

Action Plan for Implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity's Programme of Work on Protected Areas



(INSERT PHOTO OF COUNTRY)

Cook Islands

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Protected area information:

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Lead implementing agency: National Environment Service

Multi-stakeholder committee: A multi-stakeholder committee is established to oversee all biodiversity related projects which would include the PoWPA.

Description of protected area system

National Targets and Vision for Protected Areas

Protected areas are an integral part of Cook Islands life and culture, being a significant tool to safeguard resources both in the past and today. The Cook Islands is committed to protected areas and this is reflected in its commitments to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Apia Convention and the Noumea Convention, all of which emphasize the need to establish effective protected areas. To implement activities to realize these commitments the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) proposes the following goal and actions

“Conserve important ecosystems through a system of protected areas with regulated and monitored activities.”

- a) Establish an independent Suvarro National Park Authority to administer the Cook Islands' only national park on behalf of all the major stakeholders. A management group with the responsibility to conserve the atoll's wildlife, and to monitor and control revenue-generating activities.
- b) Develop a programme to select areas to establish a national system of community-based protected areas to protect important **terrestrial** ecosystems.
- c) Develop a programme to select areas to establish a national system of community-based protected areas to protect important **reef** and **lagoon** ecosystems.

Further to this the Prime minister Hon. Henry Puna has made comittments to establish a 1million km² marine park within the Cook Islands Exclusive Economic Zone, effectively making it the largest marine protected area in the world.

(Insert national targets for protected areas/Target 11 of the Aichi Targets. Include rationale from protected area gap assessment, if completed, along with any additional information about the vision for the protected area system, including statements about the value of the protected area system to the country)

Coverage

The Cook Islands has a total land area of 240km² within an exclusive economic zone of 2million km², of this the Cook Islands has protected 3% of its terrestrial areas and protected less than 1% of its marine environment. However these figures are considered very conservative as there are mixed management plans, programmes and activities undertaken as part of the islands of the Cook Islands traditional and customary practices. These plans, programmes and activities are not declared and established under legal frameworks, which makes it difficult to assign indicators and measures, however they are

contributing to the sustainable management of resources and ecosystems. The Cook Islands have also declared it entire exclusive economic zone a Whale Sanctuary

(Amount and % protected for terrestrial and marine; maps of protected area system)

Description and background

The islands of the Cook Islands are small and, with the exception of the mountain forest above mid-elevation on Rarotonga and the less accessible karrenfeld (makatea) of the raised islands, the terrestrial ecosystems have been heavily modified by people. This process started with the horticultural activities of the first settlers up to 2,400 years ago. The final transformation of the coastal coralline lowlands and the fertile volcanic lowlands awaited the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of new crops for food and sale.

Even the unpeopled islands of Suwarro and Takütea have had their native forests impacted - by the planting of Coconut Palms for copra. Nevertheless, because these two islands remain unpeopled, they support very significant mixed colonies of breeding seabirds, and large Coconut Crabs (Kaveu). Both islands are protected: Takütea as a Wildlife Sanctuary since 1903, and Suwarro as a National Park since 1978.

The inshore marine systems of atoll lagoons and reef-flat moats (lagoons) and reef-rim have been fished for generations. In recent times fishing pressure has increased such that some species have been seriously impacted, such as the Black-lipped Pearl-oyster (*Parau*) on Suwarro and Manihiki, the Green Turtle (*Onu*) on Palmerston, the giant clam (*Paua*) on Aitutaki, and the Milkfish (Ava) on Aitutaki.

On Rarotonga subsistence fishing, probably assisted by other factors such as volcanic soil runoff, agricultural pesticides and agricultural fertilisers, has lead to a seriously degraded reef system. This degradation was noted in the country's first conservation report, by Neville Gare, in 1975: "The major impact made on me by the marine environment of Rarotonga and Aitutaki was the scarceness of living resources in the lagoons." More detailed studies by Dahl (1980) came to the same conclusion. Both reports recommended the establishment of marine protected areas, yet it was not until 1996 that the Koutu Nui established a series of community-managed protected/rä°ui areas.

Over the last thirty years there have also been numerous proposals to create various protected areas to conserve particular species and/or ecosystems, such as the inland Cloud Forest of Rarotonga, and the Rarotonga Flycatcher (Käkeröri). Since the declaration of Suwarro as a National Park in 1978 only one other area has become a terrestrial protected area, the Täkitumu Conservation Area. This was established under an agreement between a committee of landowners and SPREP to conserve the habitat of the last surviving Rarotonga Flycatcher. Although Government initiated the arrangement, it had no continuing official role in implementation.

There is a need for the Government and groups of landowners to work together to develop a national system of protected areas on the land and in the sea to conserve important ecosystems. See Section 5 (3. Community Proposed Protected Areas, p.78) for a summary of areas suggested by the representatives of each island at the National Biodiversity Workshop. There is a summary of the existing protected areas of the Cook Islands presented in Section 4 (7. Cook Islands Protected Areas, p.62).

