Pacific can avoid coastal fish collapse by taking action:SPC

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Crucial fish species, lobsters and sea cucumbers are in danger of disappearing from Pacific Island coastlines unless local people take action to protect them, according to the region's leading fisheries experts.

The experts at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community say coastal fisheries are in decline.

Pacific Islanders depend more heavily on fish for food than people in many other places in the world - and with the region's population set to increase by 50 per cent by 2030, a crisis is in the making.

The SPC has a new project helping communities respond.

Local marine protected areas are one of the tools it suggests.

Hugh Govan, from the Pacific Locally-Managed Marine Area Network has been working with the SPC.

He says he is seeing very high pressure on fish stocks.

Presenter: Jemima Garrett
Speaker: Hugh Govan, an Advisor to the Pacific Locally-Managed Marine Area Network

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GOVAN: My concern is that the countries with very large populations such as Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji will see a crisis which is already slightly apparent.

GARRETT: The statistics on population growth are really quite stark - what sort of losses are we likely to see in people's key food resources?

GOVAN: In the Melanesian countries, in particular, where the bulk of the population still live in rural areas, I shudder to think what the impact could be because reliance on fish is extremely high - it is one of the major sources of protein . If the worst comes to the worst communities can live off their marine resources and their agriculture. Without one, or the other, or both, I have no idea. And, of course, we hear lots about climate change , which is a long-term and slow acting impact. I think long before we see impacts of climate change, we will have seen catastrophic impacts from over exploitation.

GARRETT: The Secretariat of the Pacific Community is suggesting that communities take action now to avoid these sorts of problems in the future - and that one of the ways that is setting up local marine managed areas. What difference can that make?

GOVAN: Well, I am advisor to the Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, the LMMA Network, and we've been working on this with as many partners as we can find over the last decade and I think there is substantial evidence that, firstly, as a frontline of defence against resource disasters community action works, it is possible and it is appropriate in the Pacific, where communities are intimately linked to their marine resources, through resource tenure, ownership rights and so on, traditional knowledge. The experiences, which we have seen more than 500 cases of communities around the region working on their marine resources, show firstly, and most importantly, that communities can manage their resources. I think that is my biggest take home lesson. The impacts

can be good, or not-so-good depending on how well the communities manage and how supported they are by governments and NGOs, and what sort of information they are using in their decision-making.

GARRETT: so just how do people go about setting up a marine managed area?

GOVAN: Well, essentially the traditional communities did have such an area. They had a traditional area, which everybody nearby would recognise as their traditional area and they would make decisions over that area. They key is for these areas to be managed well. And, of course, now, with a whole new series of factors, including commercialisation, other rights-holders and users, the situation has to be adapted. So, we have the opportunity, and many communities have actually taken it, to restrict the over-harvesting, or potential for over-harvesting of resources, and to increase the yield from their open area. You can implement fairly standard fisheries management techniques, such as size limits or banning gill nets or protecting a particular area of spawning stock. These are not rocket science. They've been done traditionally by communities and fisheries managers the world over. The key is that communities are in a position to implement and enforce them. So they are not waiting for outsiders to come and police the area for them. They are able to police it themselves.

GARRETT: You say the combination of local knowledge and scientific research is crucial to managing these areas well. Why?

GOVAN: Well, what we've found is there is a valuable resource in terms of local knowledge of their own resources but there are aspects that are either not well-known or are not given sufficient importance. A particular area I could mention is how long it takes fish to reach breeding age, for fish and clams and other animals. And also, their life cycles, so what happens to babies or eggs when they are hatched or come into the water column. And they will settle. Depending on how many days they are floating, they will settle nearer or further away and communities are not in a position to know much about that. And that is one of the key areas, better information on those life cycle elements which will allow the right management tools to be chosen by a community. In other words, don't choose closed area when the animals are going to be predominantly swimming around in the water column and their eggs are being swept away.

If you want to protect your local fish stocks, you might want to look at a new series of information sheets just released by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community; http://www.spc.int/coastfish/en/component/content/article/393-guide-and-information-sheets-for-fishing-communities.html