

collectively entering into a conservation deed, pledging to safeguard an area of 12,241 hectares of pristine forest.

It's not a huge area, about two thirds the size of Washington DC, or ten times the size of London Heathrow Airport. But it's what it represents which is big.

“Conservation deeds are legally binding agreements that are entered into voluntarily by the community but once signed have the force of law,” says Jennifer Baing, [Wildlife Conservation Society](#) PNG Country Director, adding that that these community-led governance mechanisms in the past have been proven effective for sustainable wildlife management and conservation in PNG.

“This community led approach is effective because it incorporates both social and environmental safeguards, such as rigorous processes of obtaining local [Free, Prior, and Informed Consent](#) (FPIC). Through the process of developing conservation deeds, customary landowners are empowered to make decisions on the use of their own resources based on traditional knowledge and the community's own needs. This is achieved by utilising information on local threats to their natural resources, food security and culture.”

Spanning across the provinces of Chimbu, Eastern Highlands, Jiwaka, and Madang, the Bismarck Forest forms a continuous and intact corridor of global significance, encompassing around 202,000 hectares. It includes the often snowy top of [Mt. Wilhelm](#), PNG's tallest mountain at an elevation of 4,509 meters. From the alpine heights it drops seamlessly down to the mid-elevation lowland forests. The [Bismarck Mountain Range](#), traversing the heart of the Bismarck Forest Corridor, has been identified as one of the world's top seven regions boasting unparalleled biodiversity, serving as a haven for a variety of endemic mammal and amphibian species.

In fact, it has been identified as one of the six critical global hotspots of species at risk due to the impacts of climate change. The forest is home to several little-known and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) red-listed species, such as the vulnerable [Ifola tree-kangaroo](#), the endangered [Goodfellow's tree kangaroo](#), the vulnerable [eastern long-beaked echidna](#), and the [New Guinea pademelon](#), also classified as vulnerable.

residing in the highlands region. Approximately [83,000 people live in 389 villages](#) along the forest corridor's edge.

In a resource rich but employment and cash poor country like PNG, there was some rejoicing when the area was designated a special economic zone. That, and [PNG's 3.1 percent annual population growth rate](#), which is expected to double the country's total population in the next 25 years, are likely to exacerbate these threats.

Without proper planning and intervention, the increasing population and subsequent rise in subsistence use of the environment may lead to rapid forest degradation, loss of habitat, and the extinction of crucial species. So safeguarding the Bismarck Forest Corridor becomes paramount to ensure the survival of vulnerable montane wildlife in the face of a warming climate.

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This legally binding commitment ensures the preservation of this ecologically valuable land from logging activities, while also permitting the sustainable use of its natural resources within designated zones. “We know that conservation efforts work best when local communities are conscious of the environmental impacts of human activities. Knowing that access to the forest will be managed along the road to balance sustainable development with biodiversity protection will set a benchmark for other communities,” said Dr. Adrian Tejedor, the previous WCS Country Director, when announcing the development last year.

Tejedor says the WCS PNG program has “been working closely with partners through the USAID-funded. [Lukautim Graun Proiect](#) (*Protect the environment in*

The lands are managed under the oversight of [KGWan](#), a community-based organisation made up of representatives from each of the Inaugl tribe's five clans, and monitored by local rangers or "Wasman," who will be trained in GPS software tools to record wildlife sightings and breaches of management rules. Those found in breach can face legal repercussions within village or state courts. The implementation of the SWM Programme and Lukautim Graun Program has also led to essential training for local magistrates and the Conservation Management Committee. They have gained knowledge about appropriate penalties and mediation procedures to try to enforce the conservation deeds. "This conservation deed, which is agreed by all five clans of the Inaugl tribe, meant that the people put aside their differences and are united to work together for common good," said clan leader, John Kamb Sande, at the time.

As an integral component of the management strategy, the community has also established specific zones within the conservation area to facilitate the practice of sustainable traditional hunting. In addition, to increase the supply of protein, two hundred households will be provided with chickens to initiate village-based backyard poultry farming.

"Conservation will not be fully achieved in PNG unless people's livelihoods are integrated," Jenny Steven, who represents the women of the Inaugl tribe, emphasised. Steven believes this crucial integration stands at the heart of both the Sustainable Wildlife Management Programme and the Lukautim Graun Program.

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Chief of Party for the USAID-funded Lukautim Graun Program, Tom Pringel says equal participation for all genders in biodiversity conservation programming and livelihood activities is the key to success: “Papua New Guinea, land of 840 languages and cultures is living through a time of environmental degradation which is not only resulting in biodiversity loss, but loss of cultural identity associated with traditional bilas, folklores, songs, areas of cultural significances, loss of water sources, loss of herbal medicine, loss of useful plants, animals, and insects. [...]

“With the increase in human population and demand for more resources there is now a greater need to promote biodiversity conservation and environmental protection in PNG.

“Gender equality in PNG is rated as one of the lowest out of the 159 countries, therefore the program also supports and promotes equal participation for girls and women in biodiversity conservation programming and livelihood activities.”

The Conversation Deed is part of a growing trend in PNG.

Last year the Wamiufa tribe’s seven clans formally affirmed their legal entitlement to preserve the Mount Waugareame Conservation Area (spanning 2,603 hectares), also positioned within the Bismarck Range. “It has taken a long process to come this far. For everyone to come to an agreement to give their consent for a conservation area alone is not easy. By developing laws to protect what we have in our forests and on the land, is an achievement,” said Peter Siune, one of the elders in the Wamiufa Tribe.

signing of agreement among our clans for the established conservation area.”

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