

The Last Wild Island

Saving Tetepare

By John Read

“This is a journey to one of the last wild specks of land left on Earth by an author every bit as readable as Tim Flannery - a page turner that will leave readers dazzled that such an island still exists.”

James Woodford Author, Journalist, Editor www.realdirt.com.au

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For Mary Bea, who demonstrated that 'little' women can stand up to 'big' men to make a difference.

Glossary

Pijin was derived from the Cantonese word for business and originally blended elements of Cantonese, Portuguese and English. Pijin is a phonetic language and readers can usually decipher the meaning by sounding the word. This glossary is not exhaustive of Pijin words used in text but should provide enough examples to render all Pijin text readable.

bagarap - (bugger up) broken
beleran - (bellyrun) diarrhoea
bifo - before
infula - you (fella)
iumi - you and I
iutufala - you two people
karae - (cry) sound, call
kasim - catch, go
kolosap - close(up)
laek - like
lavalava - sarong
lelebet - little bit
maet - might
manis - months
nau - now
nomoa - no more, only
olketa - everyone, all
olsem - same
plen - plan
taem - time
tok ples - (talk place) local language
tufala - two people
sanbis - (sand) beach
save - (savvy) know, understand
semsem - same
stap - (stop) here
tingting - think
vaka - white person
waetfala(white fella) expatriate
waka - work
wantok - (one talk) relative

Honeymoon in Paradise

‘You there?’ I yelled with added urgency.

Still no answer.

The spider web on my face had freaked me out. Realising the others had not broken its titanium silk confirmed my fears. The scratchy arachnid pinned to my cheek was barely a distraction.

The last time I glimpsed Katherine’s white bucket hat through the inky gloom was about five minutes earlier. Too dark to discern tracks, spider webs or even the telltale cut leaves left by the guide’s trail slashing, I was lost. Compounding my predicament, the dense mangroves suffocated the breeze and perspiration streamed down my brow, stinging my eyes. I had no idea whether the village was five minutes or five hours away. The only sound audible was the sucking squelch of my feet as I sludged through the stinky mud.

Stopping, I screamed ‘Katherine!’ and shocked myself with the edge of panic in my voice. The thud of my racing pulse beat loudly in my ears as I strained to hear a reply.

Nothing.

My right foot, gashed earlier by a broken mussel shell buried in the ooze, was burning with the sting of salty mud. Stumbling through the gnarly mangroves on my outstep, I couldn’t keep up the pace and had lost my sense of direction. Katherine would be single-mindedly pursuing our mute local guide and would assume that I was right behind her. Focused on getting out of the mosquito-infested swamp as fast as she could, she would be cursing the spiders and crocs and probably me too. I had to find her. My bride of one week was alone and scared in a dark mangrove swamp with a complete stranger.

I inhaled aggressively and let rip, ‘KATHERINE!’

‘Hurry up!’ snapped the distant reply, obviously annoyed that I was slowing her down.

Running forward with renewed conviction through unseen branches that raked across my chest and arms, I followed her calls. The relief of our impending reunion masked the searing pain in my foot. Katherine was about to get a big sweaty hug, in keeping with our vow made barely a week earlier to demonstrate more affection and compassion. Yet before I had even reached her she ushered the sinewy guide forward and set off again purposefully, walking exactly two paces behind. Her typically glowing strawberry blonde hair was trussed into an untidy plait that lurched aggressively from side to side as she stomped off.

‘Remember Lilian’s brother!’ she panted, still looking directly ahead.

As the only female in the village who volunteered any Pijin, Lilian had struck up a conversation with Katherine the previous day. When asked how many brothers and sisters she had, Lilian nonchalantly replied that she used to have eight but a crocodile ate one. Her brother had been taken from the very river that we were now stumbling alongside.

‘We’re walking way too fast for crocs,’ I muttered lamely, hoping in vain that she would slow down so I could keep up. I was meant to be the protector; the one in control. Instead I was dragging the chain, increasing our risks and discomfort.

‘It’s not only the crocs’ Katherine lamented tersely. ‘I’m getting monstered by mossies . . . We’ll probably get malaria now . . . What the hell are we doing here?’

Our tropical honeymoon, first tentatively scripted months earlier from our Australian desert home, was rapidly derailing. Attracting only a handful of tourists a year, the alluringly nicknamed ‘Happy Isles’ promised neither beachside resorts nor fancy cuisine. Instead, coral reefs, rainforests and the world’s largest skink were Solomon Islands’ key attractions. The real lure for us was a passing guide book reference to a backwater island that was set to become ‘the next big battleground between the loggers and advocates of low-impact eco-tourism’. This key battle within the international campaign to save the last of Solomon Islands’ lowland rainforests and reefs from unscrupulous international loggers offered us the adventure we craved. From the moment we read that sentence, any images of a cocktail-sipping beach honeymoon were banished. I couldn’t imagine another place in the world where a couple of unshackled young ecologists could make such a difference. Katherine too had been lured by the intrigue and excitement. She loved unplanned travel and revelled in fighting for a cause. Any notion of satisfaction with conventional marital bliss back home in Australia was smashed like a clear-felled rainforest.

Our naive desire for a rewarding and bonding honeymoon saving rainforests had somehow led us to this ordeal. Katherine trudged on, doggedly following the guide and ignoring my small talk. Eventually she snapped.

‘You’re always pushing it too far! Why didn’t you ask them to leave earlier when I said so? If you want to spend all night getting eaten alive that’s your problem but it’s not fair dragging me along too. You call this a holiday!’

