

Dr. Julia Diegmann
Scientific Consultant / Outreach Specialist
Diegmann Science Services

Can you please introduce yourself and explain how you're involved in this 'akikiki conservation effort?

Julia Diegmann

My name is Julia Diegmann. I work with the Kaua'i Forest Bird Recovery Project as an independent contractor, and I have my own company called Diegmann Science Services. I am a part of the team that wrote the grant proposal for "Forest Calls - The Story of the 'Akikiki", and I'm now helping to produce it.

How important is it for conservation groups to have good, effective media campaigns? How important is it to be seen by people, to have people know what you do?

Julia Diegmann

Only a few people know that we are working with some of the rarest forest birds in the world. Many people have heard of Hawai'i and its fragile ecosystems, but not many people have heard that there are bird species that you can only find on certain islands. The 'akikiki, for example, is an endemic bird that you only find on the island of Kaua'i, and it's terribly endangered. It's about to go extinct in the wild this year. To get this information out to the public, we need as much exposure as possible. It's very hard for people to see this bird and the other native forest birds. It's not easy to go up in the forest, so we're trying to bring these birds into people's lives by doing this media project, by doing a lot of outreach on social media - those kinds of things. It's going to help raise awareness about what's happening to the birds.

Let's first focus on the media project. What is it exactly?

Julia Diegmann

The idea came out of the need for archive footage of the 'akikiki in the wild. We're losing them in the wild, right? We're losing how they look, how they sound like. We are not going to be able to see them anymore because these birds are going extinct in the wild. The idea of the media project first came to us as a way to create an archive, an archive of the bird songs, of the birds' behaviors, and how they move about in their natural habitat. An archive for researchers and conservationists, so they can go back in time and find out exactly how these birds lived in their native habitat. That may sound easy, but it's not. People need to understand that the Alaka'i Plateau is a very remote and rugged terrain. It's a rainforest on Kaua'i, next to Mount Wai'ale'ale, one of the wettest places on Earth. It rains a lot. There's mud. There are no roads, so you have to drive a four-wheel drive for miles. Then you must cross streams, and hike up big hills, and back down, only to get to the habitat of these birds. By then, you haven't filmed a single bird; your day

is just getting started. And you know, these birds can fly, right? But we cannot. So to follow them and get good footage, you have to be very fit and able to follow the birds through the forest. It's not easy; it's very, very difficult.

Were there other objectives for the media project?

Julia Diegmann

The other objective was to use this footage and make a short documentary film that we could show people and use to raise awareness. We have all this beautiful footage, now we have stories to tell. The other objective was to find young professionals with an interest not only in conservation, but also in media production, and help them make beautiful media projects about the last 'akikiki in the wild.

How difficult was it to organize the logistics of something like this?

Julia Diegmann

The first thing we tell people when they start working with Kaua'i Forest Bird Recovery Project is that they need to be flexible. They need to be able to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. That's the most important thing because we often get sudden changes in our trips to the field, because of weather, or because maybe the nest that we were trying to collect just got predated by rats, or abandoned by the adults. So there are always changes in the schedule, and you have to be really flexible to work with us.

Do you think mixing nature conservationists with young media professionals increases the chances of future "high visibility" nature conservation collaborations? How important is it to establish creative environments that promote conservation?

Julia Diegmann

It's very clear that you get more accomplished when you work as a team, and often, the more diverse the team is, the better. We always look at things from a conservation standpoint, and with this media project, we brought younger people with some older people. We brought diverse backgrounds, different perspectives, and that gave us a lot of new ideas and helped us diversify how we see, and also how we do conservation work. It's clear that we have to think in a larger picture.

It is surprising and quite disappointing to see misinformation and disinformation online about the 'akikiki conservation project. How do you feel about someone with a misinformed opinion and no scientific background, or data, directly opposing the recommendations of scientists on social media platforms?

