

Protecting Sacred Lands in the Last Paradise on Earth...

By Christian Thompson

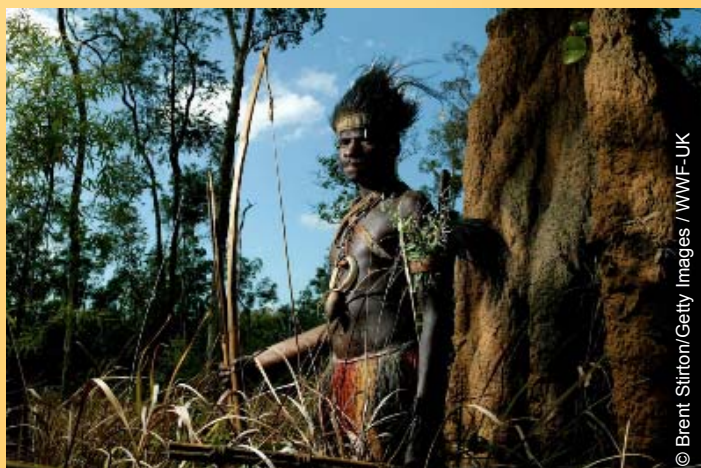
"You dig a big yam up with a stick made out of yuka, it has to be a big one" explains Abia Bai, a community elder from the Maiyawa tribe, who is sharing with me the secret to a good yam harvest. "You then oven it, break it and leave it [on your land]. The harvest is then guaranteed to be good", he says confidently. Abia's proud of his community's garden, a term used to describe the land his village grows food on, more like a small farm than a garden you or I are used to. The garden contains staple foods such as yams, taro, banana and cassava. "The gardens of those who don't do it aren't that good", adds Abia wisely. The size and quality of your yams is very important it seems – a sign of prestige and expertise.

The yam also had a significant role in Abia's family history. "My great-grandfather wanted to live where there were birds of paradise", Abia tells me. He was certainly looking in the right place. New Guinea has something of a monopoly on birds-of-paradise - out of the 42 species of birds-of-paradise in the world, 36 can only be found on this island. A large proportion of these are in the TransFly - a landscape of grasslands, pristine savanna wetlands and monsoon forest habitats, which spans 10 million hectares across the international border of Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, on the southern coast of the island of New Guinea.



Abia explains how his ancestor Mathqwi, set off from his home in the village of Tamgara in search of a new place to settle, a land with good soil, grassland and monsoon forest. At first he settled in Acrimongo, but he only stayed a few days because there were no birds of paradise. He left again to find a river knowing that birds of paradise would surely be found there. The TransFly has many rivers, the greatest being the Fly river, which winds 500-miles across PNG and Indonesia, and gives the TransFly its name.

He arrived at one and decided to follow it. "As he walked he carried a bag containing yams which, because of the distance he had travelled, was by then beginning to cut into his back. He stopped for a while, and began smoking and enjoying the creation around him", Abia mimes. "As he rested a yam dropped out of the bag and turned to stone". This would happen at all the places he stopped to rest along his journey, marking the path he had taken. Finally, Abia tells me, he arrived at the village of Chufertthak, in the heart of the Transfly, where he saw to his delight, many beautiful birds of paradise. This is the place he was looking for and where he decided to settle. "A wild mango tree is also there and small bamboo grows" Abia says as he describes Chufertthak.



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Mathqwi was not alone however. The story goes that all along the journey domebagur the eel fish was following Mathqwi in the river marking his route in the creek as he went. To this day the eel fish is the clan's totem. These ancestral routes and totems are two important cultural symbols for the tribes that live in the TransFly.

Ancestors of other tribes who inhabit the region come from further a field, quite a lot further. "My tribe originated from Australia, or Sandawi as it's known to us", says Yulianus Bole Gebze, an elder from the village of Wambi in Papua province, Indonesia. "Our tribal narrations, which are preserved in our mythology, tell the legend of our origin", says Yul. He recites the legend of Yano, a giant kangaroo, who travelled by canoe across from Australia. When he reached land he turned into a man and began visiting all the lands in which Yul's tribe - the Marind-anim - can now be found, until he reached the Digoel river in Papua. Yano was eventually killed by a spear and upon his death his body turned into hundreds of small wallabies. "These are the wallabies that can be found throughout the savannas of the TransFly", Yul says.

Stories linking man and nature are a recurring theme in New Guinea mythology. "Marind derives from Mayo, which is the name of the belief system of our ancestors. Mayo teaches us that the whole of nature, even the whole universe, is linked to one another; men and nature are arranged in a family relationship with each other in an ever continuing link" says Yul. "We believe if one link is missing or damaged, people will experience a disaster, a catastrophe, when the whole universe will collapse and this will be the beginning of the end". Such is the bond between the people and nature, that each clan holds a particular affinity to a specific plant or animal, sometimes more than one. These plants and animals often have historical significance to the community and are held as the tribe's totem. Totem animals include crocodiles, pythons, catfish, and birds such as harpy eagles, whistling kites, owls, green doves and swamp ducks. Some totems are less animated, such as bananas, coconuts and limestone, whilst others are very specific, like cassowary hearts or kidneys.

