

- Breaking News on PACER-Plus
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**“Life is like this: sometimes sun, sometimes rain”**  
~ Fijian Proverb



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### BREAKING NEWS ON PACER-PLUS

As mentioned in [previous issues](#) of *Pacific Outlook*, the Pacific Agreement on Closer Economic Relations (PACER) Plus is a comprehensive free trade agreement conforming to World Trade Organisation rules. In June 2017, the agreement was signed by 10 countries – Australia, New Zealand, Cook Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Samoa and Tuvalu. Then a few months later, Vanuatu’s Prime Minister Charlot Salwai, [signed the PACER-Plus](#) agreement at the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders’ Meeting in Apia, Samoa.

Two countries currently still absent from this agreement, Fiji and Papua New Guinea (PNG), are the largest economies among the small Pacific Forum nations. Earlier this month however, PNG's Minister for Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Rimbink Pato, hinted that his country [could potentially sign up to PACER-Plus](#) by the end of the year.

Fiji’s Permanent Secretary for Industry, Trade and Tourism, Shaheen Ali, recently claimed that Fiji has also made [significant progress](#) in negotiations with Australia and New Zealand over PACER-Plus. While speaking to the Standing Committee on Economic Affairs this month, Mr Ali explained that while “Fiji had managed to iron out a number of goods issues, it would maintain its position as a non-signatory until all grievances were addressed”.

In March this year, the Public Health Association of Australia ([PHAA](#)) expressed major concerns around the health, political and economic impacts of PACER-Plus when they appeared before the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties ([JSCT](#)). In evidence presented at the hearing PHAA noted that Samoa and Vanuatu would each stand to lose upwards of \$10 million annually upon reducing tariff revenues on imports from Australia and New Zealand, while a number of other countries would lose more than 10% of their overall revenues. PHAA representative, Dr Belinda Townsend, expressed concern that lowering tariffs on unhealthy imports such as ultra-processed foods, alcohol and tobacco products could significantly increase their availability and consumption in Pacific nations, resulting in higher rates of non-communicable disease among their populations.

[According to Michael Moore](#), CEO of the PHAA, “We recommend that the PACER-Plus be postponed until there has been an analysis of any immediate and specific impacts on public health policies, services and outcomes in any of the nations involved that would flow on from the terms of the agreement”.

The JSCT’s [final report on PACER-Plus](#) notes the absence of any independent study of economic impacts and repeats previous recommendations that such studies should be conducted for all trade deals. Dr Patricia Ranald of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network ([AFTINET](#)) argues, “Given that the JSCT Report says that the deal could cause considerable harm to vulnerable Pacific Island economies and that these impacts should be monitored, it is surprising that it still recommends ratification of the deal. At a time when many commentators are concerned about China’s influence in the region, resentment about such a deal could contribute to a reduction in Australia’s and New Zealand’s influence.”

Sources: [PNG could sign onto Pacific trade pact](#), SBS News, 3 May 2018 | [Ali: Some Progress On Pacer Plus](#), Sheldon Chanel, Fiji Sun, 3 May 2018 | [PACER Plus: trade agreements must consider health impacts on developing](#), Media Release, Public Health Association of Australia, 27 March 2018 | [Treaties Committee critiques PACER-Plus](#), DevPolicy Blog, Nic Maclellan, 16 May 2018 | Edited by Kendall Benton-Collins.

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## ARE WE LOSING NEW BRITAIN’S UNIQUE BIRDS?

New Britain is the largest island in the Bismarck Archipelago of Papua New Guinea (PNG). New Britain and its satellite islands are of vital importance to 14 endemic (meaning they are found nowhere else in the world) bird species. And together with New Ireland, it forms an ‘Endemic Bird Area’ which is home to 38 restricted-range species. Startlingly, the island lost over 20% of its lowland forest between 1989 and 2000. The culprits are palm oil plantations and industrial logging, which are threatening to turn New Britain’s rich biodiversity into a monoculture reflecting our consumerism – or worse, a barren, deforested wasteland.

Despite the importance of this habitat and the ever-encroaching threat of its destruction, New Britain’s bird fauna is poorly understood and among the least known to science. A group of researchers recently ventured into the island’s unforgiving wilderness to find out how these species were coping with the loss of their forest, with the aim of updating the status of New Britain’s birds on the [IUCN \(International Union for Conservation of Nature\) Red List](#). The IUCN Red List is widely recognised as the most comprehensive, objective global approach for evaluating the conservation status of plant and animal species.



The team had to battle oppressive heat and humidity, two weeks of torrential rain and flooding, and even a case of malaria. This is without even mentioning the difficulty of actually finding the birds during over 400 hours of surveys. Despite the impressive amount of time spent in the field and working with local guides, four of the key species were only recorded once, and the Golden Masked-owl [Tyto aurantia](#) and Bismarck Thicketbird [Megalurulus grosvenori](#) (both classed as Vulnerable) remained elusive throughout the survey, with no records at all.



