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SciCOFish makes sense for Pacific fisheries

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Pacific Island fisheries managers have significantly improved their knowledge and capacity to manage their crucial fish resources over the past three years, thanks largely to the European Union's €9 million funding for the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) SciCOFish programme.

SciCOFish, or Science for Coastal and Ocean Fisheries, is a four-year programme that aims to assist Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) to better manage their coastal and oceanic (largely tuna) fisheries through improved knowledge, skills and data collection.

An independent review of SciCOFish by Poseidon consultants asked fishery agencies in member countries to rate how much their overall knowledge regarding coastal fisheries has improved since they had been previously asked in 2010, at the start of the programme.

'There was marked improvement,' says Poseidon's Gilles Hosch, in a presentation to the Pacific Heads of Fisheries meeting at SPC last week. There was a significant increase in 'national performance in coastal fisheries resource conservation and management', with two thirds of this increase attributed to SciCOFish.

Likewise, the oceanic component of the programme was found to be the major influence on the improvements over the past three years in the PICTs' capacity 'to run fisheries observer schemes' on commercial tuna boats and 'to comply with the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission's data submission requirements' for tuna fishery information.

Concern had been expressed earlier in the week that observer training support will not continue when the project ends, and Heads of Fisheries urged SPC to seek continued funding for this very successful area of work.

'SPC's tuna stock assessment and modelling work is crucial to the region,' says Mr Hosch. 'SPC's data collection, encoding and analysis are amongst the best such work worldwide. They provide a model for the rest of the world to follow.'

Mike Batty, SPC's Director of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems, says SciCOFish aims to provide a reliable and improved scientific basis for management and decision-making in oceanic and coastal fisheries.

'Our work is clearly making a difference,' Mr Batty says. 'The review said the project overall is "highly relevant".'

'While the review suggested several improvements, we are pleased with an endorsement that SciCOFish is building the capacity of Pacific countries to manage their fisheries resources in a sustainable way.'

The three-day Heads of Fisheries meeting, organised every two years by SPC, heard updates and reports from fisheries scientists in Noumea, New Caledonia, last week.

Food security emerged as one of the top concerns of Pacific fisheries managers who were concerned about feeding and providing livelihoods for the Pacific's rapidly expanding population.

'The national directors have the best sense of the priorities and the urgent issues in their countries,' Mr Batty says. 'We are guided by their views and their advice, on our work programme in general and the SciCOFish project in particular.'

Monte Depaune, Coastal and Oceanic Fisheries Manager for Nauru Fisheries, says that SPC plays a 'very important role' in providing data to help in decision-making processes.

'There's a myriad of things SPC does – they give us the evidence to negotiate,' he says. 'It's all in the data. The scientific component is the foundation of all the decision-making processes.'

Fifteen Pacific Island countries are members of the SciCOFish programme: Cook Islands, Fiji, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

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