



Kolombangara **United by a Crater**

On Kolombangara a new chapter in conservation is unfolding.

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Photographs by **Andrew Cox & Patrick Pikacha**



High ridgeline of Mt Rano (top), falling sharply into the crater and its many streams (above) and waterfalls (far right). Ferguson Vagi coordinator of Kolombangara Island Biodiversity and Conservation Association (at right) with ranger (top center) at a custom site on the trail to Mt Tapalamengutu (1710m). *Bulbophyllum* sp orchid (below center), and *Dendrobium* sp (below right) in montane forests.

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On Kolombangara in the Western Solomon Islands, a new chapter in conservation is unfolding. Kolombangara Island is immediately appealing because the dormant volcano has a classic volcanic cone shape. The cone rises from a circular 30km base to a crater rim 1,780m above sea level. The last eruption was about 10,000 year ago and the cone has since heavily eroded, leaving a stunning shattered crater, with a major gash in one side where the Vila River drains the crater centre.

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The Indigenous people of Kolombangara, the Dughore people, have been actively supporting the scientific studies. They have also begun to re-establish their connection with the high mountains of Kolombangara after a century of living on the coastal shores.

Most importantly, despite the alienation of most of Kolombangara island during colonization, the Dughore are regaining a management role for the forests brought about through a shared vision for conservation.



Land History

Solomon Islands has been subject to many outside forces since British rule and this has had a big impact on the natural environment of Kolombangara Island.

When the early colonists claimed Solomon Islands as a British Protectorate in 1893, they found few people on Kolombangara. They were not seen by the British because they were mostly living on the slopes and in the deep valleys of the volcano crater, out of sight of aggressive headhunting raiding parties from neighbouring islands.

The British, thinking it was largely uninhabited, acquired most of the island as State land and in 1905 granted a 999-year occupation licence to Levers Brothers from the United Kingdom to establish coconut plantations to produce oil for Levers' soap.

From about 1968, Levers Pacific Timber Plantation, a subsidiary of the larger Unilever Company, began extensive logging of the rainforests of the lower slopes, largely below 400m altitude. Very few trees were left standing on the coastal lands of Kolombangara.

After Solomon Island's Independence in 1978, the Levers holding was converted to a 75-year lease and many of the operations converted to plantations. In 1989, the Government took

over the former Levers lease lands and granted it to a new independent forest plantation company, KFPL – Kolombangara Forest Products Limited. The KFPL lease covered 66% of the island.

KFPL, while either fully government controlled, or like now, 60% owned by a Tiwanese investor, adopted a constructive relationship with the Indigenous people. Most of the employees are Kolombangara people, and KFPL has built good consultation practice with island communities on the lands.

Drawing on the Respect for the Crater

Land issues on Kolombangara, like elsewhere in Solomon Islands, have caused deep-seated conflict.

Landowners regularly fight each other for timber rights and land claims in the High Court. There are different views over which descendant group should prevail in decision-making for the island. There is no easy answer. Several attempts to set up a body of 'chiefs' on Kolombangara has created splits and little real progress.

These conflicts were amplified with the disruption and breakdown of many of the traditional decision-making structures. Compounding matters was the intense pressure





One of many waterfalls in Kolombangara's crater (top). Blue-faced parrot finch (above center), only found on the summit of Kolombangara in the Western Province but occurs also on Guadalcanal and Bougainville's high mountains. *Macodes* sp orchid (above), a ground orchid found on ridge and montane forests.

Facing page: Dawn at the Imbu Rano Lodge, a research and eco-tourist lodge found nestled at 400 m overlooking the crater forests and the high ridge of Mt Tapalamengutu (1710 m).

from toxic logging deals and the accompanying bribes of alcohol, cash and hollow promises of community services like schools, roads and water tanks.

Once the log ships departed, villages were often left with few trees for building houses or shade and dried up water supplies. Many people felt a deep hurt from both the bitter conflict before the logging and a hard lesson learnt after the logging. The claimed benefits rarely materialised.