I started to protest but she spun around seething ‘We shouldn’t be in bloody Choiseul anyway, we should . . .’

She cut short her diatribe mid-sentence. Through the gloom I saw her emotions switch from anger to horror, then amusement as she stared at me.

‘Get that thing off your face,’ she implored me smirking. Instinctively I wiped my face with my forearm, like I used to when Mum complained that I’d left half my dinner behind. The big spider that I had completely forgotten about squirmed valiantly but was still ensconced in its web that shrouded my head like a hairnet. I clawed it out and flung it to the ground, then raked the rest of the web out of my hair.

‘And the other side,’ she said, barely able to keep a straight face. My right forearm smeared a sizeable dollop of mud from under my eye. I playfully tucked in my shirt and pretended to brush the mud off my shorts. Then I got my hug, no doubt to the bemusement of the guide who looked on perplexed.

After deciding to visit the Solomons, we noticed the distinctive archipelago just above the weather reader’s head on our evening news. Nearly one thousand islands spilled out into the Pacific Ocean from

New Guinea towards Fiji. They were so close to Australia that the Qantas flight to Honiara was shorter than our domestic flight from Adelaide to Brisbane.

Our first awesome views of the precipitous island of Guadalcanal lived up to our expectations of luscious tropical wilderness. Jagged mountains displaying every shade and texture of dark green were not interrupted by a single village, or road, or garden until the cabin crew had been instructed to cross-check the doors in preparation for landing. The first sign of habitation was blue twists of smoke rising through a patchwork of gardens and coconut plantations. Moments before touchdown, the small town of Honiara came into view, squeezed between the mountains and the ink blue seas of the aptly named Ironbottom Sound. I wondered which of the rusting hulks offshore were the renowned World War II wrecks or the results of more recent shipping calamities.

Honiara had sprung up around the US Henderson airfield in the frantic last couple of years of World War II and quickly replaced the small township of Tulagi as the British protectorate's capital. Despite the added importance of housing the independent National Government since 1978, Honiara remained little more than a country town. Simmering ethnic tensions had escalated a few months earlier in 1999 and we were advised to spend as little time as necessary in the troubled town. This news barely concerned us because our main destination was Tetepare Island, the logging battleground in the Western Province.

Stifling heat and humidity surged inside the plane's cabin once the doors were opened. But that was where the similarities with typical equatorial tourist destinations ended. We sweated across the baking tarmac and completed our immigration formalities, very slowly, in an un-air-conditioned terminal. None of the handful of taxi drivers lounging around the broken footpath seemed particularly interested in driving us anywhere, let alone the few hundred metres to the domestic terminal. So, like most backpackers embarking on a new trip, we strode out into the midday sun. A hundred metres later we realised our mistake. The heat and humidity immediately stripped the gloss from our exotic South Seas adventure. Sweat trickled into our eyes, blinding us and we stumbled into deep muddy puddles concealed among unkempt grass.

The domestic terminal was a filthy concrete-floored shed. Two uniformed officials behind the counter seemed to have little knowledge, or interest, in whether we were booked on the connecting domestic flight. There were no other passengers or flight crew to be seen. Katherine and I perched apprehensively on the broken plastic chairs, red faced, drenched in sweat and wondering what we had let ourselves in for. Eventually a trickle of locals checked in.

'Is the Gizo plane on time?' I enquired of a middle-aged woman dressed like a missionary in a pressed smock with a Peter Pan collar and uncomfortable leather shoes. 'Solomon time,' she quipped, without any sign of surprise or concern.

About half an hour after our listed departure time a Twin Otter, resplendent in the national colours of green, blue and yellow, taxied up to the far side of the shed. 'Plen blo iumi,' our missionary friend reassured us. This was our first experience with Solomon Islands Pijin and Katherine proudly whispered the literal translation to me: 'This plane belongs to you and me.'

Sure enough, ten minutes later one of the two uniformed men announced, ‘Gizo, Gizo’ to no-one in particular. Fellow passengers wandered off across the tarmac. Without boarding passes or a security check, we followed their lead into the eighteen-seater winged sauna.

Before we left for the Solomon Islands I had found the address of the national office of the Worldwide Fund for Nature, or WWF, in a town that sounded like a Muppet character. We had seen the valuable work that WWF had performed in other countries. Contact by phone or email proved fruitless but we decided to visit anyway, hoping that meeting the staff would enable us to take part in the battle for Tetepare. WWF were based at Gizo, the provincial capital of the Western Province. Somewhat confusingly, Gizo, the town, was situated on the island of Ghizo.

The small town of Honiara disappeared before we had reached cruising altitude and was replaced by a twinkling sea that I dissected in search of dugongs or whales or lost sailors. Once my view had been obscured by billowing afternoon storm-clouds, I scanned the cabin. The missionary must have detected my gaze. Even before she looked up from her book, her easy smile was calming and contagious. I envied the solace her brown eyes conveyed, the demeanor of a confident soul satisfied in the pursuit of an unambiguous mission. Self-fulfilment is an under-rated emotion, an essential ingredient of a content and driven personality. What did she see through the hazel portals to my psyche during that instant before I averted my gaze? A sparkle of adventure and excitement maybe, but definitely not the assured-ness and satisfaction that accompanies single-mindedly striving for a goal. Sitting next to my soul mate and lover, I wondered whether we too would find our mission and our contentment on this adventure.