The good news was that seven species may be eligible to be reclassified on the IUCN Red List from ‘Near Threatened’ to ‘Least Concern’. This has been helped by the fact that the rate of lowland forest loss has slowed in recent years. The researchers were also interested to discover that some species seemed to be using the palm oil plantations as a new habitat. However, logged forest and plantations may be far less suitable for breeding populations of species such as the Blue-eyed Cockatoo [Cacatua ophthalmica](#) (Vulnerable), which depends on large, hollow-bearing trees unlikely to be found there.

New Britain’s other range-restricted bird species remain at levels of elevated concern, since they were found to be highly dependent on the diminishing original forest habitat. An example is the New Britain Goshawk [Accipiter princeps](#), which is still listed as Vulnerable. It has been suggested that one species, the New Britain Kingfisher [Todiramphus albonotatus](#), should be re-classified from Near Threatened to Vulnerable. This was due to reduced population size estimates, with most birds being found in areas of lowland forest that are on the frontlines for exploitation by palm oil and logging projects.

While the overall rate of forest loss has slowed in New Britain over recent years – there has been an increase in helicopter use to reach formerly inaccessible areas for logging, and the forest is being fragmented by new roads that carve their way through the precious habitat. One ongoing challenge is to revoke the allocation of vast areas of traditionally-owned forest for clear-felling and oil palm under the illegal ‘Special Agricultural Business Lease’ scheme.

Due to past habitat loss and these emerging threats, the researchers call for urgent attention to be directed towards improving our understanding of the ecology of New Britain’s special birds, to find out more about how they’re adapting, or in other cases, failing to cope.

Source: [Are we too late to save the elusive birds of this Papua New Guinea island?](#), BirdLife International, Fiona Dobson, 5 February 2018 | Image: [Russet hawk-owl perched on a branch](#) | Slightly edited by Kendall Benton-Collins.

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## WOMEN & CHILDREN UNDER SIEGE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA: PART 1

On 26 February, a magnitude 7.5 earthquake wreaked devastation across the remote highlands of Papua New Guinea (PNG), killing 125 people and displacing an estimated 35,000. On Saturday 5 April, the highlands suffered another earthquake of magnitude 6.3 at a depth of 10

kilometres. These natural disasters are being compounded by severe outbreaks of tribal violence in the region. “In emergencies like these, it's easy to focus on the tangible things people need: food, water and shelter. But keeping people safe is equally important, particularly women and girls”, says Anna Bryan, [CARE Australia's](#) Program Director in PNG.

Tribal fights in the highlands are a modern, deadlier form of an ancient tradition where grievances were settled with violence, or rival tribes raided each other's villages. The introduction of firearms and a breakdown of law and order in some highlands provinces has increased the intensity of the violence and the number of people being killed. Rape and attacks on women and children – previously taboo – are now part of tribal conflicts.

[The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#) and the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) both estimate thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes because of tribal fighting, many in areas now affected by the quakes. Around 400 women and children have sought refuge from conflict in Hoiebia village, near the capital of Hela Province, Tari. The president of the Hoiebia United Church women's committee, Agnes Havalu, said the tribal fighting refugees did not have access to enough food in the aftermath of the quake. "If things from the earthquake get worse and the fighting doesn't stop there will be a famine here," she said.

While the Australian Government is funding the setup of ‘safe spaces’ for women and children as part of earthquake relief, the reality on the ground is complicated. According to village councillor Moreen Mokai, ongoing fighting makes it risky to gather people in one place. "We can't make a care centre, because men are still holding guns and finding all their enemies," she said.

The remote location of the earthquake stricken region, coupled with imminent threat of violence, has made relief efforts extremely difficult for aid agencies. Relief workers, while sorely needed, have been forced to evacuate whenever tensions have escalated. The PNG Country Director for UN Women, Susan Ferguson, argues that there needs to be long-term ‘peace building’, led by local people, to stop the tribal fighting. “It's really hard to untangle the earthquake from some of the existing challenges that women face.”

Sources: [Papua New Guinea emergency teams scramble to reach villages feared hit by latest earthquake](#), ABC News, Eric Tlozek, 9 April 2018 | [Papua New Guinea highlands shaken by magnitude-6.3 earthquake](#), ABC News, Eric Tlozek, 7 April 2018 | [PNG earthquake: Women and children facing 'double trauma' from quake and tribal fighting](#), ABC News, Eric Tlozek, 1 April 2018 | [Papua New Guinea earthquake: there is a disaster on our doorstep that's being ignored](#), ABC News, Anna Bryan, 22 March 2018 | Edited by Kendall Benton-Collins.

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