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FISHERIES: Fisheries resources not in good shape

Why we need to protect them

While the multi-billion tuna resource of the Pacific Islands is often in the news, we hear much less about the region's coastal fisheries.

It is surprising to learn, then, that in all except two Pacific Islands countries, coastal fisheries contribute more to the economy and provide livelihoods for many more Pacific Islanders than do the offshore tuna fisheries.

The reliance on fish for food—and the people of several Pacific Islands eat more fish than anywhere else in the world—and as a source of cash income makes this resource essential for the well-being of thousands of coastal communities.

Unfortunately, despite the tourist posters of coral reefs teeming with fish, the region's coastal fisheries resources are not in very good shape.

High value commodities such as sea cucumber, or bêche-de-mer as it is known in the trade, have been fished to the point of collapse across much of the region.

Three of the largest bêche-de-mer fisheries— those in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—have been closed in the hope that depleted stocks will recover.

Coastal reefs have been overfished around many of the major population centres and even in the outer islands the impact of overfishing is clearly shown.

People in the urban centres cannot fail to notice the steady rise in the price of fish as supplies fall short of the growing demand.

Population growth, particularly in Melanesia, will put further pressure on coastal fisheries resources. In the longer term, climate change and ocean acidification seem likely to cause extensive damage to the coral reefs that support many coastal fish stocks.

A recent report by the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency and the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC), looking 25 years into the future, warned that many fisheries could collapse during this period if strategic action is not taken now.

While there is not much scope to increase the stocks in coastal fisheries, the good news is that effective management of coastal resources can secure the benefits that they provide and strengthen resilience to the impacts of climate change and other threats.

A recent meeting held at SPC and supported by the European Union-funded Scientific Support for the Management of Coastal and Oceanic Fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region (SciCOFish) Project brought together officials from the region's fisheries and environment departments, and representatives of non-government organisations (NGOs) that work on marine conservation. The group discussed community-based ecosystem approach to fisheries management (CEAFM).

This rather cumbersome expression describes an approach that brings together two main elements: firstly, the involvement of communities in the management of their coastal resources and, secondly, a broad view of the ecosystem.

With regard to community involvement, it has been recognised for some years that while national governments may be able to control some of export fisheries and large scale fishing boats, they do not have the resources to enforce restrictions on hundreds, sometimes thousands, of small scale fishers, many of them based in remote areas.

It is much more effective to involve these communities in developing their own management rules—areas closed to fishing, restricted fishing seasons, limits on the types of fishing equipment that can be used— where these rules can be enforced at the village level. In a number of Pacific Islands there is already a recognition of customary ownership of coastal fishing grounds by local communities; and nearly all can trace a history of traditional management measures, such as a prohibition on fishing in certain areas or for certain species. Community-based fisheries management builds on these customs and traditions.

The ecosystem aspect is the second key element of this approach to fisheries management. Traditionally, fisheries agencies around the world have tried to conserve fish stocks through controls on the fishers

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that were aimed at limiting the catch.

These can be limits (quotas) on the total catch that is allowed or controls (effort controls) on the types of fishing equipment that may be used, as well as when and where it may be used. In recent years, however, scientists have understood that fishing can have impacts on the wider marine environment; and that other human activities—often far from the fishing grounds—have impacts on the fish.

Coastal development and pollution, causeways that block the flow of water into a lagoon, and deforestation that causes more silt to be carried out to sea by coastal rivers—all these have impacts on fish stocks.

An approach that looks beyond the fish and fishers to these broader problems is needed for the best results, but this is often difficult because it requires different interests to work together.

Having a good system of coastal fisheries management is important, and many of the governments and administrations across the region accept both community-based methods and the ecosystem approach; but acceptance is not enough—it is also essential to put it into practice.

SPC, with only a handful of coastal fisheries staff, cannot work directly with the thousands of coastal communities and, in many cases, national fisheries administrations cannot provide the long-term support needed.

For this reason, many of the success stories— such as the locally managed marine area initiative in Fiji—have relied on NGO workers at the village level.

Closer partnership among NGOs, government and regional agencies was seen as a key priority at the recent SPC meeting.

There was a lot of discussion at the meeting about monitoring—how to measure the status of coastal fisheries resources to see if management measures are working.

The meeting heard that up to 60% of the cost of coastal fisheries management is spent on monitoring, but the results of the surveys are often not translated into management action.

There is a need for simpler measures that provide information on the resources that are of first importance to the communities.

Other important recommendations from the SPC meeting included:

• highlighting the economic and social importance of coastal fisheries in order to increase awareness by decision-makers and encourage better support for coastal fisheries management;

• assisting governments to review and improve their legislation on coastal fisheries to provide a proper legal basis for community-based management; and

• developing better materials for NGO field workers on fisheries issues so that they can help communities to understand the problems and select effective solutions.

With the implementation of these recommendations in the coming months, we shall see a better future for the region's coastal fisheries.