Governance types

(Summary matrix of governance types)

Key threats

(Description of key threats, and maps, if available)

Barriers for effective implementation

(Description of key barriers for effective implementation)

Status, priority and timeline for key actions of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas

Status of key actions of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas

Status of key actions of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas	Status
• Progress on assessing gaps in the protected area network (1.1)	3
• Progress in assessing protected area integration (1.2)	0
• Progress in establishing transboundary protected areas and regional networks (1.3)	3
• Progress in developing site-level management plans (1.4)	0
• Progress in assessing threats and opportunities for restoration (1.5)	4
• Progress in assessing equitable sharing of benefits (2.1)	0
• Progress in assessing protected area governance (2.1)	
• Progress in assessing the participation of indigenous and local communities in key protected area decisions (2.2)	4
• Progress in assessing the policy environment for establishing and managing protected areas (3.1)	1
• Progress in assessing the values of protected areas (3.1)	
• Progress in assessing protected area capacity needs (3.2)	4
• Progress in assessing the appropriate technology needs (3.3)	0
• Progress in assessing protected area sustainable finance needs (3.4)	0
• Progress in conducting public awareness campaigns (3.5)	2
• Progress in developing best practices and minimum standards (4.1)	
• Progress in assessing management effectiveness (4.2)	0
• Progress in establishing an effective PA monitoring system (4.3)	2
• Progress in developing a research program for protected areas (4.4)	0
• Progress in assessing opportunities for marine protection	2
• Progress in incorporating climate change aspects into protected areas	

Status: 0 = no work, 1 = just started, 2 = partially complete, 3 = nearly complete, 4 = complete

(Insert notes as appropriate)

Priority actions for fully implementing the Programme of Work on Protected Areas:

(Insert priority actions)

Timeline for completion of key actions

(Insert timeline)

Action Plans for completing priority actions of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas

(Insert detailed action plans)

Action 1: Formalization of the National Biodiversity Stakeholder Steering Committee

This committee is established under an ad-hoc understanding, however this needs to be strengthened. The Memorandum of Understanding will improve coordination between stakeholders with the view to improving overall effectiveness and efficiency of biodiversity conservation

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Development of MOU stipulating the roles of all key biodiversity stakeholders	2012	NES	
Consultation of MOU with Stakeholders	2012	NES	
Adoption of MOU	2012	BD Steering Committee	

Action 2: Establishment of the Suwarro National Park Authority

This authority will be tasked to administer the Suwarro National Park on behalf of all the major stakeholders. They will be responsible for the conservation of the atoll's wildlife, and to monitor and revenue-generating activities

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Consultation on the draft Suwarro National Park regulations	2013	NES	
Review and inclusion of consultation data into Suwarro National Park Regulations	2013	NES	
Finalization of Suwarro National Park Regulations	2014	NES	
Implementation of regulations	2014	NES	

Action 3: Strengthening of Suwarro National Park Work Plan

Suwarro has an existing work plan, however the duties of the two Park Rangers is dominated by customs and border entry activities. As the financiers of the Park Rangers, the National Environment

Service intends to raise the profile of conservation and resource management in the work plan to support the objectives of the Suwarrow National Park

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Review existing Suwarrow work plan	2012	NES	
Inclusion of additional monitoring and management components into work plan	2012	NES	
Implementation of work plan	2013	NES	

Action 4: Biodiversity Conservation Regulations

The National Environment has established the Biodiversity and Conservation Unit within the existing government framework and is therefore allocated a budget, however the Unit requires further regulations to determine the functions and responsibilities of the Unit.

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Further develop draft Biodiversity Conservation Regulations through consultation	2013	NES	
Inclusion of consultation results into draft Biodiversity Conservation Regulations	2013	NES	
Awareness programme for the Biodiversity Conservation Regulations	2013	NES	
Adoption and implementation of Biodiversity Conservation Regulations	2013	NES	

Action 5: Ecological Gap Assessment

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Develop capacity to conduct Ecological Gap Assessment and Valuation Assessments	2012	NES	
Undertake Ecological Gap Assessment exercise	2012	NES	
Develop Ecological Gap Assessment report	2013	NES/Traditional Leaders	
Develop work programmes to address priority concerns from assessment report	2013 - ongoing		

Action 6: Valuation Assessments

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Develop capacity to conduct Valuation Assessments	2012	NES	
Undertake Valuation Assessment exercise for priority species, ecosystems and services	2012	NES	
Develop Valuation Assessment report	2012	NES/Traditional Leaders	
Develop work programmes to mobilize adequate finance to support protected areas	2013		
Develop work programmes to effectively manage important species, ecosystems and services	2013		

Action 7: Financial Resource Trust Fund

It is the aim of the Cook Islands to create and establish an environmental trust fund to replace the Environmental Protection Fund which was legislated out by government

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Develop capacity to conduct Valuation Assessments	2012	NES	
Undertake Valuation Assessment exercise for priority species, ecosystems and services	2012	NES	
Develop Valuation Assessment report	2012	NES/Traditional Leaders	
Develop work programmes to mobilize adequate finance to support protected areas	2013		
Develop work programmes to effectively manage important species, ecosystems and services	2013		

Action 7: Rarotonga Cloud Forest Reserve Park

Key steps	Timeline	Responsible parties	Indicative budget
Consultation with Rarotonga Traditional Leaders and Community on the proposed Cloud Forest Reserve	2014	NES	
Review existing conservation practices	2014	NES	
Development of policies, regulations and rules	2015	NES/Traditional Leaders	
Promulgation of policies, regulations and rules	2015		
Development of Cloud Forest Reserve	2015	NES/Traditional	

management plan and work programme		Leaders	
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(Insert more as needed)

Key assessment results

Ecological gap assessment (insert summary findings if available)

Management effectiveness assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Sustainable finance assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Capacity needs assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Policy environment assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Protected area integration and mainstreaming assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Protected area valuation assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

Climate change resilience and adaptation assessment (Insert summary findings if available)

(Insert other assessment results if available)