Julia Diegmann

That's a difficult question... We are scientists. We look at data and facts. We don't look at opinions. What is shared on social media is often an opinion because you cannot explain scientific facts in under ten words. Social media and science are two things that just don't mix well. Yet, that's where many people get their information. People don't read long scientific papers. Unfortunately, misinformation and disinformation can have detrimental results and tragic consequences not only for Kaua'i birds, but for all honeycreepers statewide. I encourage everybody to make sure their information comes from credible sources and to invest time to understand the issues at hand. Check out the FAQs on the birdsnotmosquitoes.org website or reach out to us.

As Outreach Specialist, you're in direct contact with the public. How do you feel about the landscape in which we find ourselves?

Julia Diegmann

I do outreach here on Kaua'i, tabling events or informational booths, and I must tell you that we have the overwhelming support of the local community. Many, many times, people walk up to me, and they thank me for what I'm doing. And I always tell them: the KFBRP staff are the heroes in the field. They're the ones saving these birds. So the local community, the people here on Kaua'i fully supports us and we are very thankful for that.

Tell me more about 'Resist Extinction'. It's on t-shirts, it's the rallying call of some of the media projects. Where did the slogan come from?

Julia Diegmann

Last year, we did this project with Monika Mira; the little 'akikiki graphic with the bird that's hanging upside down, just how they always do in the wild. It took us a while to come up with a good slogan. 'Resist Extinction' was the compromise that we found. We were looking at things like 'Fight Extinction' or 'Repel Extinction', and we settled on 'Resist Extinction' because we feel that's what we all should be doing. When you look at what's happening in the state of Hawai'i overall, there are so many native species that are critically endangered. We're at the brink of extinction, from snails to butterflies to birds to plants. We have to come together and resist this extinction, for the 'akikiki and all the other endangered species, plants, insects, birds. We have to resist.

When will these media projects be made public? And how can people help?

Julia Diegmann

The goal is to release the documentaries on August 8th. We're going to have a community showing on Kaua'i, and we're hoping to also do a virtual showing, at around the same time, on all other Hawaiian Islands. Just a while back, August 8th was declared the 'Hawaiian Honey Creeper Day' by the legislators. The resolution was awesome. Many kids, I think over 2 000 students statewide,

worked on this. They sent in testimonies, and it was heartwarming to see all these students show up and testify in front of the House Representatives and Senators, and explain how much they care about the birds, how much they would like to see them thrive, how much they like to see them in the wild. So one thing people can do now is go to our website at www.kauaiforestbirds.org and see how they can help. We have many available tools for teachers, free resources that include curriculum and lesson plans that anybody can use. We also have a great YouTube channel where you can learn the bird songs, the mosquito control project that's currently happening here on Kaua'i, and all sorts of other resources.

We also encourage folks to contact their local representatives and tell them that they support the conservation of our native birds and the measures proposed by the Birds, Not Mosquitoes partnership.

What's in the works beyond August 8th?

Julia Diegmann

The resolution we did for this year's Hawaiian Honeycreeper Day on August 8th was just for 2023. Right now, we're working on declaring next year, 2024, the 'Year of the Honeycreepers'. So we're working with the Governor's Office to do just that, and we're also hoping to introduce a bill that will declare August 8th the 'Hawaiian Honeycreeper Day' every year.

Why do you fight for the 'akikiki and the other critically endangered birds? Why do you care?

Julia Diegmann

I moved to Kaua'i in 2010 and learned about the rich biodiversity that exists here, not only on Kaua'i, but on all Hawaiian Islands. I learned about adaptive radiation, which is this concept where one species evolves into many different species, as described by Charles Darwin for those Galapagos finches, and now, I often say that Charles Darwin made a huge mistake because he went to Galapagos and not Hawai'i. If he would have come here, he would have found many more examples of biodiversity. When you look back, you realize that we've lost dozens of species just here on Kaua'i, but we have many species that are still with us. We have eight forest bird species they are still here, and we can, and must do something to save them from going extinct. So I think that that's my motivation, keeping as much of the original biodiversity as we can. It really is our collective responsibility to try our best to make sure that that we keep these species alive, that they don't go extinct.

And these birds are just stunningly beautiful and deserve to be protected.