

Harnessing the power of *Tara Bandu* to protect Timor-Leste's natural resources



A *Tara Bandu* marker

18 January 2011 – *Tara Bandu* are traditional laws used by communities in Timor-Leste to regulate relations between people and groups as well as between people and the environment. *Tara Bandu* restrict access to and use of natural resources and spaces and as such constitute a traditional protection and management mechanism ensuring sustainable resource use. For example, in Aileu *Tara Bandu* prohibit the cutting down of trees to prevent flooding. Meanwhile another only allows fishing in Bemalae Lake (in Maliana) once a year allowing juvenile fish a chance to grow. Sacred places are also protected, such as those where ceremonies are held to call for rain after a long dry season are held.

In the *Tara Bandu* process, communities set out the procedures and methods allowed when utilizing/harvesting natural resources and the penalties for those who violate them. Based upon spiritual beliefs, "*Tara Bandu* are highly respected by Timorese communities and consequently they can be very effective in conserving the common resources," explains the RFLP's Crispin Wilson.

However, although they have long been in existence *Tara Bandu* are passed by "word of mouth" and do not exist in written form and consequently are not incorporated into the Timorese legal system.

"Because they are not written, the interpretation of *Tara Bandu* varies from community to community depending on the elders. Meanwhile, their sustainability is threatened due to their verbal nature that can only be passed on from generation to generation," explains the RFLP's Pedro Rodrigues.

Recognizing the importance of *Tara Bandu*, RFLP is working to have these practices play a more recognized role in community resource management by helping the communities document them and submit them to appropriate authorities. This initiative is very much in line with government policy, which sees institutions such as the Secretary of State for Environment attempting to promote *Tara Bandu*. Since the legal system and law enforcement are still very much under development, the Ministry of Justice is also seeking to recognize the usage and enforcement of customary laws, including *Tara Bandu*.

"RFLP is actively seeking to involve the local community in managing fisheries resources. Trying to introduce new fisheries regulations is not easy, and getting the fishers to comply is even more difficult. On the other hand traditional rules are well known by communities. By having a *Tara Bandu* written down, its interpretation can be standardized, signed documents can be kept for future reference, and enforcement can be enhanced", added RFLP's Enrique Alonso.



Digital map showing *Tara Bandu* area

As first step, RFLP's district field managers have conducted interviews with elders to collect as much information as possible on the *Tara Bandu* process as well as any existing *Tara Bandu*. The location of these areas is then documented and mapped using GPS equipment. The next step is to submit the information to the appropriate governmental departments and open a dialogue so that these community-led efforts can be recognized and supported by the authorities.

Information on *Tara Bandu* has been collected in Lequica, Bobonaro, Baucau, and Oecusse while another is planned in Atauro.

So far the RFLP work on *Tara Bandu* has been very well received. In Beacou, a fishery community in Bobonaro District the RFLP has assisted local authorities in drafting a written version of the *Tara Bandu*. Local leaders and community representatives are engaged; they expressed their happiness about the process and are currently reviewing and improving the draft. Once satisfied with the content of the written version, the community leaders and community representatives will then sign and endorse the document, witnessed by the elders/cultural leaders (Iainain).