Just over an hour, one hundred islands and one thousand clouds after take-off, our plane descended to only metres above the turquoise sea. There was no airstrip, let alone any land below us. A small forested atoll whizzed past on the left, and a split second before we seemed destined for a disturbing watery encounter, a patch of cleared grass appeared. Our Twin Otter touched down surprisingly smoothly on the airstrip littered with lumps of crushed coral and tussocks of grass. We pulled up alongside an open concrete shed with a peeling sign that proclaimed ‘Welcome to Nusa Tupe’. Flat land on Ghizo is at a premium and as a result Gizo’s airstrip occupies the nearby elongated atoll of Nusa Tupe. I watched through the window as two men rolled a fuel drum past a still-spinning propeller to refuel the plane. Following the lead of our missionary friend, we grabbed our bags from under the wing of the rapidly reloading plane and lugged them to a rocky jetty.

Our shirts that had temporarily dried during the flight were again drenched with sweat from our brief walk in the thick tropical air. Katherine and I looked around for a ride to the main island. This was nothing like our travels in Africa or South-East Asia, where we had been besieged by taxi, rickshaw or becak operators thrusting their services upon us. We had wanted to visit a remote tourism backwater, but now we felt a bit lost. Eventually a friendly islander approached us. Patson introduced himself with English that was far more comprehensible than our rudimentary grasp of Solomon Pijin. For only eight Solomon dollars Patson offered to transfer us to Gizo in his canoe. Instinctively, like all tourists, we made the conversion to about four Australian dollars for the ten-minute journey. Patson also knew the best beaches and snorkelling reefs and claimed to provide cheaper canoe rides than either of the two dive operators in town.

We stared in amazement at the strange settlement that we approached in Patson's fibreglass canoe. Despite being the Solomon Islands' second largest town, Gizo was a ramshackle coastal version of a John Wayne movie set. Closer inspection revealed shops with pockmarked rusted iron walls that had been strafed by Japanese bullets in the war that put the islands on the international map for our parents' generation.

Leaving the milling masses at the waterfront, we sweated up the hill behind the town, the contents of our water bottles being sucked from our bodies by the intense afternoon sun. Following the sketch map in our Lonely Planet guide we eventually located the WWF headquarters, its identity only revealed by a rusted forty-four gallon drum rubbish bin emblazoned with a panda. After drying ourselves as best we could, we entered the building. A local woman, preoccupied with cleaning her impressive fingernails, peered at us apprehensively over a bare desk. In my best Pijin I explained: 'Mitufala Australian biologists laek help lo Tetepare or volunteer lo WWF.'

After a long embarrassed silence, the woman politely informed us that Tetepare was very difficult to visit and WWF did not have any volunteering opportunities. We were surprised and disappointed. When we hesitated to leave, a shy young man sitting at an equally uncluttered desk eventually suggested, 'Sapos iutufala kam bak next tomoro, wanfala waetfala staff maet stap.' We gathered that an expat, or waetfela, might be around if we returned the day after tomorrow.

Deflated that our offer of assistance had been rebuffed, our mood soon changed on our way back down the hill as we surveyed the views. Gizo once earned the title of the most beautiful town in the Pacific. The mango-lined avenue provided glimpses of a collage of postcard views. Rippling surf breaks to the south gave way to uncountable islands to the east and a mighty conical volcano to the north. Waiting for a couple of days would allow us to explore this paradise.

A haphazard waterfront market occupied most of Gizo's foreshore. Fisherfolk paddled from adjacent villages or islands in their dugout canoes with the day's catch of iridescent fish that seemed more appropriate for an aquarium than a food stall. Next to the brilliant reef fish were phenomenal-sized tuna and kingfish that had been caught on handlines. These monsters, weighing in excess of twenty kilos, must have led their catchers on a mighty wild tow as they attempted to drag them back to their little canoes. The fishermen typically had long straight hair, in contrast to most of the islanders who were the more typical fuzzy-wuzzy Melanesians. These fishermen were of Gilbertese origin and had been resettled in the Solomons in the past couple of generations when their Micronesian islands, now named Kiribati, became overcrowded. Along with their renowned fishing skills, the Gilbertese brought their rhythmic and seductive Micronesian dancing to the Solomons. Whole families from toddlers to grand-parents dressed up and danced all night at village celebrations and for the few dive tours that visited.

Vendors from Simbo, a rough two-hour canoe ride away, sold eggs from wild megapodes. These bantam-like birds laid their rich eggs in the warm volcanic soils near their village. Gardeners from other islands converged on the market and arranged small piles of betel nut, bananas, coconuts, cassava or potatoes on banana leaves or old plastic sheets. Elongated purple and white eggplants and cherry-tomato-sized capsicums added flavour and colour to the market. Depending on the time of day, their produce was typically either doused in mud or sprinkled with dust from the adjacent main street. No-one seemed

concerned about the dust or mud, as long as the fishmongers lazily swished flies from their catch with a wet coconut frond.

Next to the market, stores were emblazoned with freshly painted signs spelling out ‘Mok Yu Wah’, ‘Mrs Ng Chai Store’, ‘Chan Corporation’ or ‘Leung Hong’. Each store sold the same ad hoc collection of goods. Tinned Taiyo tuna, packet noodles, cheap Asian watches, kerosene lanterns, buckets, gaudy material, ‘ladies’ bras and rubber thongs, or ‘slippers’, could be purchased at all of these stores. A classic that had Katherine and me grinning for hours was the handwritten advertisement for hanger-chiefs, presumably marketed for those really sticky sneezes!

