



SANTO SUNSET ENVIRONMENT NETWORK

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Remote Western Santo leads on Custom Conservation Action

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This week, over 30 Environmental Rangers from across Western Santo met in the high-mountain village of Valapei to refine their skills on using mobile phone apps to map culturally and ecologically significant resources within their custom conservation areas.

The largest Key Biodiversity Area in Vanuatu is located across the Western Santo Mountain Chain. The area spans two area councils, 42 villages from Kerevinopu in the South to Hokua in the North, and more than 4000 people living in one of the most remote parts of the country. In Western Santo, there are no roads, mobile phone services are commonly out of service, and families rely on the infrequent sale of copra, cacao and peanuts for their livelihoods.

The high mountain chain of Western Santo is also home to the largest diversity of plants and animals in the country, and a wealth of traditional knowledge and customary environmental practice. Chiefs have been working hard for many years to protect, manage and conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the area through the Tarpoe and West Santo Councils of Chiefs.

Over the last 12 months, especially since cyclone Harold, the priority placed on the environment has expanded rapidly as chiefs and village leaders are seeing the critical importance of healthy resources and healthy places. With water systems destroyed, and little to no government support, many villages are still drinking out of the creeks and rivers, so keeping these rivers clean and protecting water sources has become essential.

Income generation for most Western Santo families has taken a serious toll after the double disasters of TC Harold and COVID19, for example the thousands of coconuts were destroyed during Harold limiting money available for school fees, rebuilding and basic household needs. Food, shelter and income generating resources are now coming directly from the forest and the sea, and so there is a greater motivation to protect and manage livelihood options.

Custom conservation action is no longer the exception on Western Santo, with most villages currently strengthening their tabu areas and ramping up management activities. From March to May of 2021, 5 villages developed new Management Plans for their tabu areas, which strengthen customary governance, identify local language names of important plants and animals, establish chiefly-enforced by-laws for resource use, and set customary penalties like pigs and mats for transgressors. Vasalea, Wusi, Linduri, Valapei and Kerevinopu each held week-long community planning meetings, with support of the Santo Sunset Environment Network, to define their own priorities and strategies for environmental management. These five villages now bring the total number of communities with formal environmental management plans to 12 also including Wunpuko, Nogugu, Penouru, Tasmate, Eden Hope,

Elia and Kerepua. Western Santo is now the national hotspot for customary conservation action where chiefs and traditional authorities have taken steps to better steward and actively manage forests, grasslands, lakes, mountain peaks, rivers and the ocean.

“Chiefs in these communities are so thankful to have the support of the Santo Sunset Environment Network to strengthen customary governance, especially in regards to documenting custom environmental rules and bringing awareness to the tribal and family decision-making structures of each community,” said Mr Richard Rojo, one of the management planning facilitators. “People are now talking about the environment everyday, chiefs are being empowered as the custodians of natural resources.”

The Santo Sunset Environment Network is the official environmental arm of the West Coast and North West Santo Are Councils, with both Area Administrators and chief representatives part of the fully local executive committee. The Network is formally registered as a charitable association and sets a new precedent for self-reliance and locally-led development. In contrast to external NGOs that often do not know the area well, and spend huge sums on transport and per diems, the Santo Sunset Environment Network is always locally available to provide support to all villages in Western Santo, leaving no one behind, no matter how remote or inaccessible the community.

“Western Santo is modelling a new approach to development”, said West Coast Area Administrator Samuel Kenneth. “Our locally based environmental NGO, led by local people, with local knowledge is now delivering real impacts on people’s lives in Western Santo. We encourage all government agencies and NGOs to work through the Santo Sunset Environment Network and Area Council to ensure work is well coordinated and builds local capacity.”

This week’s Ranger training represents an important precedent for inclusivity as it was hosted by Valapei one of the most remote and inaccessible villages on Western Santo, and Rangers hiked for more than 5 hours up steep mountains to reach the community. The location is ideal as rangers learned to use two mobile phone apps which can, without expensive equipment, map Tabu areas and the important cultural and ecological features important for chiefly resource management. Fully functional offline, the apps use high resolution satellite imagery, with maps remaining the full and exclusive property of the community for local environmental management use.

Mr. Rexly Bune, one of the GPS training facilitators, reflected that “modern mobile technology is helping us revive customary practice. Our maps help chiefs document and share traditional environmental knowledge before it is lost. We are mapping important information that elders want to share with younger generations.”

After this GPS training in Valapei, rangers will return to their communities and make a mapping plan under the guidance of chiefs and traditional authorities. By June, it is expected that each village will be able to report to Sanma Province and the national government on exactly how many hectares of the Santo Mountain Chain Biodiversity Area are under active customary environmental management, and thus help Vanuatu meet its national sustainable development goals, and its international obligations to protect the environment.

Allan Taman, Chairman of the Santo Sunset Environment Network celebrated this week's training success. "We all have a part to play to protect our natural resources, as a healthy environment is the basis of life. Customary conservation action on Western Santo is strengthening our culture, our traditional way of life, and also the endangered and endemic species found only in this chain of mountains. I am proud of local Rangers who are working voluntarily and tirelessly so that future generations can enjoy what we have today."

For more information, contact the SantoSunsetEnvironmentNetwork@gmail.com or visit www.SantoSunset.org



