

Babeldaob



This is just the beginning...

Mysteries abound in the hills of Babeldaob. Covered with lush tropical forest, the island hides a myriad of animal and terrestrial diversity, woven into a land that is as old spiritually as it is geologically. Ancestral stone paths lace the island, connecting traditional meeting houses to subsistence villages. Bird and insect music, mixed with babbling brooks and ocean waves, create a day long chorus of sounds. In moments of silence, ghosts can be heard...

Babeldaob Island is changing. To a growing nation, Babeldaob is both Palau's greatest hope and its greatest challenge. The Palau Conservation Society has its own hopes, where human needs are balanced by sustainable uses, creating a harmony of land, water, and time.



Babeldaob



Babeldaob was formed about 70 million years ago from volcanic activity. At 128 square miles (measuring 27 miles in length and 1.9 miles in width), Babeldaob is the largest island in Palau and the second largest in Micronesia. Babeldaob's soils are very old and have been weathered by millions of years of rain. They are easily eroded. The island's 98 miles of coastline are irregular with numerous small bays, beaches, and mangroves. Mangroves border all but 20 miles of coastline. Babeldaob supports a complex network of surface streams and rivers with five major watersheds. There are 345 miles of permanent streams and rivers in Palau. With the total length of all its tributaries measuring 72 miles, Ngerdorch River is the longest. The Ngerikiil watershed in Airai has an area of 13 square miles, and is the primary source of water for the National water system, which serves 80% of Palau's population. Babeldaob has two freshwater lakes, including Lake Ngardok. The lake has been named a Wetland of International Significance under the Ramsar Convention and is the largest freshwater lake in all of Micronesia.

Babeldaob is covered in native forest, including upland, mangrove, swamp, limestone, Rock Island, agro-forest, plantation and palm forest. Non-forested land is comprised of savannah, marsh, cropland, strand vegetation and urban development. Palau shelters the most diverse forests in Micronesia. These forests provide habitat for many unique animals and help to maintain freshwater supply; this forest cover is also crucial to maintaining the nutrient balance that flows into the pristine marine environment. Of Palau's 1260 species of plants, there are over 800 species and varieties on Babeldaob, and Palau is believed to have more native species of plants than any other area in Micronesia. 25% of these plants are believed to be endemic to Palau. 29% of these plants are believed to have been introduced by people or their agents (canoes, planes, domesticated animals, etc.).

Animal endemism (i.e., those species found only in Palau) on Babeldaob is high. All of Palau's 12 endemic bird species use and require the island's forests to survive. The nation's only Globally Endangered bird, the Micronesian Megapode, also makes its home in the forest. Palau has an estimated 3,000-6,000 terrestrial insect species, with a 26% endemism rate. There are at least 47 species of freshwater fish in Palau, of which 5 are non-native and at least 4 are endemic. There are 46 species of reptiles and amphibians in Palau, with 1 known endemic frog, 9 endemic lizards, and 2 endemic snakes. Highly threatened and endangered species such as the Green and Hawkbill Sea Turtles nest on Babeldaob's beaches, and the endangered saltwater crocodile uses Babeldaob's wetlands and streams as breeding areas. These areas are also home to 40-50 documented species of native lands snails and 15 species of freshwater mollusks, however many more remain undocumented. Discoveries await on Babeldaob, and much more research is needed to unlock the mysteries of the big island.

Archeological evidence shows that Babeldaob was initially settled over 3000 years ago, and the island has 77 sites registered by the Bureau of Arts and Culture as important for the preservation of historical and cultural heritage. Recent archeological research shows that Palau had a highly complex and organized social order. Much of this information has come from studies of terraces on Babeldaob, structures often dismissed as recent agricultural platforms but which are some of the oldest historical features found in Palau. Perhaps 20% of Babeldaob has been sculpted into terraces, built using only digging sticks, woven baskets, time, and human labor, under the order of highly structured chiefdoms. Other archeological finds on Babeldaob include ancient villages, paved/stone features, petroglyphs, burial sites and pottery. There are also many WWII administration structures. Up to 70% of Babeldaob is an archeological site of some sort.



Left: High Chiefs of Palau
Top right: Paramount Chief
REKLAI Raphael B. Ngrimang
Bottom right: Paramount Chief
IBEDUL Yutaka M. Gibbons

Message from the Council of Chiefs

**A Belau a dikesed era recheuodel e otil a klengar er kid.
Ngercheled el ousbech rengii e kutmeklii e mengeluolu erngii e mekekeldar
el bo doleukes erngii el mora merael elmei el telecheroll.**

**Palau is our natural heritage handed down to us from our
ancestors. It is our responsibility to utilize it wisely, preserve it, protect it
and hand it over to the next generation.**

Babeldaob

is the largest island in the Republic of Palau. The Palau archipelago consists of over 300 islands located seven degrees north of the equator in the Western Pacific. Babeldaob represents over 75% of Palau's total land area.



