



THE THREATS DIVERSIFY, BUT **Loro Parque Fundación backs Katala in more conservation successes for the Philippine Cockatoo**

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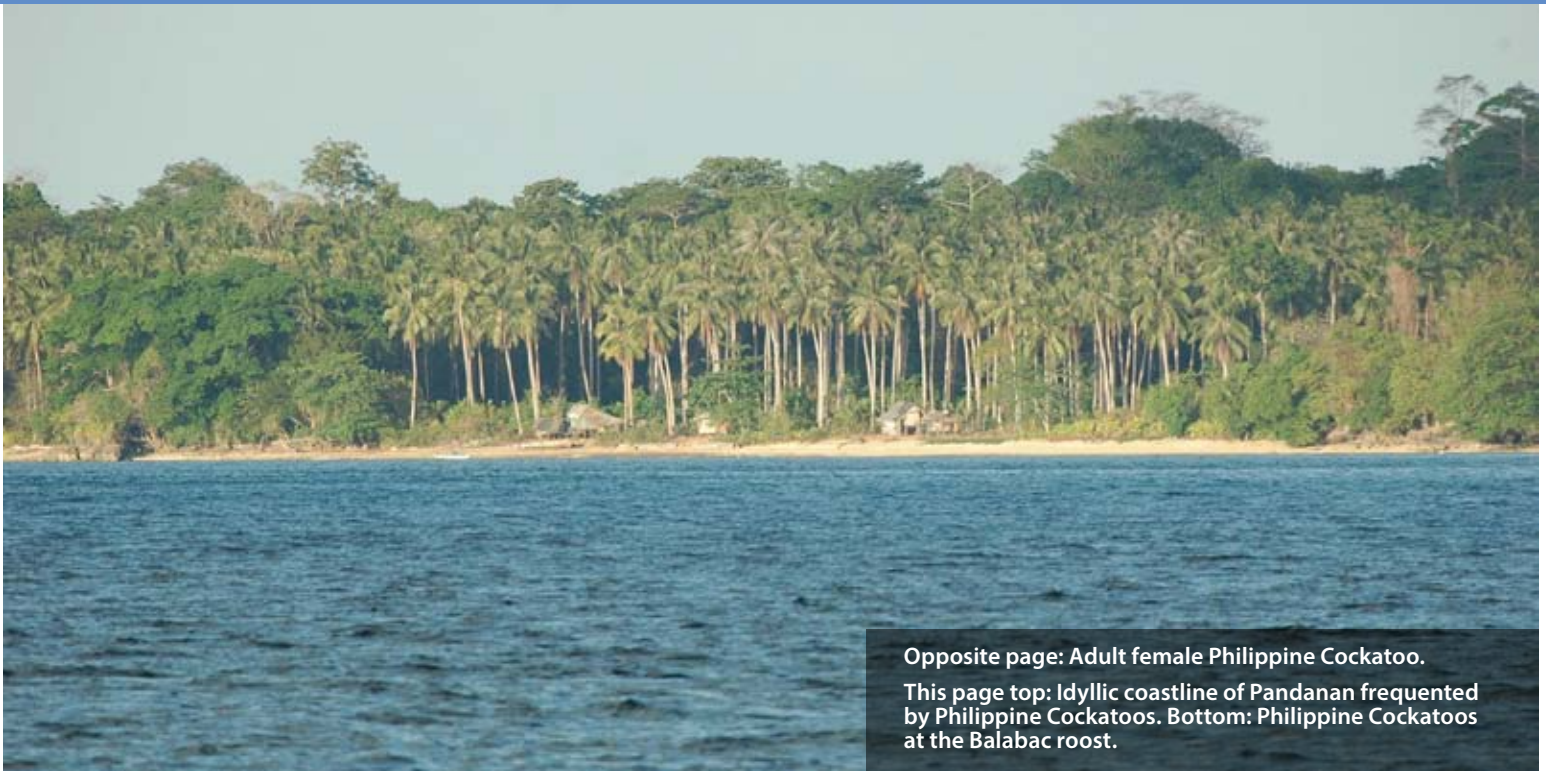
Photos: Peter Widmann/KFI

An 'El Niño' event causes food shortage, and security concerns put an important area off-limits to one of the Philippine Cockatoo project's co-directors, but in the same area 220 cockatoos have been counted and cockatoos released to the wild at another site continue to survive.

