Pacific communities better able to save reef fisheries with new information sheets

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SPC: Sea cucumbers, lobsters and other fish species are in danger of disappearing from Pacific island fisheries unless they are protected by villagers and local fishermen through measures recommended by a new series of information sheets.

Actions such as reducing or stopping the use of SCUBA to fish for such species are some of the measures recommended in 16 information sheets, especially targeted at Pacific Communities, and being launched today in Suva, Fiji.

The sheets, developed by scientists and managers from the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Locally-Managed Marine Area (LMMA) Network, are in response to the urgent need to protect the region's coastal fisheries in the face of projected climate change impacts and increasing population growth.

The Pacific population is predicted to increase by 50 per cent by 2030 and already many reef systems are struggling from intense fishing pressure.

SPC research indicates that tropical Pacific reef fish populations could decline by up to 20 per cent by 2050 and up to 50 per cent by 2100. Climate change will affect fish population distribution and numbers as rising sea temperatures reduces the food available to reef fish and changes the timing and success of fish reproduction.

Most coastal communities in the Pacific rely on reef fisheries for food, and fewer fish in their catches will increase the gap between available fish and the protein needed for their food security.

The average annual consumption of fish per person (including shellfish) by coastal Pacific populations ranges from 30–118 kilograms in Melanesia, 62–115 kilograms in Micronesia, and 50–146 kilograms in Polynesia. This is significantly more than the annual consumption globally of just 17 kilograms per person.

"It's good to have something ready for our next generation. I see that there's plenty of fish, but we know that it takes many years for the growth of the coral and for fishes to give birth," says Kini Ravonoloa, Votua Village Chief and FLMMA representative for Koroleviwai.

"My advice is that we should keep a place protected for the fishes and other organisms that they live in the sea to have more time to reproduce."

Management programs already in place in Fiji have proven successful, as Pio Radikedike, site manager for Veratavou, Viti Levu in Fiji reports.

"We have increased the number of MPAs [closed areas] in our village because the communities, the chiefs, have seen the benefits from what we have been doing. Now we have three – two on the

mudflats near my village for the clams and other small species, and one on the reefs for fish and sea cucumbers, not only for my village, but for the benefit of the whole district."`

Dr Hugh Govan, advisor for the LMMA Network, says the combination of local community knowledge and scientific research is invaluable.

"Communities in the Pacific are well placed to manage their own fisheries as they still usually have traditional and local knowledge of their areas and resources. In fact over 400 communities are known to be managing their inshore areas in the Pacific," he says.

"However, communities gain much from access to scientific information on aspects of biology and ecology or experiences of communities elsewhere to help improve their management practices in the face of emerging modern challenges."

The information sheets will be distributed to communities across the Pacific. Funding for the printing and distribution of the information sheets was provided by the European Union-funded SciCOFish (scientific support for the management of coastal and oceanic fisheries in the Pacific Islands region) project.

"What is unique about these sheets is that, together, the SPC and LMMA Network are trying to get a consistent message to all Pacific communities in terms of resource management," says Ian Bertram, Coastal Fisheries Science and Management Adviser for the SPC.

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< Prev Next >