Even more incomprehensible was that tinned fish and noodles were peddled not only by the general stores, but also the hardware store, electrical shop and even the post office. Despite this ridiculous duplication, none of the stores stocked fresh milk, orange juice or red meat. A few of the upmarket shops boasted a fridge out the back stocked with Coke, Sprite or pineapple Fanta cans from faraway places like South Africa, Malaysia or New Zealand. The cans from New Guinea were particularly eye-catching with a heavily bearded black-skinned Father Christmas enjoying a Coke cloaked in his thickest Arctic red.

Uncharacteristically blank-faced locals handed our money to grim Chinese shopkeepers behind the till, many of whom clearly neither trusted their staff nor were keen to teach them the intricacies of calculating change. Like the sellers at the market, none of the dozen or so stores made any effort to advertise their sales or to undercut competitors. However, the Wing Sun store became a favourite of every expatriate in town when they received a shipment of Mars Bars and Crunchies. Weeks later work stopped for several hours when news rapidly spread that cheese had temporarily appeared in the Wing Sun fridge.

Tailors and post offices selling tinned tuna were not the only surprises that confronted us in Gizo. Policemen sauntering their beat in ‘slippers’ were seemingly not interested in the prisoners that checked themselves into and out of the jail on the outskirts of town. Several generations of barbed and razor wire draped around the bent rusty poles that roughly marked the area within which the prisoners were supposed to remain. Families hovered outside the hospital that serviced most of the Western Province, preparing dinner for their sick relations.

The pace of the town was incredibly slow. Even when deliberately slowing to a saunter, we raced past the locals who had perfected a more relaxed way of passing time. Many sat or stood under the shady shore-side casuarina trees telling stories or watching the world go by at a tropical pace. Youths ambled with their little fingers linked in camaraderie, stooped old folks contentedly gazed nowhere in particular as if the local scene had not changed enough for several decades to captivate their attention. Everywhere the distinctive blood orange colour of betelnut spittle stained the road and pavement.

School children sported unbelievably crisp white shirts, although many did not wear shoes. Something about one little girl caught my eye but as I stared, she averted her little brown eyes. I backed off then surreptitiously sidled closer, using the same technique I use when closing in to photograph a nervous animal without the challenging ‘walk-right-up’ approach. Suddenly it dawned on me that her maroon T-shirt was emblazoned with the white Linden tree and the faded but clearly distinguishable words ‘Linden Park Primary School’. This girl wore a shirt that had probably been ‘popped in the mission bin’ at the shopping centre near my former suburban Adelaide primary school.

Despite our inability to conform with its pace, something quaint about the town made us feel like locals within days of arriving. In a country that barely required five-digit telephone numbers and four-digit car plates, we soon recognised many of the people on the beachfront esplanade where all the action took place. In half an hour at the market we invariably bumped into the local member of parliament, the bank and hotel managers, the waitress at a restaurant bearing the name of J.F. Kennedy's sunken PT109 boat and one of the handful of pilots on the national register.

Eventually we met with Phil Shearman, the waetfala, at the WWF office. Unfortunately he was unfamiliar with Tetepare and did not know how we could assist with the 'battle' there, which dampened our enthusiasm. Instead Phil lamented that he was not able to conduct a logging audit on another island before he left the country. Landholders from the far north-western island of Choiseul had been waiting for nearly two years to lodge an environmental and cultural damages claim against an international logging company. Their case would soon be thrown out of court if no evidence of damages and unpaid royalties was forthcoming.

'Do you know anything about logging?' asked the lanky Australian, his accent noticeably thinned by the singing overtone of Pijin.

Katherine and I glanced at each other sheepishly. We lived in the Australian desert. Neither of us had ever witnessed logging first-hand, nor seen a recently logged rainforest.

'We used a chainsaw to build stockyards on our farm. Does that count?' I joked, as I thought back to Dad's puny yellow Makita that was no match for a rainforest giant.

Sensing that my joke had fallen short, Katherine sensibly explained that we were ecologists with experience in assessing environmental impacts.

Although we were rank novices in the business of logging, Phil felt our experience would enable us to come up with a 'moderately back-upable statement that the land has been trashed'. When we pushed him further he conceded that no-one else could help the villagers. Phil urged us to walk back down the hill to the Public Solicitor's Office, near the basketball court, to find out if we could help.

This project sounded like depressing work, not the adventure holiday we were yearning for. However, we conceded that helping out WWF might open opportunities for us to become involved with the Tetepare battle, if indeed such a showdown with loggers was actually occurring. Furthermore, a visit to Choiseul would introduce us to the environmental and social consequences of Solomon-style logging, which could be invaluable for our Tetepare quest.

BREAK

The Last Wild Island

‘Whoaa!’ exclaimed Katherine and I in unison as a huge sailfish jumped clean out of the water in front of us providing a thrilling omen to our long-awaited Tetepare adventure. White terns and black noddies swooped onto the bait fish the sailfish was chasing and evil-looking frigate birds wheeled around, looking for an opening to scab a fish from an unsuspecting tern. ‘Bigfala fis,’ John T calmly announced, as if these monsters were an everyday occurrence in these waters. Before we had stopped marvelling at the massive fish and the avian activity surrounding it, the outboard started spluttering and then died altogether. We watched with intrigue, then apprehension, as Keto stripped a midrib from a coconut palm leaf that had been woven into an ingenious potato basket.

