

Encouraging women’s participation in fisheries conservation through fish warden training

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Fiji’s Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry is trying to enhance the management of coastal fisheries by promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and youth through its capacity building training programme. The initiative includes fish warden training, fish aggregation device training, post-harvest methods and food safety, value adding, and aquaculture training. These efforts aim to empower women as stewards of fisheries, and promote inclusive decision-making.

Background

Yacata is a small maritime island in the northern part of Fiji’s Lau group, under the jurisdiction of Cakaudrove Province. The island has one village comprising 60 households, and a population of approximately 270. The island has limited fertile land for agriculture, and villagers mostly rely on fisheries and tourism for their livelihoods.

The fish warden training, fish aggregation device training (FAD) and deployment, and community awareness programme for Yacata Village was a collaborative effort between Fiji’s Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, and the Vatuvara Foundation. The Vatuvara Foundation has been working with Yacata villagers to protect and sustain the marine resources in their fishing ground. The foundation has undertaken several scientific studies, and these show that the reef system surrounding the island is deteriorating, and that implementing fisheries management measures is crucial for protecting and managing Yacata’s fishing ground.

Fish warden training

The Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry in partnership with the Vatuvara Foundation conducted the fish warden training for 16 participants (3 women, 13 men) to strengthen community-based fisheries management. Participants from Yacata and Kaibu islands attended the three-day training from 18 to 20 November 2024. The main objectives of the training were to: 1) train community members to become fish wardens; 2) enhance participants’ knowledge of fisheries policies and regulations; 3) build practical skills for monitoring and surveillance of their fishing ground; and 4)

raise community members’ awareness of fisheries regulations and the importance of conserving fisheries resources.

Day 1 of the training started with an overview of the Fisheries Act Cap (158), which is the primary law regulating coastal fisheries in Fiji, and the roles of authorising officers, which include fish wardens.

The honorary fish wardens are appointed by the Minister under the Fisheries Act Cap 158, whose role are the prevention and detection of the offences under this act and the enforcement of the provision.

Why do we need fish wardens?

Fish wardens are needed to:

- help reduce incidences of illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, which is on the rise and a serious concern throughout Fiji.
- help fill the gap of limited resources that are needed to monitor all 410 fishing grounds in Fiji;
- help with monitoring, control and surveillance, in the Fiji’s vast and geographically isolated fishing grounds;
- involve and empower community members to manage their fisheries resources for future generations;
- ensure compliance with Fiji’s fisheries laws; and
- deter offenders from reoffending.

The duties of a fish warden are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Fish warden duties fall within three major categories.

Fish warden duties	
Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise offender • Provide advice to the village and district councils • Raise awareness of communities about fisheries legislation • Raise awareness among children and youth (schools and Sunday schools)
Detection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be physically present at the place of offences • Identify witnesses • Take photographs • Note down sequence of events • Decide on the next step
Enforcement	Powers of examination and detention

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Participants having an interactive session with the facilitators learning about the fisheries legislations, offences and penalties. © Pretika Kumar



Group presentations by fish wardens during training. © Pretika Kumar



Pilot sea patrols. © Pretika Kumar



Participants with their certificates. © Sereana Tuigaloa

Other topics presented during the training were:

- offshore fisheries management regulation (2012);
- monitoring, control and surveillance;
- licensing processes;
- note taking;
- documentation and evidence handling; and
- bill of rights caution.

There were also interactive sessions on: protecting species such as sea turtles; seasonal bans on the taking of grouper and coral trout; bans on harvesting sea cucumbers; a ban on the use of underwater breathing apparatus; and fish size limits and fishing gear restrictions.

Day 2 included a group discussion and short quizzes to test participants' knowledge. Participants were divided into four groups and given scenarios whereby the teams were asked to identify and present offences as an investigative officer. Participants were reminded that their approach and communication style are an important part of compliance inspections.

When conducting an inspection there are some general principles to remember, such as:

- introducing oneself before conducting any inspection;
- using common courtesy and respect;
- remaining calm and professional; and
- being safe (every inspection should be treated with caution).

Collaboration between various enforcing agencies and channels of communication were also explained during this session.

Day 3 was a practical class whereby participants learned why it is important to gather evidence when they have detected an offence. This was done through at-sea pilot patrols. The group split into two teams and role played as offender, authorising officer, recorder, and photographer to collect the three types of evidence: direct evidence, documented evidence and photographic evidence.