"My clan's totem is the [palm] tree", Yul says. He explains when Geb, one of his ancestors, was buried he resurfaced from the ground as a giant palm tree. "We call the palm 'Ami', meaning our grandfather". It's understandable then that Yul gets concerned when he sees the environment being destroyed around him. Industrial logging, sugarcane, oil palm and



acacia plantations, as well as road developments, have all had a devastating impact on the landscape around his community. "This kind of damage of our land, which has been preserved by our ancestors from time immemorial, makes us feel pain in our hearts".

"We cannot talk about conservation in terms of biology alone", explains Benja Mambai, Director of WWF Indonesia's office in Papua. "Local communities must come first and

then biodiversity". In both Papua and Papua New Guinea, communities traditionally own the land, so it's crucial that any conservation effort gets the support of indigenous tribes. WWF has understood the importance of community participation in conserving the TransFly ever since the organisation began working directly with communities during the 1990s to help protect their sacred lands.

Documenting the cultural importance of the TransFly has been a significant part of a three-year project undertaken by WWF researchers. In 2003, WWF began to conduct biological and community surveys in the TransFly. "Surveys on community sacred places, ancestor routes, totemic species and cultural icons have revealed a significant overlap with habitats and species of high biological importance", says Michele Bowe, WWF's TransFly Ecoregion Coordinator.

The exercise was part of an ambitious process to identify and accurately map out all of the unique features, both biological and cultural, that are threatened in the TransFly. In May this year a conservation vision was forged for the TransFly by community leaders, government and conservation experts, based on the biological and cultural data compiled by WWF with cutting edge computer technology for assistance. The goal of the vision is to ensure more land is protected and the region develops in a sustainable way – in a way that is not detrimental to the environment or local cultures.

Once implemented, the vision will have a significant impact on the landscape of the region. The joint conservation initiative will protect important features of the TransFly such as grasslands, beach ridges, wetlands and mudflats, as well as essential water catchment areas in both Papua and PNG. In addition, such is the threat facing monsoon forests in Papua that under the new plan, the vast majority of these will be spared from logging. The conservation plan has already succeeded in causing government planners to seriously rethink the location of several plantations and other developments proposed for the TransFly. In some cases it has resulted in the size of these developments being reduced significantly, by half in one instance.

In Papua New Guinea the ultimate decision on how lands will be used is in the hands of their traditional landowners, and only in their presence and with their informed consent can plans be made about their lands. For those in Papua Indonesia, who haven't always enjoyed the same rights as their fellow tribesmen in PNG, the WWF research has greatly empowered a regulation introduced by Indonesia in 2001, in which greater autonomy was granted to the province. Now the government is required to consult extensively with traditional landowners regarding any development plans and ask permission from communities before their land can be used.

On both sides of the border, the research will both better inform government development policy and emphasise the importance of traditional cultural sites, stories and totems, which were previously not understood.

Understandably however, some community landowners are quick to sell the rights to their land to developers, plantation owners and logging companies, for attractive sums of money or other incentives. WWF has helped raise awareness among local communities



about the need to resist short-term financial gains and keep their land. “If they do not see benefit of the biodiversity on their land they will destroy it”, says Benja.

“We’ve been promoting the importance of culture, through traditional symbols, ancestor routes and story places as a means of enhancing community pride and achievement and reinforcing the historical links between the people and the land, so that they see the benefit of managing the land sustainably and in the long term”, says Michele. “For the first time, communities will have access to documented records of their cultural history. This can be used to encourage younger generations to continue to learn and respect traditional values and the environment”.

Some communities however started taking the initiative a long time ago and have already been making great efforts themselves to conserve their land. Rouku, the sizeable village in which Abia lives is nestled in the Tonda Wildlife Management Area, in southern Papua New Guinea. Established in 1975 by local communities, to protect and conserve the exotic and unique environment found in the TransFly region.



“We teach the younger generation not to spoil, but respect the environment”, says Abia, who was the chairman of the local school for 18 years. The Tonda Wildlife Management Area is an environment managed by the village community to conserve and sustainably use their natural resources. “Part we use, part we protect” says Abia, explaining how his community uses the land that surrounds his village. In

the forest not designated protected they hunt with bow and arrow and dogs for wild pig, deer, cassowary, wallaby, bandicoot, fish and birds.

Wildlife Management Areas are designed to protect the biodiversity of an area, whilst safeguarding the culture of its traditional owners.

“The vision is important for communities and important for conservation”, says Benja, “by conserving biodiversity, we also protect community livelihoods and promote sustainable resource management”. WWF has been working with local communities to help set up further Wildlife Management Areas as well as community-owned and managed enterprises, ones that do not require land rights to change hands. Projects to sustainably harvest timber and cajuput oil, an essential oil used for massage, have been initiated. Such eco-enterprise is already helping promote community development and traditional management, ensuring that the TransFly’s sacred lands remain in traditional hands.

“Whenever people ask me what is WWF doing in New Guinea, I always say to them we’re working to conserve the last paradise on Earth”, Benja tells me. The Transfly is surely the jewel of this paradise.