

# THE PACIFIC INVASIVES LEARNING NETWORK

## *Empowering Effective Invasive Species Management Across the Pacific*

### program information

**location** Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia, and Hawaii

**threat** invasive plants and animals can disrupt natural cycles, crowd out native species, and cause billions of dollars in damage

**strategy** The Pacific Island Invasives Learning Network will build the skills of multi-agency teams in the Pacific to address the threats posed by invasive species

**mission** to empower effective invasive species management through a participant-driven network that meets priority needs, rapidly shares skills and resources, provides links to technical expertise, increases information exchange, and accelerates on-the-ground action

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Pakin Atoll, Federated States of Micronesia ©Jez O'Hare

Invasive species are one of the greatest threats to biodiversity in island ecosystems. When a species is accidentally or intentionally introduced into a new landscape or seascape, the consequences can be devastating, posing a large threat to agriculture, public health, tourism, and other economic activities. Invasive plants and animals can spread unchecked, disrupting natural cycles, and costing billions.

Invasives are a priority for Pacific Island nations because islands are highly vulnerable to invasions that can result in catastrophic loss of biodiversity and other impacts. However, the relatively small size and iso-

lation of most islands offer important opportunities for preventing new invasions and eradicating existing pest species.

In some parts of the Pacific, experienced conservation professionals have developed model programs to prevent, eradicate, or control certain high-priority invaders, such as rodents, feral animals, and invasive weeds. However, according to the Global Invasive Species Programme, "In most Pacific Island countries, there is a profound lack of awareness about the issue and an almost complete absence of capacity to deal with invasive species." Conservation practitioners in the Pacific represent a



*Merremia peltata*, an invasive weed ©Joel Miles

host of different agencies and countries, and most are geographically and professionally isolated. As a result, few Pacific conservationists currently have the information, expertise, and support they need to manage invasive species effectively.

### Peer Learning Networks

Peer learning networks are a proven strategy for improving conservation skills and building cooperation between trained professionals. By bringing peers together with conservation experts, learning networks foster new ideas and practical, site-specific solutions. Multi-disciplinary project teams can work together on strategies with critical input from other teams and experts, resulting in a common vision and a plan for effective conservation action.

The Nature Conservancy's work with peer learning networks has produced impressive results, including:

- 1) A Fire Learning Network in North America that has helped 16 projects obtain over \$3.5 million in conservation funding;
- 2) A fire network in Latin America and the Caribbean that has trained 150 practitioners from 7 countries; and,
- 3) The Micronesians in Island

Conservation Network, which is helping 12 Pacific conservation leaders strengthen their programs and manage or monitor 21 natural areas.

Now, we are building on this success to develop a learning network that specifically addresses the threat of invasive species in the Pacific.

### Launching the Pacific Invasives Learning Network

The Conservancy recently joined with the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme, the Cooperative Island Initiative on Invasive Species, the IUCN Invasive Species Specialist Group, the National Park of American Samoa, Conservation International, the Palau Office of Environmental Response and Coordination, and others to establish the Pacific Invasives Learning Network (PILN). Start-up of PILN is being supported by the U.S. Department of State. The network will serve teams of Pacific Island agencies responsible for invasives management, including agencies responsible for agriculture, international trade and other economic interests, as well as conservation and natural resource management. The network's mission is *to empower effective invasive species management through a partici-*

*part-driven network that meets priority needs, rapidly shares skills and resources, provides links to technical expertise, increases information exchange, and accelerates on-the-ground action.*

The first set of PILN teams will come from Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Hawaii, with each team representing a single nation, state, or archipelago. Teams will include members with a long-term commitment to conservation, strong cultural understanding, and the potential to act as innovators to increase invasive species management and prevention in their nations. Participating teams will determine the specific invasive species issues that they will address using the network.

The network's activities and agenda will be determined by the individual and shared needs of the participants. Examples of potential projects include: 1) developing a national invasives strategy; 2) implementing a pest risk assessment process; 3) adapting international health standards to regulate imports; and, 4) eradicating rats or invasive plants from offshore islands.

To start, the network will commit to two to four meetings of participating teams and experts over the course of two years. The network will hire a Pacific-based coordinator to help recruit the founding teams, organize meetings and activities, and provide ongoing support to network participants. Team applications will be distributed in 2005, with the first meeting proposed for early 2006.

PILN and the Conservancy are now seeking funding to launch the network, hire a coordinator, and hold the first meeting next year. We believe that PILN will be a highly effective, far-reaching, and sustainably financed strategy to address invasive species, and that the network will have a lasting impact on conservation in Pacific Island nations.