

## **MILDA Conference & Preparatory Meeting for Slow Food in Melanesia**



Theme: “Inseparable – The Land, Food, and People of Melanesia”

*10-14 March, 2014*

*Natapao Village, Lelepa Island, VANUATU*



### **The Lelepa Declaration 2014**

**The declaration of the 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA), held at Natapao Village on the island of Lelepa, Vanuatu, 10-11 March 2014**

In response to continued and increasing severity of threats to customary land systems posed by the land reform and other foreign development agendas of international financial institutions, aid agencies, governments and elites within our own countries, the third meeting of the Melanesian Indigenous Land Defence Alliance (MILDA) re-affirms its commitment to indigenous control of customary land systems and Melanesian development goals. We are united and organized as a region to defend the continued control of Melanesian communities over their land, sea, water, air and ancestral heritage, recognising that the threats to customary land are directed against the Melanesian Pacific as a region. We re-assert that the customary land systems are the basis of life and community in Melanesia.

MILDA is an alliance of groups and individuals with a shared vision and commitment to working together united by a common cause to protect our indigenous land extending from the surface of the ground to the centre of the earth and underneath the sea, including our ecosystems, biodiversity, intangible cultural heritage, the waters of our rivers, streams and air. Our members comprise church and traditional leaders,

fieldworkers, community members including men, women, youths, children and people with special needs, academics, regional NGOs and international supporters.

Land has and always will be of the highest value to the lives of our peoples, and so it will be for generations to come. In all Melanesian traditions, land is regarded as a non-alienable resource that cannot be parted with. The relationship which we have with our land is special and unique, and cannot be replaced by foreign value systems. The Melanesian definition of land is collective and inclusive. We are custodians of the land since time immemorial.

Land is our mother and the source of life for our people. Land secures life, fosters and strengthens relationships that sustain our society. It embodies the connections to our past, present and future and therefore sustains everything we aspire to. MILDA members, hailing from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Fiji, Kanaky, Papua New Guinea, Maluku, Solomon Islands, West Papua, and Vanuatu, reaffirm the sanctity of land.

We declare the following:

1. As Indigenous Peoples of Melanesia we are committed to upholding and safeguarding our Melanesian indigenous traditional and cultural heritage, customs, values and beliefs.
2. We acknowledge and support the value and use of Traditional Resource Management, Traditional Knowledge and vernacular language in the sustainable management of, and cultural links with, the environment and natural resources.
3. We oppose any form of alienation of land and sea from customary landowners, whether by outright sale, leases or acquisitions which remove landowners' capacity to effectively control; access and use their land and sea.
4. We believe that the ways in which land is used and distributed should be determined by Melanesian custom, and not by foreign systems.

5. We assert the value of our traditional economy, which promotes self-reliance amongst our people and communities, and we oppose actions and policies which promote the dependency of Melanesian peoples on others, including the State.
6. We say NO to all policies which require customary land be registered as a precondition for business or development activities, and demand that Melanesian governments and aid donors cease all pressures for customary land registration, whether voluntary or involuntary.
7. We are opposed to any form of experimental seabed resource extraction from our seas.
8. We oppose all foreign programs, bribes and other methods that take away the right to self-determination over our lands, reflective in Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including customary land registration, foreign land grabbing, and extractive industries in Melanesia.
9. We call for a total review of the current land administration in Melanesia to eliminate corrupt land dealings and fraudulent land practices. All customary land acquired by these means should be returned to the rightful ancestral inheritors.