

THE BECHE-DE-MER FISHERY IN TONGA

by

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The bêche-de-mer fishery probably began in Tonga in the mid-1980s and, with the unregulated use of scuba and hookah from about 1990, has increased rapidly. Concern for the apparently excessive harvests of sea cucumbers, mainly in the Ha'apai Islands group, was only recently supported. Since gazettal of the Fisheries (Conservation and Management) regulations in late September 1994, detailed export figures have been made available; and permission to access earlier export figures was only granted in April this year.

The well known cycle of bêche-de-mer fisheries is being played out in Tonga. Factors such as 'open access' to the sea, and the importance of some species of sea cucumber in the traditional diet, give the Tongan situation a poignancy and engender management problems perhaps not experienced in other areas where the bêche-de-mer cycle has been experienced. Addressing the issues is a welcome opportunity for a newly reconstituted fisheries ministry.