Ten minutes later, after unblocking the motor’s water outlet with the custom-made cleaner and tugging enough times to crank-start a Tiger Moth, our little outboard spluttered into life amid a pall of blue smoke. We were on our way again. Slowly. Horsepower is a strange descriptor for an outboard motor’s power. Any of thirty horses destined for a knacker’s yard would have been able to drag our canoe faster on dry land. But horses are not built for dragging crowded leaking canoes through choppy seas. I figured that our motor generated 30-seahorse power instead. Tetepare wasn’t getting any closer and trees and huts on the islands that we had left behind were still clearly visible.

Once we left the shelter of the Roviana Lagoon, irregular and increasingly violent waves buffeted our vulnerable vessel. Minutes earlier the radiant blue sky was punctuated only by an isolated dollop of mashed potato cloud forming above the peak of Mt Rendova. But blue turned rapidly to white, then grey. Within seconds the sun was obscured by a seething blackness, with alarming swirls of inky blue morphing through the storm clouds like spice stains in a simmering soup. The crack in the fibreglass seat opened up as the canoe flexed in the menacing grey waves, giving me an almighty ‘horse bite’ on the arse. Katherine had entered the trance-like state that she uses to counteract seasick-ness. Then the storm hit. Stinging cold rain pelted our faces and forced me to shut my eyes as if I was riding a motorbike through a locust swarm. Warm thick seawater slopped over us. Then the motor conked out again.

With my eyes shielded from the driving rain I could just make out Keto reaching for the coconut frond basket again in order to fashion another outlet cleaner. Through half-open eyes I could also make out John T and Eddie bailing out water with cut-off plastic bottles. Frantic is seldom an appropriate word to use in the Solomons, but the two men had adopted an unnatural and unsettling urgency. Only then did I realise that my feet and our packs were under water and the canoe was dangerously close to sinking. The top quarter of the waves were breaking into, or over, the canoe which was rapidly filling. I cupped water out of the canoe with my hands while splashing it out with my feet. Katherine inspected the inside of her knees.

Inexplicitly, the old war song ‘It’s a Long Way to Tipperary’ invaded my mind and subconsciously morphed to ‘a Long Way to Tetepare’, which rhymed with the original destination. While Katherine

suffered and Keto battled with the motor, I mindlessly splashed water out of our unstable bath to the tune and wondered whether the original lyrics ever saw the marchers reaching their distant destination.

Finally Keto got the engine started again and for five minutes we lurched through the storm. I had lost all sense of direction while we had been bobbing around, and assumed that Keto was simply trying to gather as much pace as possible to drain the canoe. The rain was driving straight down and waves seemed to be crashing on our small canoe from all directions. Then the outboard died again. Katherine did not once look up. She had reached the palliative state where nothing mattered. Without life jackets or any communication or navigational aids we would be totally stuffed when this canoe sank.

Right there and then I conceded that even if the storm abated and we managed to prevent the canoe from sinking, Katherine would never agree to attempt to reach Tetepare again. She was going through hell. The whole thing was a crazy idea; a risky, stupid pipedream. This was not in the script of our South Seas fantasies.

Keto eventually fired up the motor again while we all bailed like crazy. Minutes later the storm abated, and although the waves continued to crash into our little dinghy, the clouds cleared slightly. Amazingly the hazy outline of Tetepare remained straight in front. I had assumed that if we survived the storm Keto would have headed for home but he continued on. John T unravelled his towelling headband, wrung it out, wiped his face and then tied it back on his head again. Unless he did not share my opinion that we had just survived a near-death experience, John T's emotional control would serve him well as a poker player.

As we gradually closed in on Tetepare, the waves diminished, the sun peeked out from the billowing white clouds and life again looked rosy. Fortunately, before Katherine had regained contact with the outside world, we were approaching the calm lee of the island so the decision to continue rather than turning back into the open sea was easy.

The Tetepare forest overhung the shoreline like a verandah, shading the narrow beaches. Silly white cockatoos screeched above the canopy. A pair of brilliant beach kingfishers, sporting a hue of blue normally seen only in tropical postcards, were disturbed by our approach and darted off noisily along the shoreline. In my head I started compiling the bird inventory for Tetepare.

Keto steered the canoe over a shallow sandbank and into a river mouth. 'Raro River', we were told. The trees were enormous. My eyeballs strained as I searched the forest for critters. Admiring scenery is markedly different from prising the jungle apart for cryptic beasts. Our mission to document the wildlife of Tetepare had begun and I was determined to make the most of our time on the island. What rarities would we find on this island that had been shielded from the ravages of modern humanity? A pair of hornbills laboured past. Even one hundred metres away their powerful wing beats, reminiscent of a steam train, were clearly audible over the splutter of the outboard. As we pattered up the river a grey heron and diminutive blue and orange kingfisher slipped along the bank in front of us and disappeared behind a forested bend. Katherine had quickly recuperated and pointed to the telltale mudslide left by a crocodile down the riverbank. The Lonely Planet guide was correct.

Our idyllic cruise stopped where the river bank transformed from a tangle of vines to fern-clad cliffs with little waterfalls splashing noisily into the river. Once we could no longer traverse the shallow riffle of

stream-covered boulders, Keto cut the engine and John T announced that we would camp just here. ‘Yes, crocodile stop lo disfala ples,’ John T confirmed, without the slightest hint of apprehension. Why should we be concerned? After just surviving the storm on the high seas, a stray reptile was not going to prevent us from exploring the island we had waited so long to visit.