Close to the equator, and with about 7,640 islands, the Philippines has countless sun-drenched, white-sand tropical beaches and warm, crystal-clear waters. The western-most island of Palawan (and its satellite islands) is well-endowed with these natural assets which, together with the greater area of forest which it retains, is designated as a Biosphere Reserve under the Man and Biosphere Programme of UNESCO. It also constitutes the stronghold of the Philippine Cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*), a species classified in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as 'Critically Endangered'. The threats to the existence of the Philippine Cockatoo are various, but the two main cause of its highly threatened

status are the widespread destruction of its lowland forest habitat and the illegal removal of mainly young cockatoos for the pet trade.

Result of these pressures is the disappearance of cockatoos from most of the Philippine islands, and an upper estimate of only 1,120 wild Philippine Cockatoos. The lower estimate could be as few as 640, but without doubt this would be worse without the strenuous conservation efforts made by the local Katala Foundation Inc. (KFI) within its Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Program (PCCP). Katala and Kalabukay are two local names for the cockatoo. The Loro Parque Fundación (LPF) has since 1999 been the principal



Opposite page: Adult female Philippine Cockatoo.
 This page top: Idyllic coastline of Pandanan frequented by Philippine Cockatoos. Bottom: Philippine Cockatoos at the Balabac roost.



problem, from the beginning KFI identified the poachers and has conducted an effective approach to convert them into remunerated wildlife wardens, thereby harnessing their valuable local knowledge and skills. Equally successful have been the multi-faceted awareness and education efforts, including the establishment of the Katala Institute for Ecology and Biodiversity Conservation (KI), which have led to widespread consciousness about the uniqueness of the Philippine Cockatoo and the need to protect it and its habitat. With this groundswell of support, KFI was able to lead the decisive opposition to a coal-fired power-plant planned for construction dangerously close to Rasa Island Wildlife Sanctuary which holds the most important Philippine Cockatoo population.

supporter of the PCCP, with its main partner donors being the Chester Zoo, ZGAP (Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations) and Beaval Nature. Without the US\$1,679,278 contributed to date, it is likely that the species would now be extinct in the wild, but instead we now have a much more optimistic scenario where recovery of the wild population increasingly becomes reality.

The island of Palawan certainly has its idyllic side, but even with Biosphere Reserve status there are substantial challenges that the conservation heroes of the KFI, co-directors Peter Widmann and Indira Lacerna-Widmann and their team are tackling head-on. To deal directly with the poaching

Building on those achievements, the KFI team has revealed the importance for the Philippine Cockatoo of the Balabac and Pandanan Islands situated off the southern tip of Palawan. The importance of this site has proven to be on a par with the sites which have received conservation attention over a longer period of time, namely Rasa Island, Dumaran Island and the south-western plains of central Palawan. In sequential visits to Balabac and Pandanan, KFI has extended to this site the essential elements of the PCCP, with the deployment of wardens, the monitoring of nests and leg-banding of young cockatoos, the counting of cockatoos at roost-sites, the planting of food-trees and the establishment of an agreement with the private company which is the owner of land most

important for the cockatoos. In the most recent report from KFI, no less than 220 cockatoos were counted near to the end of the breeding season, and 26 young birds fledged from nests. Sadly, KFI also reports that the security situation in these beautiful islands has deteriorated to the point where field work by an obvious foreigner, like Peter Widmann, can only be conducted with armed escorts. However, the KFI will not be deterred from its endeavours, and the Philippine members of the team continue their activities there.

On Balabac and Pandanan the drought effect of the ‘El Niño’ event was less noticeable than at the other PCCP sites, notably Rasa Island. Here, despite the very dry conditions in the last breeding season, 41 cockatoo pairs attempted to breed, 15 in various coastal forest tree species and 26 in *Sonneratia* trees, highlighting the importance of the mangroves. Of the 70 eggs laid, 53 (75.7%) hatched and 39 hatchlings successfully fledged. The 14 hatchlings which died did so from predation, mite infestation and starvation due to El Niño-induced food shortages, and underweight hatchlings were given supplementary feeding before being returned to the nests. Two nestlings had to be brought to the KI for more intensive treatment. During the same breeding season six wildlife wardens conducted a remarkable total of 782 monitoring visits, including the arduous climbing of trees, and in doing so discovered two new cockatoo nest-trees.

