



The Pacific project

The Fijian island being strangled by vines

Vanua Levu is being overrun by invasive vines – and the increasing number of natural disasters, brought on by climate

change, is only making things worse

by Katie Edwards

Inosi Ravisa wading through merremia peltata towards his breadfruit trees which have also become engulfed by the vine.
Photograph: Katie Edwards/The Guardian

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In Vanua Levu, the second largest island of [Fiji](#), every contour drips with green. The landscape is impossibly lush and verdant. But upon closer inspection, it's evident that nearly everything is shrouded in vines.



Merremia peltata smothering the forest near Savudrodro village - a small path is maintained to a pigsty

There are several vine species in Fiji, one of which is the invasive *kudzu*, introduced by US troops in the second world war as living camouflage for Allied equipment. But, as botanist Judith Sumner, writes: “under tropical Pacific conditions kudzu quickly became an invasive species with a growth rate that aggressively outpaced native Fijian flora.”



Above: An abandoned car just outside Savusavu town being smothered by *merremia peltata*. Right: Kudzu vine, which was introduced to Fiji by American troops in the second world war to be used as a form of camouflage



While *kudzu* is certainly prevalent, it is vines from the morning glory family, especially *merremia peltata*, which are now wreaking havoc in Vanua Levu. Once this vine grows over the tree canopy, it can spread for miles devouring everything in its path. Locally known as *viliyawa*, which translates as “to collect far,” it can be found swamping buildings, erupting from old cars and smothering farms.



Vines growing over an abandoned building at the copra mill outside Savusavu.

Inosi Ravisa from Savudrodro village works in the hot sun on his farm. He says it was only after Cyclone Winston in 2016 that *viliyawa* became a huge problem.

“After the cyclone, *viliyawa* is growing very very fast, all over the place. Because after the cyclone, all the trees were down, so the *viliyawa* [was] very easy to come up. You see *viliyawa* everywhere, it can damage healthy trees, big trees, break all the branches.”



Inosi Ravisa of Savudrodoro village removing *Merremia peltata* vines from the edges of his farm.

“It’s just like arms, very heavy, imagine that heavy on the branches.”

According to the Global Invasive Species Database, while *Merremia peltata* has been in the Pacific for hundreds of years, it only became invasive after tropical cyclones, which are occurring with increased intensity as a result of climate change.

Ravisa remembers that lots of wild yams and reeds, used for building houses, were lost to these vines. He also has to visit his farm more frequently or else the paths will become covered, making an already arduous activity even harder.

Virisila Tinaniqica cuts the merremia peltata vines from her cassava plants.

About 10km from Savudroddro, in Urata village, Virisila Tinaniqica is fighting off the *viliyawa* from her cassava plants. “It’s really bad for the garden. It can kill a big tree. There was one big guava tree in my garden, one day I came, it’s dead, and the *viliyawa* roots are so thick around it”

Merremia peltata being used as string to tie up taro roots at Savusavu market.

While a huge nuisance, the villagers in Urata have also managed to find some practical uses for the vines. *Viliyawa* can be used as a coarse string. “We mostly use it for tying up the bundles of dalo. If you go to the market you will see it.”

Eka Dauvonu squeezes the young *merremia peltata* leaves to make a medicinal drink to treat menstrual cramps.

Similarly, *merremia peltata* has been found to have healing qualities. The village healer, Eka Dauvonu, squeezes the young leaves to make a juice to relieve menstrual cramps.

Fiji's ministry of forestry recognises the severity of *merramia peltata*, but currently the only means of trying to keep the vines under control is mechanical removal. The fear is that without careful management, and with future cyclones increasing the ferocity of the vines, many native species will be lost and lives disrupted.

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