Eddie cleared a site for our little tent, deftly hacking through saplings with his bush knife. In doing so he carefully avoided the wild taro, a kastom plant of Tetepare. ‘Sapos iu katim disfala lif, devil blong Tetepare baebae kilim man finis,’ he dutifully explained to us. Failure to respect this elephant-ear-like leaf would attract a curse from the spirits of the island, a risk that after fearing for our lives only hours ago we had no intention of taking. While we were still absorbing the significance of these leaves, Eddie tapped a small palm with the back of his knife, ‘Deswan hea semsem, no katim.’ Wild betel nut was another kastom plant that should not be cut. To keep our tent clear of the mud we laid down a bed of leaves collected from Eddie’s hacking, taking care to stomp down the sharp stakes left by his deft swipes. By the time we had our tent up, John T and Keto had fashioned their own shelter by stretching a plastic sheet over a couple of saplings cut from the bush. Four lengths of vine, or bush rope supported the whole structure.

The act of clearing our campsite had disturbed a match-sized grey skink with an orange eye. John T called the minute lizard koko ziolo, the ‘suicide skink’. Historically, or in taem bifo, warriors summoned courage by eating these skinks that were named for their hazardous propensity for running into cooking fires.

Our enthusiasm for catching and identifying the island’s critters was not shared by our guides, who were far more interested in John T’s attempts to boil the kettle for tea. I had hoped for nimble-footed, quick-handed guides but it appeared right from the outset that it would be up to Katherine and me to find and catch most of the critters.

Before John T had his kettle boiling the torrential rain started again almost dousing his fire. Unlike our guides, Katherine and I were relieved to have the drenching rain to rinse the salt from our hair and clothes. The rain also excited the frogs. John T informed us that the common frogs that were serenading us with their distinctive call of cree cree cree were called kuni in his Roviana language. Another frog gave a yapping call from among the leaf litter, and we soon confirmed that this poodle-sounding bark belonged to the spectacular horned frog. Darkness quickly engulfed the sodden campsite and we started searching for more frogs by torchlight. Eddie was amazed that we could walk straight up to a frog from twenty metres away when he could only detect them from a distance of about five metres with his excellent eyesight. Then we showed him. By holding his torch near his eyes, he too could see the orange glow of their eye shine in the darkness. A massive brown frog materialised behind a particularly impressive pair of glowing embers as I approached. To my disgust, the monster broke through my grasp and disappeared. Ten minutes later we found another but it leapt an astonishing three metres upstream in a single bound before we approached. The third one that we found an hour or so later was not going to escape. I dived on it and quickly grabbed one of its massive hind legs before it could break free from my hands. With outstretched legs and arms it measured nearly as long as my forearm, the biggest frog I had ever seen. We hoped that this monster would be the first of many special finds that would help us conserve the island by attracting the finances of aid donors and ecotourists alike.

The following morning we asked the boys to take us for a walk through the bush to locate big strangler figs, or ambalolo, which might harbour bukulu, the prehensile-tailed skink. Our experiences in Choiseul, Kolombangara and Marovo suggested that one reptile we were unlikely to just bump into in the course of a wander in the bush was this pièce de resistance of the Solomons' reptiles.

Ambalolos twine around huge trees, gradually engulfing them as their English name suggests. In the process these figs send down curtains of interlocking roots that form massive living pyramids. The top branches of these rainforest monsters penetrate the forest canopy as green cathedrals that teem with pigeons and parrots attracted to their bounty of fruits. Not only are these figs favourites for many birds, but the cavities in their tangle of roots provide ideal roosting spots for bats, cuscus and the prehensile-tailed skink that we were hoping to find.

John T explained through laboured puffing that the limestone escarpment at the summit of a hill near our campsite signified a tabu area, complete with old fortification and nut trees that had been planted by the previous inhabitants of the island. Before the regrowth that now smothered the site, the inhabitants would have had a commanding view of headhunters arriving from Roviana or Marovo lagoons.

On the way down the densely forested hill, the shy Keto did something remarkable. With lightning-fast reflexes he caught a juvenile green tree snake, a darting whip-like snake found throughout much of the Pacific. I was impressed that, unlike most indigenous people I had worked with, Keto was not afraid to catch it. His reaction to the next snake, a thicker yellowish specimen, was quite different. Having previously scanned the Solomons reptile book, which boasted only seven land snakes, I was confident that we had disturbed a Salomonelaps, possibly the most venomous land snake in the Solomons.

Bulldozer operators love bulldozing, fishermen love fishing, wildlife biologists love catching critters. I could not help myself and quickly caught the snake, using the thinly veiled justification of requiring a scale count to confirm its identity. Keto and the other boys recoiled with horror when I picked it up. 'Lukaot long tel, hemi foison,' they screamed, alarmed that their naive visitor was about to be poisoned by the tail of the snake. 'Hemi oraet,' I reassured them. 'Mi save long disfala snek,' I lied. What I did save, or understand, was the blunt end, not the pointy end, of a snake requires particular attention. The snake proved to be docile in my hands and I was reassured that it didn't possess a strange poison gland in its tail.

The following morning we packed up camp and drifted back down the Raro River to its mouth, our bird watching hampered by misted-up binoculars. Right at the mouth we stopped at a garden the size of a couple of tennis courts planted with spinach-like slippery cabbage. The garden surprised us because Isaac had told us that Tetepare was a wild island completely free of gardens, with the exception of an overgrown coconut plantation on the western tip. A tree with small pink fruits called 'apples' took our eye and we asked if we could try some. This garden apparently belonged to a woman called Mary from Lokuru but we could help ourselves. The 'apples' tasted more like flowers than fruit and there were no seeds or core. The boys were obviously not too keen to hang around in Mary's garden any longer than necessary, although Katherine was keen to catch a rat that we had disturbed to determine if it was a native or introduced rodent.