Against this roadblock, the landowners of Kolombangara quickly realised that their ancestors and the stories of their recently deceased elders held the key to the future.

The Dughore believe that all their ancestors came from a man and a woman who lived inside the Kolombangara Crater, Kongu Rano. Over time, the people moved out of the crater to live in villages further down the slope, in the major river valleys of the Vila, Kukundu and Rei rivers. More recently, as the headhunting wars between islands stopped, the Kolombangara people settled around the coast, leaving behind old village sites, burial places and other tambu sites in the mountains and the crater.

The Kolombangara elders had a deep respect for and tradition of protecting the high mountain forests and the crater, the birthplace

of the Kolombangara people.

While the people could not agree on how best to organize themselves to resolve the land issues, they could agree on preserving the Kolombangara crater and the forests above 400m altitude.

KIBCA – a Uniting Force

Prompted by several enthusiastic overseas scientists and supported by KFPL, the landholders decided to set up an organisation that would take a lead in the conservation interests on Kolombangara on behalf of all landowners.

So in 2008, KIBCA was formed – Kolombangara Island Biodiversity Conservation Association.

KIBCA represents landowners via representatives from 10 zones that come together for an AGM, and regular Executive meetings that have at least one representative per zone.

For the first time since about 1900, KIBCA provided a realistic way for Kolombangara Indigenous people, long alienated from their land, to be involved in managing at large part of their island.



Strong Steps Forward

KIBCA has moved ahead in leaps and bounds.

KIBCA has secured a long-term funding commitment to pay scholarships to parents of high school and tertiary school students, in return for landholders signing a pledge not to log above 400m altitude. This year it distributed 110 scholarships to Kolombangara parents worth a total of SBD\$94,000 (about USD\$12,000)

It has conducted awareness workshops with villages to help them find alternative forms of income to logging, such as from honey-making and local nut harvesting.

To take advantage of the spectacular scenery on Kolombangara, it has begun to promote the island to overseas visitors.

In June 2011 KIBCA held a festival to celebrate the 400m conservation area. The area was formally dedicated by the Prime Minister and the Minister of Environment. The festival included sporting and other contests, but popular amongst the local people was a walking tour to the crater centre. Up until this time, few Indigenous people had the chance to go inside the crater and reconnect with their birthplace.

Science a Fundamental Plank

The overseas scientists had readily understood the significance of the crater and its mountain areas. Kolombangara hosts two high altitude endemic birds, the Kolombangara White-eye and the Kolombangara Leaf Warbler. At least two frogs endemic to the high cloud forests were found last year. More surprises are likely to be found.

KIBCA has formalised its relationship with International scientists. This ensures that the studies undertaken on the island do not repeat work already done, that they answer the most pressing scientific questions and that benefits clearly flow to the local people.

Scientists fear that the tropical forests will suffer greatly under the impact of global climate change. Something as seemingly benign as a one-degree temperature rise will put animals under greater heat stress and cause the tropical clouds to form at a higher altitude. Then there are predictions of lower rainfall and longer drought periods. This will spell profound change for Kolombangara's mountains and the cool climate and high rainfall specialists living there.

KIBCA is planning to set up long-term remote weather modeling stations and is working with several scientists on long-term altitudinal monitoring of bats and frogs.

Tourism

Tourism has great promise for the future of Kolombangara. It has the potential not only to put this jewel of an island and KIBCA's conservation efforts in the international spotlight, but also to generate long-term revenue, both for KIBCA and small family-run businesses servicing tourists.

While tourism often promises more than it delivers, KIBCA is careful to offer something unique to adventurous and wildlife loving visitors.

Already KFPL has come to the party and built a well-appointed lodge close to the 400m elevation as a springboard for walks into the Kolombangara Crater and to the crater rim. KIBCA has recently set up a network of walking track, two huts a few hours walk from the lodge and a basic shelter deep inside the crater.

Visit Kolombangara Yourself

All the information you need to visit Kolombangara Island can be found at www.kolombangara.org. Daily flights from Honiara go to either Gizo or Munda airports.

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