

Removal of feral dogs *Canis familiaris* by befriending them, Viwa Island, Fiji

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SUMMARY

On a Fijian island a decision was made to remove feral dogs *Canis familiaris* as they were predated upon endangered fauna. Rather than trapping or shooting, by offering food and gradually habituating them to people, almost all were captured unharmed and moved to the main island of Fiji.

BACKGROUND

To help restore the biodiversity on Viwa Island (Fiji) it is planned to eradicate several invasive alien species (Pacific rats *Rattus exulans*, feral cats *Felis catus* and feral dogs *Canis familiaris* and cane toads *Bufo marinus*). These eradications should help protect the endangered Fijian ground frog *Platymantis vitianus* which is found on only four mongoose *Herpestes*-free islands in Fiji (and a small population recently rediscovered on Vanua Levu). There is ample evidence that on other islands, Pacific rats have contributed to the decline and extinction of a range of amphibian and reptile species.

On Viwa, feral dogs were considered a significant predator of the Fijian ground frog. Therefore, in collaboration with the local community, the decision was made to remove the dogs. Rather than shooting or trapping, it was decided to try and befriend them in order that they could be caught and moved off the island.

ACTION

Study site: Viwa Island (17.56S, 178.36E) is relatively small (60 ha) and lies approximately 30 km northeast of Suva, Fiji's capital city. The island consists of six short valleys separated by rolling hill country, with a maximum elevation of 49 m a.s.l.

The closest landmass to Viwa is Viti Levu, another small island, which is 900 m away at low tide.

Viwa has one main settlement with 26 houses (107 people live on the island but another 150+ Viwa Islanders live near Suva on the mainland). The island has one small sandy beach and many small rocky outcrops and ledges dropping to the water's edge. There are extensive mangrove *Rhizophora* spp. zones in the southwest and northeast. Viwa still has some tall native forest cover although much of the forest cover comprises human-dispersed fruit trees.

Befriending dogs: A small population of 12 feral dogs were present on Viwa. These were gradually befriended by feeding them scrap foodstuffs (fish, meat etc.) from November 2005 to January 2006. This was done on a daily basis by the villagers on Viwa. Initially no one was present when the food was distributed but as time went by the dogs soon learnt to trust the presence of humans and became habituated to people standing nearby.

CONSEQUENCES

Gradually the dogs were tamed and some became so tame that they could be fed by hand. When they could be fed within reach, they were grasped and transported to the mainland of Fiji. Unfortunately two dogs could not be captured and so food laced with poison (1080) was fed to these last two. Eradication of feral dogs on Viwa Island had been achieved.

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