BREAK.....

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Mary intercepted the TOLOA men from Lokuru before they reached our guesthouse, which they had selected as the location for the pivotal meeting. She spoke at length with them, particularly a short man in a loud unbuttoned orange shirt and reflecto glasses. Whoever this dude was I was going to remember him. Eventually he extracted himself from Mary's lecture and strode up to where we were making small talk with the other men. Tilting his head slightly askew he paused to ensure that everyone was listening. 'Mr Jack Daniel' he announced grinning while exaggeratingly shaking my hand. Falling into line behind Jack was a bearded man of similar stature but opposite demeanor. Through deep-set concerned eyes framed under a protruding furrowed brow he announced quietly, 'Seda . . . Henry Seda.'

Jack had been involved in logging operations on Rendova and was the Chairman of TOLOA. A mischievous midget, Jack had given the impression that he had not concentrated on what Mary was saying, and was not interested in holding a serious meeting about the future of Tetepare. However, he surprised us. Waving a copy of the draft conservation proposal at us, the unlikely leader displayed his support with a flashing grin and an exuberant 'Very nice.'

Jack gestured me away from the others. Through an intensely beetle-nut stained grin, he frankly admitted that on previous occasions when TOLOA had managed projects like this that much of the loans and all of the profits had gone down his and his mates' throats. Assuming an unconvincing seriousness, Jack proposed that if the groups decided on supporting 'their' Tetepare project, then we should manage it. Despite being thrilled at Jack's willingness to support the concept I remained opposed to managing the project for them. We were enthusiastic about advising and assisting the descendants to secure funding but this was not our land, or our fight.

I suggested to Jack that if his TOLOA group were considering merging with Friends of Tetepare they should reach some resolutions in the next day or so to assist us in seeking funds for a collaborative environmental project. Jack didn't hesitate. With a cheeky smile he replied, 'You come back from Australia with a bottle of Jack Daniels for me and I will sign the resolutions on the bottle right away.' With that he sauntered off to get a smoke and that was the last we were to see of this charismatic rogue for the rest of the two-day meeting.

Concerned that his leader was avoiding the seriousness of the meeting, Henry confided, 'We have had many developments on Tetepare before.'

'Do you support this one?' I asked.

He replied in near perfect English, 'Yes, it is good but we will only give it two years to show that it can make us money.' True to their reputation, the Lokuru men were pragmatic. This two-year deadline for monetary success added pressure to the fledgling conservation agenda.

While the TOLOA contingent seemed content to allow FOT to take the initiative, Peter Siloko, Mary, Isaac and the rest of the Friends of Tetepare met until 3 a.m., determining what their stance would be at the next day's meeting. Did they trust and want to work with TOLOA, or retain their independence? Poor old Twomey sat under the verandah like a loyal sheepdog while Katherine and I retreated to our room. Although only a couple of panels of palm fronds separated us from the mixed Marovo and Roviana

dialects interspersed between bouts of fast Pijin, the FOT meeting sounded like another world away. The smells of the Solomons were heavy in the air; the insect repellent that we had smothered on our legs and arms, the dank sheets that never dry. Maybe I had become accustomed to the malaria-induced sore joints, listlessness and my chest infection. As Mary had promised, my symptoms must have abated because for the first time in a week Katherine could lie close to me.

‘What are you thinking?’ she asked; a common conversation starter we both use when we are reflective and not ready for sleep. ‘I’m not sure whether I want the two groups to agree,’ I admitted, surprising myself. ‘How about you, what’s on your mind?’ I asked. ‘Sem sem,’ Katherine replied, reverting to Pijin. It was not the first time that we had consistent thoughts, the opposite of what we had discussed and agreed upon. In clarifying, Katherine conceded that offering to help the landowners felt good, but if they agreed to the plan and really needed us to manage it, we would be committing ourselves to at least two years of frustration in a project over which we had little control. Tetepare would absorb all of our spare time and energy and we had been warned several times that it was too hard. Should both groups decide tomorrow to say ‘Thanks but no thanks’ we could sign off our little Melanesian adventure with a clean conscience.