Coral reefs surrounding Babeldaob are still in pristine condition. Ebiil Channel, off the west coast of Ngarchelong state, is a spawning and conservation area.



Ngarchelong State is home to the mysterious Badrulchau. These monoliths date back more than 1000 years, but there are no legends to explain their existence.



Ngardmau State has Palau's highest waterfall and highest vista, Mt. Ngerchelchuus, with an elevation of over 700 feet. A new National Port and Free Trade Zone are proposed for the state.



The endangered fruit bat is a common sight over the hills. The unique and endangered saltwater crocodile also lives in Babeldaob. The island is also home to endemic flora and fauna, including 12 endemic bird species.



Melekeok State is the home of the new Capitol.

Melekeok is also the seat of traditional power. Sustainable land use is critical in order to balance the combination of traditional power, modern development, and unique habitats found in the state. Micronesia's largest freshwater lake, the protected Lake Ngardok, is in Melekeok State. The state is also the proposed site of a new Botanical Garden.



Subsistence fishing is important in Babeldaob. Ngermeduu Bay and associated watersheds are protected and serve as important nursery and adult habitat for a myriad of aquatic species



Babeldaob is covered with cultural artifacts. Every forest corner or savanna hilltop holds a wealth of history and culture.



The steeply rugged interior of Babeldaob is deeply forested. Much of the interior is covered with mature forest. Babeldaob is over 70% forested.



Much of the coast is fringed with healthy mangroves, where harvesting occurs. Destruction, solid waste, and sedimentation threaten mangrove health.



Taro is a staple in the diet and is important to the Palauan culture. The freshwater marshes where taro grow also form a network of wet habitats for birds and amphibians.

Challenges...

Palau is faced with rapid modernization, and the problems of urbanization seen in other nations are present here, including overcrowding and scarcity of resources. Currently, Palau's means of addressing these issues is to focus its development efforts on the island of Babeldaob, which holds a wealth of space and resources. A 53-mile road, provided by the United States as one of its obligations under the Compact of Free Association, is being built around the island and will open up the island to development. Land use and resource planning are minimal and yet to be implemented.



It is the very presence of Palau's diverse and abundant natural resources that creates many of Palau's current threats. Tourism opportunities and a growing population create development pressures that threaten the very livelihood of the country. Earthmoving activities lead to land clearing and erosion that threaten land and marine habitat quality. Development leads to direct habitat loss, and road building leads to forest fragmentation and change in flora and fauna composition. Agriculture,

which offers a beneficial alternative to construction, also poses the threats of burning, soil loss, and pesticide and fertilizer runoff, all on land that is slow to regenerate. Dredging and filling operations are directly tied to the loss of critical habitats such as mangroves. Mangroves and other habitats are also being degraded by solid and hazardous waste disposal. Invasive plant and animal species threaten endemics. Poaching is also a threat to endangered animals.



...A bright future



The Palau Conservation Society works with communities to manage their precious natural resources. The Society provides guidance and technical assistance to the Lake Ngardok Nature Reserve Board, Community conservation

officers work daily with the Ebil Society, a new nonprofit environmental group formed in Ngarchelong State with the goal of maintaining the pristine quality of Ebil Channel. Another community conservation officer works with the three states forming the Ngermeduu Bay Conservation Area. Adult and youth education are key components to conservation work.



The Palau Conservation Society Babeldaob Strategy

In the face of growing development pressures on Babeldaob, the Palau Conservation Society has developed a comprehensive Babeldaob Strategy to guide the Society as it approaches terrestrial conservation. This ambitious strategy proposes a number of strategic goals and associated objectives and activities that will be undertaken in the three years starting in 2004.

Goal 1. Community Visioning as a basis for land use planning

Communities are empowered to make and are making sound ecological and economic decisions locally for the long-term sustainable future of Babeldaob

Goal 2. Protected Area Network

An island-wide protected area network is established, in which ecologically and traditionally important areas are identified, designated, and sustainably managed as protected areas.

Goal 3. National and International Support for Community Conservation

National support for sustainable natural resource use practices and community level natural resource management planning has increased significantly.

By educating and empowering the population of Palau to make sound resource use decisions, negative impacts of development in Babeldaob can be avoided. The Palau Conservation Society strives to take the forefront in promoting sustainable resource uses. Many of the objectives and activities of the Babeldaob Strategy are similar or linked to those in the Palau Conservation Society Marine Strategy, which seeks to conserve and sustainably manage major reef systems.

For more information about or to support the Babeldaob Strategy, please contact us:

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