



Sue Maturin

"Big leaf" vine smothering forest, Vanuatu.

The battle against Vanuatu's "big leaf"

MERREMIA peltata – or big leaf, as it is known in Vanuatu, must be one of the world's worst super creepers.

This invasive plant is capable of growing up and over trees more than 25 metres high, it sends out a vast network of ground-hugging lateral ropes more than a kilometre and can grow nine metres in three months.

At Vatthe Conservation Area on the island of Santo in Vanuatu,

Forest & Bird's Southern Conservation Officer Sue Maturin and her teams of volunteers have found that big leaf is smothering trees and causing extensive forest collapse in Vanuatu's prized last remaining intact coastal alluvial forest.

Local landowners, with Forest & Bird and the local Landholders Conservation Initiative, supported by a generous donation from the Aotearoa New Zealand Quakers,

Peace and Service Committee, are about to embark on an ambitious project to clear the pestilential vine.

Work is planned to start in March/April 2009. The two land-owning communities, from Matantas and Sara Villages, will form work groups, which will each work cutting vines on a forest block. Further funding is being sought to enable the whole forest to be cleared of the vine,

and to carry out further herbicide trials at Vatthe and in another protected area at Nusumetu Tabu Forest.

Trials with full-strength herbicide gels donated by HortResearch NZ, George Mason and Ann and Basil Graeme have shown that the vine can be killed by hand cutting and poisoning the vertical climbing ends of every lateral rope of every plant – but given the extent of the vine's spread, eradicating it all using this method would be a daunting task.

However because so many trees are being smothered to death, there is an immediate need to clear the vines from the forest canopy while more efficient control methods are developed. Once freed from the vine, the canopy recovers within months and can knit back together to shade out the vines. Healthy canopies are able to resist rampant vine invasion.

Sue will be leading a paying volunteers' trip in July 2009. There will also be time to explore Vatthe, and visit the world's most accessible active volcano on the Southern Island of Tanna. If you would like to volunteer (volunteers meet their own costs) contact Sue Maturin, s.maturin@forestandbird.org.nz, Box 6230 Dunedin.

Volunteers tackle "big leaf" using herbicide gel.



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