

## Ekodo: Can Do

By Sean Weaver

“Why not?” I thought. “What is the worst that could happen?” “If not me, then who?”

So I picked up the phone and called international directory and asked for the office of the Fiji Minister of Forests. They gave me the number and I nervously dialled.

A deep, gravelly Fijian voice came down the line – “Minister of Forests.”

“Hello. My name is Sean Weaver – I am doing some forest research in Fiji, and I am ringing from Wellington, New Zealand. I am calling about a unique forest in central Viti Levu that is currently scheduled for logging. I believe needs to be protected because it is the last remaining old growth stand of Fiji kauri in the country...”

I went on to describe the forest in more detail in response to his questions.

“Yes, this sounds interesting. If you want to raise this issue formally, I suggest that you prepare a proposal with all of the details and send it to me. Good bye.”

Phew. He did not just hang up on me. What next? A proposal. I have never prepared a reserve proposal before. Who should I ask to point me in the right direction? I know – Forest and Bird Society. They do this kind of thing all the time. Another phone call - this time to the Forest and Bird Society head office. I got Mark Bellingham, the senior conservation officer.

“Yeah, good idea. You need to prepare a map of the forest, a description of the vegetation and its conservation value, and a report explaining the land tenure situation and the threat to the forest in terms of any logging concessions and things like that.”

OK. A quest. I had never done this before but I once I got started the proposal began to take shape. All the while I was thinking of the amazing Fiji kauri forest I had ventured through as part of my field-work as an undergraduate student in botany at Victoria University of Wellington.

I recalled the intangible feeling of being there beneath these enormous trees standing majestically still, on the lower slopes of Fiji’s highest mountain range. Here in this breathtaking tropical rainforest, light dappled through multiple layers casting a myriad shades of green, amid vines and ferns towering above me was a treasure worth immeasurably more than merely logging royalties. What’s more, if I could find a way for the owners of this forest to get their royalties without having to cut the forest down, perhaps they would agree to let it continue to be the cathedral it clearly was.

I went to study this forest as a pilgrimage to Nature in its topical forest splendour. There was nothing particularly rational about my sudden desire to try to protect this forest. It simply caused a pain in my chest to think that if I do nothing, this forest will be cleared within the next two years.

But I don’t know anything about protecting a tropical rainforest. Well, soon I will. And soon I did. Over the next few years I found my way along this path less travelled, and found it to be less scary than I thought. I

teamed up with some others and we put the protection of this forest on the agenda of the Fiji government. We met with the landowners, and gained their agreement to protect the forest if they could receive the equivalent in timber royalties. The Fiji government then decided that this was not very expensive in the broader scheme of things. The royalty money was paid to the landowners and the forest was protected.

Learning by doing is a wonderful way to push forwards in an adventure we call our life. Adventures like this bring rich meaning to my existence and for that I am very grateful.

That nervous phone call to the Minister of Forests as a spotty 21 year old, back in early 1987 set me on a path that led to the protection of that forest. By 1992 it had become a nature reserve – I think it amounted to 4,000 hectares in total. When in Fiji in late 2009 I was in a meeting where one of the lecturers from the University of the South Pacific who talked about their field-work in the Wabu Creek kauri forests, and I smiled contently inside.

The success of this little campaign proved to me beyond a shadow of a doubt that we can do these kinds things if we choose to. In the 23 years since I have had innumerable opportunities to witness the outcomes of my actions – always in combination with others, where together we create something wonderful and worth celebrating.

We have power. We can decide to use it. And when we do we have an adventure, and do not need to wait for someone else to do it for us. There are countless people who want to be part of the solutions to the world's environmental and social problems. Some have resources, others have skills, but the most important ingredient is the passion we can unleash as com-passion-ate agents of change. This passion is amplified when we see the differences that we make. So let's get on with it.

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