At the end of the pilot sea patrol, participants shared their views on the training. Most participants were grateful for the opportunity to learn about the fisheries legislation, particularly about protected and prohibited species, offenses and penalties. Participants emphasised after the training that they had a better understanding of fisheries management and the need to follow the rules to protect fisheries resources for present and future generations. The participants acknowledged that IUU fishing had been taking place in their fishing ground and their role as fish warden was to ensure that IUU fishing was reported to authorities. There was a request for more capacity building training and women's involvement in taking lead roles in fisheries conservation.

One of the challenges identified by participants was delivering the knowledge gained during the training to the rest of the community, and for community members to voluntarily comply with fishing regulations. The training ended with a closing ceremony and presentation of certificates to the participants.

Community awareness

An awareness session was conducted at Yacata Village on 19 November 2024. Twenty households were present during this informal session where general awareness was raised about fisheries legislation and services provided by the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry. Fisheries officers explained the licensing process and urged all fishers to get a fishing licence if they are involved in commercial fishing. Community members asked questions about the establishment of a new marine protected area. Awareness raising was also carried out on Fiji's sea turtle harvesting ban and sea turtle nesting season, which occurs from October to March every year. Yacata Island is one of the nesting places for sea turtles, and community members were advised not to disturb turtle nests, or remove eggs, or kill any turtles.



General fisheries awareness in the Yacata community. © P. Kumar

The awareness session also included getting the community to agree on where to deploy the FAD. Deployment was at the Yacata fishing ground to allow the community to establish a marine protected area, and allow the overfished reef system and lagoon area to recover through a coral restoration programme with the Vatuvara Foundation. FAD fishing offers several benefits to fishers, such as decreasing fishing pressure on the nearshore area, reducing fuel costs by reducing the distance and time spent reach the fishing ground, and increasing the income of fishers because they are now able to catch bigger pelagic fish such as tuna that aggregate around FADs.

Women and youth engagement in conservation efforts

The Vatuvara Foundation is working closely with the youth and women of Yacata Village to protect sea turtles. The turtle management initiative at Yacata started over a decade ago through a community-based conservation programme. The

two most frequently sighted sea turtles in this area are green turtle and hawksbill turtle. The sea turtle conservation and management provision are captured under the Fisheries Act 1942, as well as the offshore fisheries management regulation. All species of sea turtles are also included in the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Yacata Village also has a community-based marine protected area (MPA) that was established in 2017, and the community intends to establish a new MPA for the nearshore reef and lagoon area to recover from overfishing. Coral restoration is also being done in partnership with the Vatuvara Foundation.

Gender perspective in fisheries conservation

Women participants shared their dedication to and passion for taking ownership to protect and conserve marine resources for present and future generations. Amelia Nawaqadau of Yacata Village, who is involved with the coral restoration project with Vatuvara Foundation, said that coral reefs play an important role because they support biodiversity and livelihoods, hence there is a need to protect this vulnerable ecosystem. She said the establishment of the coral restoration sites has helped revive damaged corals in the fishing ground. She further added that the corals in the Yacata fishing ground are mostly affected by overfishing, destructive fishing practices (night diving), and climate change. Amelia shared her sentiments that as a newly trained fish warden, she would encourage fishers in her village to obtain a fishing licence and ensure there is no harvesting of protected species or sales of undersized fish or crabs.

Like many other young women from Yacata Village, Amelia's long-term goal is to safeguard and improve the livelihood of her family and community who are dependent on fisheries resources. However, she faces several challenges, such as Yacata's isolated geographical location, limited resources, and inadequate training and awareness, all of which affect her efforts in fisheries conservation. Social norms and traditional roles further influence her ability to actively

participate in conservation efforts, thus highlighting the need for support and capacity building to empower women in fisheries. Women (in a traditional setting) are often seen as the caretakers of the household and their contribution to fisheries is often undervalued because it is often confined to post-harvest activities or subsistence fisheries. While this role is important, it has limited visibility because subsistence fishery data are not well captured. However, tradition can serve as a foundation to women's participation in fisheries conservation and management due to their traditional knowledge of ecosystems, and their sustainable harvesting practices, which is passed down through generations.

Way forward

Five suggestions were made on the way forward:

- 1 Revive the Yaubula Committee and the youth group.
- 2 Fish wardens to establish a committee with community representatives and Vatuvara Foundation to effectively carry out their work.
- 3 Engage women, youth and children in conservation initiatives, such as coral planting.
- 4 Establish an MPA to help protect marine ecosystems that are degraded by human activities, such as overfishing.
- 5 Raise community awareness and increase participation and empowerment through workshops on fisheries policies, conservation and management.

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Women participants learning how to build fish aggregation devices. © Pretika Kumar