The highest ever population count on Rasa Island was of 317 individuals in 2014 (from only 23 in 1998), but the counts at the traditional roosting site are declining further, with the most recent very low count of only 74 birds. However, at



Clockwise from top: A warden's monitoring station on Pandanan. Tropical lowland forest and mangrove of Rasa Island. Philippine Cockatoo eating Horseradish tree seeds.



the same time the number of cockatoos on the south-western plains of mainland Palawan, naturally re-colonised from Rasa Island, is at an all-time high. In this reporting period 90 birds were observed at the traditional roost-site on the mainland, and the highest ever daily numbers of cockatoos foraging there were recorded, with 144 in May and in 149 in August. The planting of food-providing trees continued with 240 Parina tree (*Ailanthus triphysa*) saplings planted in the foraging area of the cockatoos. Ninety of these saplings were on land purchased by KFI, where additional direct-seeding was done of Moringa or Horseradish trees (*Moringa oleifera*), another key

food-plant. Many parts of this tree are edible, and although the cockatoos might focus their attention on the blossoms, seeds and seed-pods, they can obtain even more nutrition from the leaves, which are rich in vitamins and minerals.

Further north, on the larger island of Dumaran, the PCCP also undertook extensive planting of trees, although one month late due to the rainy season delay from the 'El Niño' phenomenon. More than 13,500 tree seedlings were available in the tree nursery, comprising more than 40 species, and 2,872 of those seedlings were planted by wardens in the buffer zone restoration around the Omoi and Manambaling Cockatoo Reserves as well as in a forest corridor connecting the two reserves. In addition, the team made a Herculean effort to collect 4,185 wild saplings for propagation in the nursery, and the growth was measured of 425 trees planted during the previous rainy season in the corridor and buffer zone. The nesting cockatoos produced eleven eggs, but food shortage and extreme heat caused by the El Nino event contributed to the death of three hatchlings, and the remaining five hatchlings had to be removed from the nests. They were hand-fed until their condition was stable, and three days later transferred to the KI to be raised with reduced contact to humans for later release. A maximum of 20 cockatoos were observed post- breeding season.

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One of three cockatoos translocated from another site and released previously on Dumaran was frequently seen close to human settlements, and therefore local people were asked to not to feed cockatoos and instead to scare them away from the houses. Two of the released birds were observed foraging with the wild flock, particularly in mangroves adjacent to roost sites. They would returned to the roost site with other cockatoos, but then would separate to sleep in trees nearby.

To accommodate for release the cockatoos which were rescued earlier in the year from Dumaran and other sites, pre-release aviary panels were prepared in the Katala Environmental Education Center on Dumaran. These panels and a roof of palm thatch were assembled on an elevated platform at the release site close to the warden's campsite within the Omoi Cockatoo Reserve, thereby facilitating the regular maintenance of cockatoos. A double door was installed to allow easy and safe access, and the walkway and feeding area were screened with bamboo mats and plastic sheets to reduce visibility of caretakers to the cockatoos. Being located on a hillside within existing vegetation, the aviary gives the cockatoos a view over the forest area. To prevent premature dispersal of the birds, four feeding stations with naturally occurring food items were installed in the vicinity of the aviary. Three camera traps were installed in the immediate vicinity of the aviary to check for potential predators. Additionally, an isolation cage and a rope and pulley system were installed, the latter for anti-predator training with a model of a flying White-bellied Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*). The five cockatoos rescued from Dumaran, one bird rescued from another project site, and one confiscated bird from the main town of Puerto Princesa have been transferred to the pre-release aviary, and we await with great anticipation any further news on succeeding events.

To keep all these crucial activities in the public eye, the PCCP continues its awareness and education activities, notably organising another successful annual Katala Festival in Narra (Rasa), with a total of 2,520 participants. The support of the local community reinforces the commitment of the KFI, and of the LPF, to continue the actions best indicated to remove the Philippine Cockatoo from the threatened species list and to secure its future.



This page, from top: Philippine Cockatoo flock flying from rasa Island to the nearby mainland. A warden's refresher course. Tree nursery on Dumaran Island.

Next page: 1. The pre-release aviary on Dumaran Island. 2. Food hung in the aviary as enrichment for the cockatoos. 3. Philippine Cockatoos in transit to the Dumaran Island release site. 4. A Philippine Cockatoo marked for release. 5. The Kalabukay Festival in Dumaran Island with the Katala mascot.

