the fruit, they cut the tree down to get at it," says Albertus Moiwend, Committee Chairman of the Marind-Anim tribe, who's been sitting quietly next to Yul until now, "even the younger trees of 15-20cm in diameter."

Yul believes that the TransFly is in great danger. In 20 years time, he believes much of the TransFly in the Indonesian province of Papua will have been destroyed.

The impact of the development and settlement in Papua has also been felt across the border in Papua New Guinea. About six or seven years ago, the people in the community of Rouku began to notice a dramatic decline in the population of saratoga and barramundi fish in the waters surrounding their village in the Tonda Wildlife Management Area. "Myself and 20 other community leaders went to Papua to see how the other side was managing their resources," says Abia Bai, a community elder of the Maiyawa clan in Papua New Guinea, also attending the conference. "We found saratoga fish that had been caught illegally in the waters of my village." It's a situation that could get a lot worse if more resources are destroyed in Papua.

To understand the current pressures facing the TransFly in Papua, one must go back to 1969, when the Indonesian government introduced a new five-year plan. The plan aimed to unlock the abundance of untapped resources in Papua and develop the land of the province, moving the economy towards one that was market-based, rather than traditional subsistence. As a result, towns such as Merauke near Yul's village grew rapidly, as economic migrants moved into the area from other islands in the archipelago, seeking new opportunities. Today, this has resulted in high levels of poaching and forest clearance, with the land used for plantations that can satisfy the market demand for palm oil, sugar, and other lucrative commodities.

"There are now plans for a 40,000 hectare sugar cane plantation in an area close to the Wasur National Park and a further 120,000 hectares elsewhere in the TransFly," Fitriani Ardiansyah, Forest Restoration and Threats Mitigation Coordinator for WWF Indonesia, tells me. "A request to develop 260,000 hectares of eucalyptus for the pulp and paper industry is also on the table," he adds.

If these plantations are approved without taking into account environmental or social considerations, or a commitment from companies to operate sustainably, then it may result in large swathes of pristine TransFly monsoon forests and other unique ecosystems being destroyed.

All the land in Papua is traditionally owned by local communities, so in order to acquire land for development, companies must either pay communities cash for the land, or try to influence the regional authorities, to convince the communities that developing their land would be a good idea and profitable.

The market economy in Papua is supposed to benefit everybody. However, communities like Yul's, which have existed for hundreds of years on a subsistence basis, are poorly skilled to contribute to or benefit from a market economy. "We sell potatoes for daily use, but the economy doesn't change for us," says Yul. This makes it all too tempting for landowners to sign away their land for short-term incentives.

WWF Indonesia has helped raise awareness among local communities about the need to keep their land. All too often, unscrupulous investors will arrive offering perhaps one million rupiah (US\$100) to landowners for their land. "This is a lot of money to us," says Yul. "Hire it, rent it, but don't sell it, WWF advises us. And it's true – once the money is gone, what do you have left?" he shrugs.

"The government claims plantations will benefit local communities, however the reality is that mostly they won't," says Benja Mambai knowingly. He's been the Director of WWF Indonesia's office in Papua for four years now. "This is why WWF is supporting local communities with the development of a community livelihoods programme. We've assisted communities through identifying alternative means of



income, such as the sustainable harvesting of cajuput oil, an essential oil used for massage. We're also involved in the introduction of community-based sustainable forestry, which will eventually allow communities to supply certified timber to the international market."

The landscape of the TransFly is not just important for livelihoods. Yul belongs to the Marind-Anim tribe, one of 60 indigenous tribes whose lives, customs, beliefs, languages and knowledge are inextricably linked to the TransFly. He is here in Alexishafen to deliver an important speech on the need to conserve the TransFly, and the cultural heritage of his people. "I want to preserve all things for my ancestors and future generations," exclaims Yul, father of six children, and grandfather of two.

It's difficult to believe the ancestors of this mild-mannered gentleman, neatly dressed and with a soft temperament, were ferocious head-hunters, who raided the land of other clans across the border in Papua New Guinea, and terrorised the British in the late 1880s. "My tribe featured in the reports of Governor MacGregor," he announces proudly, referring to the colonial days when Sir William MacGregor was the administrator of British New Guinea, "and when the Dutch arrived, they knew to keep their distance," he adds.



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I'd always assumed that the heads were taken as trophies, but Yul enlightened me to the real reason behind this dark practice. "It was a religious act to preserve life," he says. "My ancestors believed that there were spirits in the world that they needed protecting from. So that they would not kill us, we needed spirits ourselves to protect us. We would acquire this 'protective' spirit when we killed men. We had to cut off his head and bring it back to our village.

"If the man was still alive before we took his head, we would ask his name – that name would then become the name of the spirit that would protect us. We would also give the same name to our children. I'm also called Mooli. This is my Paegez or 'head name' that my grandfather gave me. Mooli was the name of the man whose head he took."

However, it seems that things didn't always go to plan: "If the man is dead, and we did not know his name, the head would be called 'Igizno', meaning 'no name'," he laughs.

Today, Yul views his neighbours in Papua New Guinea a little differently. "They are my brothers and my sisters," he states poignantly. Tribes are scattered across the region, a result of the nomadic journeys that took place long before any modern border was established, so strong cultural bonds exist between the indigenous communities living in both countries straddled by the TransFly. It is common for people to own land on the opposite side, and often people marry into other tribes across the border.



“It is the unique combination of biodiversity and cultural values that reflects the importance of the TransFly for local indigenous people,” explains Michele Bowe, TransFly Ecoregion Coordinator for WWF.

Michele has been working in the TransFly for 15 years, so has a good idea of what’s at stake. “Until now, there have been no attempts to prioritise conservation efforts in the region, properly document its biodiversity or cultural values or identify how conservation efforts can proceed hand in hand with development”, she explains. “A transboundary conservation and development vision for the TransFly could assist the region to develop in a sustainable way and prevent the environment being devastated by logging, agricultural expansion, poaching, invasive plant infestations, and road and settlement development.”

After the three-day conference, during which people worked with maps to identify the critical areas of importance for biodiversity, sites that are important for cultural reasons to local people and discussed areas across the region that required special management to safeguard other values such as water resources, an important announcement is made. Community leaders, government officials and conservation experts have succeeded in crafting a new vision for the TransFly, one that takes into consideration the importance of biodiversity and cultural conservation but also the development needs of the area.

The plan is a lifeline for the region, proposing widespread protection from logging for threatened monsoon forests in Papua, as well as wholesale protection of important features on the TransFly landscape, such as grasslands, which are important hunting grounds; wetlands, the only wet areas during extreme dry seasons; and mudflats, which provide critical habitat for migratory birds. Essential water catchment areas, which provide major sources of food for local communities across both Papua and PNG, will also be safeguarded under the new conservation vision. However, much work still needs to be done to turn the vision into reality. The challenge to safeguard the riches of the TransFly has only just begun.

“A vision is very important,” says Benja, philosophically. “It’s like a dream-like guideline for what could be achieved in 10 years from now.” He pauses. “I think the TransFly has a good future. This is my dream anyway,” he smiles.