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## RESEARCHER DISCUSSES IDEAS TO REJUVENATE NAURU SOILS

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New Zealand ecologist has hope for 'devastated land'

MELBOURNE, Australia (Radio Australia, Jan. 2, 2012) – A New Zealand ecologist says there is hope for Nauru's devastated former mining land.

After years of open cut phosphate mining much of the centre of Nauru has been left devoid of plant life and soil. But a researcher at Victoria University in New Zealand, Alex Feary has spent part of last year on the island nation, and he has just released his thesis on restoring its soils.

Presenter: Campbell Cooney

Alex Feary, Ecologist at Victoria Universty in New Zealand

FEARY: Well, I mean there are natural ecological processes taking place. If you came back to the place in a couple of thousand of years then you may very well find a fully grown forest. Unfortunately the timescale that that recovery is taking place on isn't really suitable for the people who are living there. So as much as there are things there, there are many, many species hidden away in the cracks and the crevices, it's a very hard place for a plant to eke out a living, and so the landscape isn't really developing soils or recovering in the way that we'd like it to do so.

COONEY: It's also a fairly dry climate?

FEARY: Absolutely so it's the dry topics so it does get very variable rainfall naturally. Unfortunately it has been proposed that the exposure of rock and the absence of trees sort of putting out material which helps to aggregate raindrops and encourage rainfall mean that they are getting even less rain than they did in the past.

COONEY: What did you find when you got there? What did you expect to find and what did you actually find?

FEARY: Well I wasn't really sure what to expect. I mean everything I read sort of indicated that this was the most interesting place in the world to go to as an ecological restorationer(?), and what I found was familiar, there are some amazing people on the island, there are some really dedicated people, and

there are some really beautiful parts of the island as well. So I managed to see and experience some really lovely things. However the interior of the island is really not in a very good way, not the kind of place that anybody would want to spend significant amounts of time.

COONEY: You look at the pictures that you've got in your report, and I've seen images myself, I think it's best been described as like a moonscape?

FEARY: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, it's a moonscape in which you can't really cross it very easily, it's undulating, and it's called a cast land, the rock is this sort of extreme pinnacles. So I mean in the worst places to cross, to travel 50 metres would take hours, hours and hours and hours because you need to climb up and down across this very rough sharp jagged rock up and down, kind of up to five metres.

COONEY: From what you saw and what you found, what will work, and I suppose can it be done?

FEARY: I think with projects like this it's important to recognise what kinds of scales we can deal with. It's not going to be the right way to approach this as in to try and restore the entire island in the next ten years. But it is very possible to achieve very significant things with the right kind of planning, political will and funding. It is an incredibly productive environment, it gets very high solar incidents, so by developing and working to create conditions which will foster plant growth, we can start really pumping a lot of organic locally produced organic material back into creating soils. That's just going to work out in the long term.

COONEY: What sort of plants will grow there? I mean when we start talking about the plants or grasses or anything, what looks like it's going to work?

FEARY: Well there's a lot of weedy species that have been very successful in Nauru. Nauru now has quite a few more species than it did before western colonization. And a bunch of them as well as a whole lot of the indigenous plants seem to do very well. In particular there's a ficus which isn't the most productive plant but it's quite remarkable, it grows just straight into large outcrops of rock, it's quite a striking tree to see actually. It's very, very large and will just grow straight out of phosphate rock on the top of the island. So it's pretty amazing. The plants which do the best, there's actually a very wide range of plants that will do well, and more research needs to be done to work out which of those are going to form the best and most stable communities and be most productive and produce the best outcomes in the long run. My research is really only preliminary when it comes to that kind of information. There are a very large number of species, given soil and sufficient soil moisture, we can have very productive plants in Nauru.

COONEY: The species that you're talking about, did they exist there or are we talking about introducing some?

FEARY: Sure, no, no, they exist on the island, although I mean personally I think it is worth looking at productive species that aren't already on the island and making the most of them where they're not going to cause issues in terms of being invasive.

COONEY: You mentioned soils and organic matter, are they able to produce it or transplant it to these affected areas?

FEARY: Certainly, absolutely, so one thing that Nauru does have, they have some soil stockpiles, there's soil that was stockpiled whilst the mining was moving forward. So there is some soil that's available for the restoration project. And a key way to make those soils much healthier will be to increase the content of organic material in those soils. So those will be the first things to work on will be to a. use them to grow plants and then use the productive

material from those plants to increase and improve the properties of those soils.

COONEY: You mentioned the will and the willingness to actually do something, political and in other ways, by the sounds of it you feel that they realise that they have to do something about it now though?

FEARY: Certainly I mean it's a tough situation, it's a small place and not necessarily as well setup as maybe Australia or New Zealand to meet these challenges. Having said that there are a very large number of people who are very passionate about the future of their country and are pulling out all the stops to do what they can and their own sort of areas of expertise. There's a lot of people who are very keen to develop the education and skills necessary to make their contribution.

COONEY: I'm curious why were you looking at doing this research project? What grabbed you about doing this on Nauru?

FEARY: So many things, I think it really for me summarised many of the concerns and issues that I have had about the way that things are, and also it really summed up so many of the potential strengths of the fields of ecological restoration. Nauru is a very isolated small country, potentially threatened by sea level rise because the elevated topside plateau is mined out, so everyone is living at sea level. There's very significant issues around oil and oil costs, so everything in Nauru is very dependent on the price of fuel to get things out there. And also just fascinating stories, it's been a very isolated nation, it has an incredibly unique language. All of these things kind of came together, and it sort of struck me as potentially a new Easter Island in a way, and I think that's a really interesting place to look at.

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