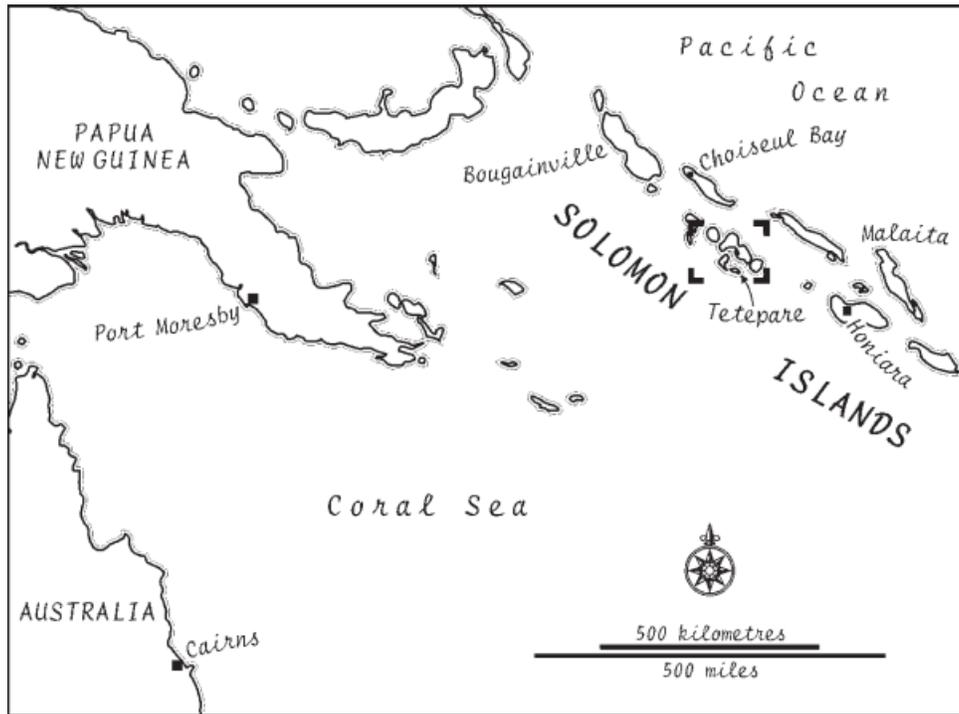
TDA is Born

Ten minutes into the meeting the following day Katherine and I were cognisant that we had strapped ourselves in for a roller-coaster of emotions. Every project or business that we had witnessed in the Solomons was fraught with logistical, political and financial woes. The added pressure of providing tangible benefits to thousands of Tetepare landowners who had by now become accustomed to lucrative logging royalties compounded the challenge. Odds were clearly stacked against success and we were aware that many landowners and interested observers felt that the ‘conservation project’ would fail like previous development attempts on Tetepare. By pinning their collective hopes on Katherine and me at their combined meeting, Friends of Tetepare and TOLOA had issued us the greatest challenge of our careers.

Like most other development in the Solomons, conserving Tetepare initially depended upon securing funds from international donors. The panda emblem on our grant applications would greatly enhance the funding opportunities and the local WWF office could also provide Tetepare descendants and their reluctant expat managers with valuable advice and an inaugural office. Before returning to Australia we worked with supportive local staff to apply for funds from three international agencies. Once signed by WWF managers, the applications could be posted in the stamped envelopes that we had left on their desks.

BREAK.....

Illustrations

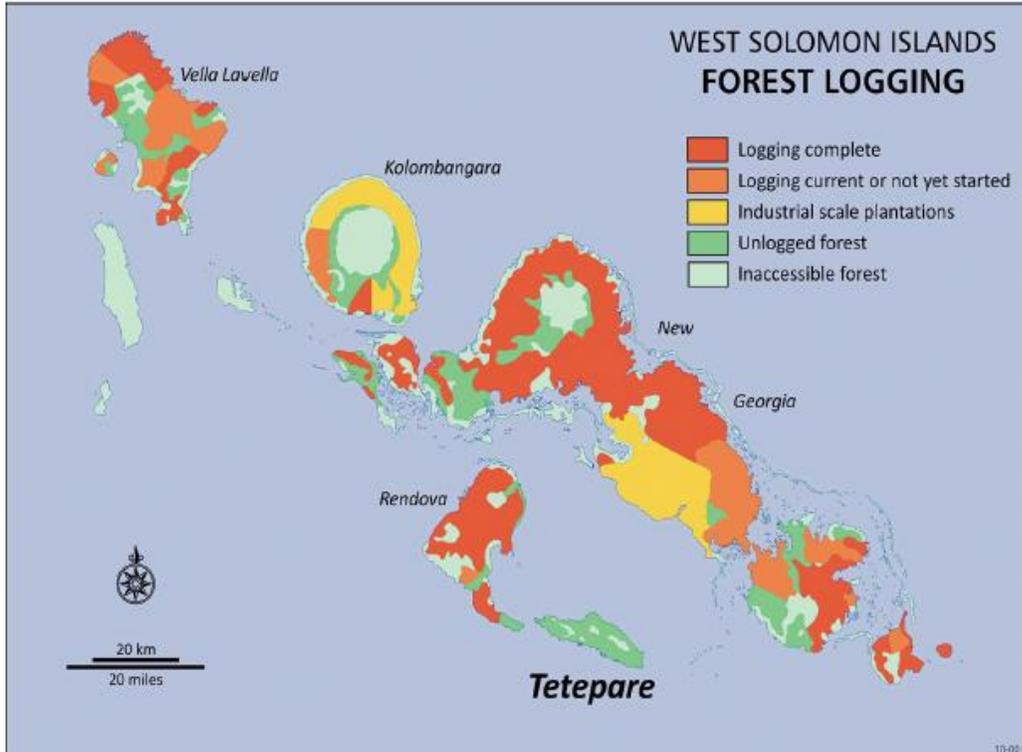


Regional map of the Solomon Islands



Tetepare and surrounding islands

The Last Wild Island: Saving Tetepare by John L Read



Tetepare stood out as the last 'green' unlogged island in the Western Province.



After witnessing the destruction of logged forests, Tetepare's cathedral induced a tree-hugging episode

The Last Wild Island: Saving Tetepare by John L Read



Anna Daniel and the ‘seagrass girls’ have now joined other TDA members who routinely monitor resources within and outside the Tetepare Protected area. (*Photo Katherine Moseby*)



Education scholarships, such as this one handed to Petrie Sute (*on right*) by TDA coordinators Allan Tippet Bero and Mary Bea, have allowed hundreds of children and their communities to benefit from conserving Tetepare.



Tetepare's 'ecolodge', built without any bolts, nails or sawn timber, remains unscathed despite a number of earthquakes and tropical storms.



Smiles all around as the author delivers donated second hand wheelchairs to Lokuru village (photo Matthew Suka).