

ABC Radio Australia

Growing concern over sea cucumber stocks

Updated 17 July 2013, 22:08 AEST

Several Pacific Island countries have imposed bans on the export of sea cucumbers or beche-de-mer because the high demand for them in China has led to some species almost being wiped out.

Australia Network's Pacific

Correspondent, Sean Dorney, has

been speaking to the Coastal Fisheries Division of the Noumea based Secretariat of the Pacific Community about its concern for the future of sea cucumber stocks.

Correspondent: Sean Dorney

Speaker: Ian Bertram, Coastal Fisheries Adviser, Secretariat of the Pacific Community; Dave Mills, marine scientist;

DORNEY: Beche-de-mer or sea cucumbers are a highly sought after delicacy in China and that means harvesting them can be highly profitable. The state of the stocks in the Pacific is of mounting concern to the coastal fisheries experts at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

BERTRAM: The sea cucumber fishery appears to be in a bit of trouble due to increased market demands, high price.

DORNEY: Ian Bertram is a Coastal Fisheries Adviser at the SPC in Noumea. Sea cucumbers are a little like the vacuum cleaners at the bottom of sea in the tropical inshore fisheries. They take in mouthfuls of sand, strip out any of the nutrients and then deposit the sand behind them. Australian marine scientist, Dave Mills, who has worked on a sea cucumber aid project in Vietnam, told an ABC TV Landline program that sea cucumbers or beche-de-mer have an extraordinary defence mechanism against non human predators.

MILLS: If you learn a bit about the biology they really are quite bizaare. If it's attacked it can throw up its entire intestine and while there's this little pile there for this predator to feed on it just buries or moves away slightly. Over the next few months it can regenerate its whole digestive tract. And so that's a pretty amazine quality.

DORNEY: Unfortunately for the slow moving sea cucumber that sort of defence does not help if it just plucked up by a scuber diver. The SPC's Ian Bertram:

BERTRAM: The animal really doesn't have much in the ways of avoiding being harvested. So fishermen are able to harvest this and dry (it) and sell this off to some local buyers and this is then exported to Asia. This particular group of species is in a bit of trouble.

DORNEY: Just how valuable the sea cucumber can be was highlighted in that ABC TV Landline program.

REPORTER: The market price for dried sea cucumber can top 200 dollars a kilo. Its popularity stems from its supposed medicinal properties and reputation as an aphrodisiac.

DORNEY: Dave Mills says the Chinese appetite for sea cucumbers means that even species that were traditionally not highly sought after are now threatened.

MILLS: Throughout the tropics sea cucumbers have been very heavily fished and there's been this move from one species to another. So the most valuable species get fished out and they move to the next species down the chain and so on. Maybe ten or fifteen years ago there may be four market species they could fish and get money for. But now there are twenty species. So they're going further and further down the chain finding value in more and more as the valuable species disappear.

DORNEY: Ian Bertram says the decline in sea cucumber stocks in the Pacific has alarmed several Pacific Island nations.

BERTRAM: Well, some of the biggest producers, the Melanesian countries - Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and, where else is there? Vanuatu - three of these countries have imposed moratoria on the collection and exports. They're trying to rehabilitate their stocks. In other countries where they have also experienced heavy fishing pressure and they're trying to introduce additional management tools to try and slow down the declining stocks of sea cucumbers.

DORNEY: Last year, Tonga imposed a three year ban on the harvesting and export of sea cucumbers. Solomon Islands lifted its three year ban earlier this year opening up a three month window for harvesting. The Fisheries Division of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community says protecting the inshore fishery is not only a job for national governments. It's also trying to help those who know their coastal waters best by providing ☐

BERTRAM: Management tools that are not too complicated but can be implemented either by communities, chiefs or villages or at the national level.

DORNEY: Ian Bertram from the SPC. The concern is that some sea cucumber species are on the verge of extinction in some Pacific Island countries.

Topics:

Fishing, Aquaculture Pacific

[ABC Home](#) | [About the ABC](#) | [Careers](#) | [ABC Services](#) | [Help](#) | [ABC Contacts](#)

© 2013 ABC | [Conditions of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)