

Fiji's Muanaira Women's Group sees promise in pilot mangrove oyster farm

It's hard work walking over sharp shells in the mud, reaching in among dense mangrove roots and chipping off oysters. But members of the Muanaira Women's Group have been doing this work for years, harvesting the oysters that cling to the roots of mangroves in the Rewa delta and carrying them back in buckets to be sorted and prepared. Oysters here are a key part of life, used for consumption, for traditional purposes, and as a source of income when sold at the Suva Market as shelled oyster meat.



Three-month-old oysters are placed in wide mesh bags attached to poles fixed in shallow and protected areas where tides and sea chop will gently rock them. (Image: Tim Pickering)

Scientists of Fisheries Research at Fiji's Ministry of Fisheries have teamed up with the aquaculture staff of the Pacific Community and the Vutia community members to find out if there is an easier way to ensure a steady supply of edible oysters.

A study tour of aquaculture techniques used overseas, and at Mago Island in Fiji, guided a spat-catching trial that started within the Vutia fishing grounds late last year when plastic sticks were set on wooden racks in shallow water. Juvenile oysters that settled onto the sticks were collected in February this year as roughly 5–10-mm shells, then counted and transferred to plastic mesh baskets hanging on stakes. After three months of culture, these oysters were checked and found to have grown rapidly.

Members of the Muanaira Women's Group are impressed by the size of oysters after only three months. Already many are about 7.5 cm long and 5 cm wide. The fine-mesh nursery bags were starting to look very full, and the oysters needed thinning out. New bags of wider mesh-size were made, and the oysters were size-graded and placed into the new bas-

kets. These were then re-attached to the poles that make up the pilot project farm, where hung baskets are gently rocked by sea motion, which produces nicely shaped oysters with a deep cup.

It normally takes one and a half years to produce a good-sized edible oyster, but it looks like these could be ready for harvest in about one year.

With such promising results, members of the Muanaira Women's Group are hopeful that their oysters will be more plentiful, easier to harvest, and provide more income to their community for generations to come.

For more information:

Robert Jimmy,
Aquaculture Advisor, SPC
robertj@spc.int