

Rainforest restoration

Villagers managed to stop logging operations starting in Tetepare Island's virgin forests and are restoring Rendova's once-logged rainforest (pictured). Photo: Craig Salmon

Rebecca Stirnemann and Dean Baigent-Mercer visit two special rainforest and marine conservation projects in the Solomon Islands.

Many rainforests across the world have been logged and/or wiped out, especially in coastal areas. The remote island of Tetepare, in the western Solomon Islands, is one of the last places where such forests have been spared in the Pacific. With friends, we were lucky enough to travel there recently, staying in a traditional leaf house at the heart of this special forest and marine conservation project.

Indigenous descendants of the Tetepare people, who left the island uninhabited for over 150 years, now own and care for the land, where giant rainforest trees grow from the top of volcanic ridges down to the waves.

For over a decade, they have also enforced a fishing ban in the large lagoon and carried out turtle and dugong protection. Coral famous for its diversity surrounds the island – a testament to the health of this ecosystem.

Protection of these ancient Tetepare rainforests didn't happen easily. Auntie Mary Bea told us about how the forest was nearly lost. She remembers watching helplessly as trees were logged and bulldozed on the neighbouring island of Rendova (see panel).

With the loss of the forests, she says the local culture of caring for nature broke down, and rivers became dirty and were no longer good for drinking. For the first time, people experienced flash floods in the village. She told us how the

once abundant fishing grounds were spoilt with sediment.

It was too late to stop the logging at Rendova. But when Mary and her family heard about a proposal to log neighbouring Tetepare, they and some of the other original island descendants decided they had to stop it happening.

Some of them jumped on boats and travelled the two hours to the island to fight to protect it. As traditional owners, they asserted their rights to prevent logging.

"We knew what was right for Tetepare," says Mary. "Now I am thankful to be a woman who protected Tetepare Island."

Mary now works to ensure Tetepare operates a genuinely sustainable ecotourism business, which helps fund the conservation, monitoring, and policing of the marine protected area.

Visiting Tetepare Island is a logistical challenge. First you need to get to Munda, in New Georgia, by boat or by plane. From there, you are in the care of Tetepare descendants who whizz you on a small boat to Tetepare. On the journey, we saw flying fish, pigeons, large dragonflies, and butterflies fluttering between the two emerald islands.

Once we were there, Uncle Twoomey explained the island's history and things we needed to take care around (crocodiles, some very itchy plants, and about kastom or traditional protocols). His knowledge is all-encompassing.

With a maximum of 12 guests at Tetepare Island, you are surrounded by nature and not people. The virgin forest held a remarkable diversity of bird life. Mustachioed swifts, red-knobbed imperial pigeons, and flocks of cockatoo



Auntie Mary Bea is proud to have helped protect Tetepare Island from destructive logging. Photo: Craig Salmon



Cuscus, a native possum, likes to nibble rainforest figs in the moonlight. Photo: Rebecca Stirnemann



Tetepare's rainforest is home to a remarkable diversity of plant and birdlife. Photo: Rebecca Stirnemann

were everywhere. Song parrots nibbled on berries beside the endemic Tetepare white-eye. Giant butterflies fluttered, flashing iridescent colours.

The soundscape of the bush was incredible. The change from night to day was a crazy chorus. At night, we couldn't tell what the sounds came from. Were they bugs, reptiles, mammals, or amphibians? It turned out the barking was from a frog that was perfectly camouflaged to look like bark.

By day, skinks scuttle along tracks. They are usually black or brown but one species looked like it wore green leotards. The sheer number was incredible. At nightfall, hermit crabs of all sizes took the lizards' place on the forest floor. Huge endangered coconut crabs, the world's largest land-dwelling crustacean, searched for food. In the canopy, we spotted a native possum called a cuscus nibbling rainforest figs in the moonlight.

While eating the tasty traditional food in the communal dining area, we watched fireflies flash attracting mates. The exciting thing was not knowing what you would see next. The most surprising combination was mangroves in full flower feeding hundreds of black butterflies above a darting school of foot-long baby black-tipped reef sharks.

Within the protected lagoon, the corals are striking in their diverse colours and forms. A magical diversity of colourful fish peered out at us. Dugongs and turtles fed on the sea grass. Snorkelling the drop-off outside the lagoon, we saw enormous endangered bump-headed parrotfish crunch coral. They ignore sharks swimming in the hazy deep waters. Both are a sign that marine life thrives here.



Islanders look after nature in the ocean as well as on land. A fishing ban in the lagoon means there is a magical diversity of fish, corals, and turtles. Photo: Ingrid Stirnemann

All adventures are with a Tetepare guide to keep both the guests and the island safe. It is rare to find a place pulsing with so much life.

Tetepare shows how a small number of people can have an enormous impact in protecting and restoring nature.

For more information about Tetepare Island, see **tetepare.org**. If staying in Munda before heading to the islands, we recommend <https://www.agneshotelsolomon.com/>.



Eco-tourism is at the heart of the local economy on Tetepare and Rendova. Photo of Titiru Lodge: Craig Salmon

Marine protection on Rendova

Take a short boat ride from Tetepare to Rendova Island, and you come to Titiru Ecolodge nestled between the mangroves of Saqiri Cove and an orchid garden. This is a good place to see the bright red cardinal lory parrots, coconut lorikeets, and sea eagles elegantly catching fish from the lagoon. You hear the giant Blyth's hornbill, it sounds like a steam engine, well before you see it.

The eco-lodge's owner and manager Kilo Paza was involved in the logging industry for almost 15 years and experienced its negative effects first hand.

"I saw the impacts and realised things had to change," he says. He returned home to Rendova with a plan to build something sustainable.

Kilo took time to convince people in the nearby Ugili village to end fishing in Saqiri Cove, a small mangrove-fringed bay near the eco-lodge known locally as the "nursery".

"Now people realise that stopping fishing in one area results in more abundant fishing in the surrounding area. The improvement people have seen has caused others to also put in marine protection."

There are challenges though. The people of Rendova Island are on the front line of sea-level rise. We walked along an area where a whole row of houses had disappeared into the sea. All that was left was some debris and garden trees falling into the sea.

Kilo's conservation efforts are not limited to the ocean. The success of his eco-tourism venture has inspired him and his family to retire the nearby coconut plantations and replace them with native trees.

"It is time to bring all the native forest bird species back close to the lodge," he says.

We paddled canoes across Saqiri Cove, snorkelled in the marine protected area, and explored a nearby coral limestone cave at night to see the baby bats. At every meal, we were given a delightful and healthy feast.

For more information about Rendova Island, see <https://www.titiruecolodge.com/en/>.