

Conservation and Sustainable Management of Soga – the Fiji Sago Palm (*Metroxylon vitiense*)

Soga, an endemic and endangered Fijian palm, is seriously threatened. Currently, isolated populations are mostly confined to the Province of Serua where, in recent years, the harvesting of Seko (palm heart) and leaves for thatching has become an important source of income to over 300 rural households. The supply of seko is not sustainable since only wild populations are harvested by felling the palm with no new replanting practice. Traditional thatch made from the Sago leaves has become a very popular building material for Fiji's rapidly-growing tourist industry. The growing demand has also led to the practice of felling the palm to remove all the leaves as well as the palm hearts.

Soga, fruits just once in 20-25 years before it dies, and it must be cross pollinated. If the current unsustainable rate of harvest continues, Soga will no longer be a source of income for these communities within the next 5-10 years. Soga habitats are also threatened by large scale coastal drainage schemes, new residential and agricultural subdivisions

Awareness and Understanding

- There is no concept of sustainable use
- Landowners are remotely involved
- 'Settlers' especially women are responsible for vast majority of harvesting, organised by middlemen
- Significant variation in price for all products
- Less than 30 significant users of thatch in the tourist industry

Consequences of Unsustainable Harvesting

- The loss of an iconic resource for the tourism industry
- The loss of a culturally important natural resource with a proud tradition of sustainable use
- The decline and possible extinction of an endemic species of Fiji
- Increased poverty in Serua
- The abandoning of Soga by the tourism industry in favour of other thatching materials

The Soga Sustainable Harvesting and Conservation Project

NatureFiji-MareqetiViti has been working with partners including the Environment and Forestry Departments,



the National Trust and the Serua Provincial Office in developing the Soga Sustainable Harvesting and Conservation Project which seeks to both conserve Soga and sustain a rural industry.

Achievements To-date

- Increased awareness and control of harvesting by landowners
- Active involvement by Provincial office
- Fiji Sago Palm Recovery Plan agreed by all stakeholders and endorsed by the Department of Environment
- Sustainable Harvesting Guidelines now widely agreed with and adopted
- Introduction of Peach Palm as alternative to Seko palm heart trade with full support of the Ministry of Agriculture
- Successful restoration of 10 ha Culanuku site

Further Actions Needed

- Prohibition on the commercial sale of the endangered Fiji Soga palm hearts
- The need for a permit system to ensure sustainable harvesting of Soga
- The 1993 NES (protection through prohibition on commercial sale) needs proactive action
- Soga to be included in the Endangered & Protected Species Act, CITES or IUCN Red List
- Active support from the tourism industry for sustainable harvesting
- Sago palm restoration at other sites
- Distribution of Peach Palm seedlings (Seko palm heart substitute) when available in 2015