

East Timor's first national park (proposed)



What is the project about?

Since the devastation and turmoil of Indonesian withdrawal from East Timor, the country has been the subject of an extensive program of rebuilding of the social, physical and governmental infrastructure and in capacity building amongst the East Timorese population. The international conservation organisation, BirdLife International has been involved in Timor Leste for several years, mainly through biological surveys, but also in the development of a protected areas network. The first National Park in Timor Leste is now proposed for the Tutuala – Lake Iralalaro – Jaco Island area at the far eastern end of the island of Timor. BirdLife has raised funds for biological surveys and training of locals in the area and has sought the involvement of the Northern Territory Herbarium. Botanical surveys of this park area and capacity building in Timorese staff are required to help produce management guidelines, identify conservation priorities and ensure effective management.

Research

The project is one of the first comprehensive botanical surveys conducted in the proposed park area. It aims to build knowledge of the flora of the proposed NP, provide baseline data on the distribution and abundance of the plant species and provide a preliminary assessment of the conservation status of the flora. Training of East Timorese staff in botanical survey and vegetation assessment techniques is an important component of the project. About 3 weeks of rapid flora surveys and up to two weeks of training for local staff are involved.

The proposed park area has high biodiversity and scenic values including limestone ranges, evergreen tropical rainforests, vine forests and seasonally inundated wetlands and swamp forests associated with Lake Ira Lalara, that support aquatic and riparian species. Along the difficult-to-access south coast, areas of coastal forest can be found. This vegetation type has been heavily exploited by humans and is now rare in Asia. Illegal logging, livestock grazing, slash-and-burn agriculture and inappropriate fire regimes are threats to the biodiversity values of the area.

Although East Timor is reported as having many endemic species, much of the dry vine forest flora of northern Australia also occurs in Timor. Around 20% of the Northern Territory flora was first described from overseas material including a number from specimens collected on Timor. Access to overseas plant specimens is of benefit to herbarium botanists in interpreting species concepts in the Northern Territory context. Specimen data from collections made during the survey as well as from an additional 500 plant specimens at NT Herbarium from Timor and Wetar will be available online through the Australian Virtual Herbarium. It is envisaged that a duplicate set of plant specimens from the surveys would ultimately be sent to East Timor.

