



## FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA: YELA VALLEY

In Tafunsak, Kosrae State, Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Yela Valley Forest Legacy project already conserves the heart of the largest intact ka (*Terminalia carolinensis*) forest in the world.

The USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Program (FLP) has enabled the first conservation easement (CE) in Asia and the Pacific (outside Hawaii). The project is crucial to the protection of the valley as ancestral lands may move from public to private ownership due to a constitutional amendment in Kosrae. The Yela Valley's watershed directly impacts downslope mangroves and coral reefs, which have high economic and cultural value. The project lands are identified for protection in the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the FSM Strategic Development Plan: Environment component. The FLP offers the best means for this necessary protection to occur.



Adjacent lands have already been converted to agriculture and agroforestry. The Yela Valley was recently threatened by the construction of a dam that would pipe water through the mangroves for export to developed countries. There are no zoning restrictions that would limit this development. The area is also desirable for residential development due to its gentle slope, proposed access, and proximity to the airport.

The FLP's support of the Yela Valley ties into other initiatives, including the Micronesia Challenge Initiative, a regional intergovernmental effort to preserve both forest and marine resources. The Nature Conservancy Conservation Initiative identifies FSM as "home to some of the most biologically diverse forests and coral reefs in the world" and places the Yela Valley into two formally-defined Areas of Biological Significance. At the local level, the Kosrae Land Use Plan identifies the Yela Valley as a "Special Consideration District" for priority conservation of the entire valley's ka forest. The Kosrae Biodiversity Conservation Strategic Action Plan, calls for priority conservation of the Yela Valley and ka trees.

Endemic to the FSM, the **ka tree** (*Terminalia carolinensis*) is habitat for numerous local birds, including several endangered species and the state bird (the Dusky White-eye).



The piloted use of a CE in Kosrae has inspired the expansion of the FSM's Assessment of Need in Pohnpei and Yap island-states and supports the use of CEs elsewhere to magnify conservation efforts throughout the Pacific. The FSM, Palau, and the Marshall Islands are all former UN Trust Territories now in a Compact of Free Association with the US, which makes them eligible for S&PF programs. The protection of the Yela Valley ties into land-

scape-level conservation work occurring in Kosrae that includes the designation of inland peaks as the "Sleeping Lady" park.



Protecting the Yela Valley yields benefits, including ecotourism and education, as the landowners host tours for tourists and schoolchildren. The valley includes one of the most intact wetland-dominated watersheds left in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, where many freshwater wetlands have been converted to rice or taro, and mangrove wetlands have been filled or converted to shrimp ponds.

The valley provides important services to reduce sedimentation on the coral reefs and support the mangroves, which in turn protect the coast from erosion and mitigate climate change. While the forest type of the Yela Valley is productive, the management plan for the Yela Valley calls for preservation to maintain the limited ka forest left. The adjacent mangrove forests are sustainably harvested for timber and fuel.



Through the connection between forests and adjacent reef health, this project also supports the scuba and snorkeling industries in one of the most pristine parts of the world. The easement restricts harvest of native species and conserves the native ecosystem. It allows controlled public access to the property for hunting feral pigs and gathering non-native fruits and plants that still grow there.

Land ownership in the Pacific Islands often looks different from ownership on the mainland. The first CE in the Pacific covers a tract still owned by over one hundred descendants of a single original owner. However, as the Yela Valley project shows, even in places where maintaining ancestral lands is a priority, the FLP can still provide the right tools to support conservation and its environmental, economic, and cultural benefits.

### Reference:

<sup>1</sup> <http://sfrc.ufl.edu/facultysites/ewel/pubs/Tropical-Peatlands/Drew%20et%20al%202005.pdf>

## AT-A-GLANCE



Kosrae is an island 2,957 miles southwest of Hawaii.



The Yela Valley is home to the endangered Micronesian Imperial Pigeon, Kosrae fruit bat, and endemic Flying Fox.



The Yela Valley Forest Legacy project conserves the heart of the largest and most intact ka forest in the world.



The Yela Valley is home to five endemic plant species.



According to a 2005 study<sup>1</sup>, ka forests annually provide over \$3.1 million worth of goods to Kosrae.



Project allows controlled public access to the property for the purposes of hunting feral pigs, and gathering non-native fruits and plants.

**Top L:** River and swamp areas. (Photo: KIRMA); **Bottom L:** Landowner family member and YELA staff member during acquisition William K. Wil-liam, leaning on the buttress of a ka tree. (Photo: Michael Conner); **Top R:** Yela Sign Ambassador featuring (L to R): Lance Isaac Nithan, Former Kosrae U&CF Coordinator; Maxson Nithan, Kosrae State Forester; Dr. Tholman Alik, landowner family member and YELA executive director during the acquisition; and US Ambassador to the FSM, Hon. Robert Riley. (Photo: Kathleen Friday); **Top R:** Yela River. (Photo: Kathleen Friday)

For more information, visit

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/communityforests/?cid=fseprd477256>.