

My career in fisheries observing: A story for aspiring observers

Manoi Rex Kutan, Observer ID code: MAK

Profile

2001–2007: Joined the Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority (NFA) Observer Programme

2008: Selected as a Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer Trainer

2009: Selected as the Papua New Guinea Observer Training Coordinator

2011: Selected as the Secretariat of the Pacific Community Regional Observer Debriefing Training and Support Officer

Becoming a Fisheries Observer

After flunking two courses at the Papua New Guinea (PNG) University of Technology, I returned to my home island of M'Buke, in Manus Province, for six years before joining the PNG Observer Programme in 2001. I was very, very fortunate to be selected to attend this observer training because there were about 400 applicants and only 17 of us were selected. Nowadays, the PNG National Fisheries Authority (NFA) receives almost a thousand applications for observer training each year.

Training was delivered by SPC and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), and our trainers were Peter Sharples (SPC's Port Sampling and Observer Coordinator at the time) and Karl Staisch (FFA's Observer Manager at that time). Peter is now my supervisor here at SPC. At end of the observer training I graduated among the top five.

Working as a Fisheries Observer

Working as a Fisheries Observer has its challenges. Although the basic training tries as much as possible to reflect the actual working environment, once actually out there, physically putting into practice what has been taught, is quite different. You are on your own with no one to guide or assist you in any decision you make.

At times, I really did not like the working conditions but I liked my job overall so never complained — that was all part of it. Although never directed at me, I have witnessed different types of treatment dished out to Fisheries Observers by others on board the vessel. It is, however, always at the back of my mind when I go on board a fishing vessel that this will be my home for a month or two. I endeavour to see everyone onboard as being of “one community”, and that we should at all times try to respect one another. All of the vessel masters I have worked with have been very friendly but I always try to remember my limits. I respect them and they respect me. Knowing when to speak and what to say is a very important skill in this job. But I also soon realised that not saying too much is better.

You also get to travel to a lot of places and meet and work with different people from different cultures and nationalities. This has been all very exciting.

As an observer collecting information for various agencies, I try to focus on the end result of the information I am asked to collect. Understanding the purpose for the main data fields has made it easier to make decisions on the best information to record, although this is usually fairly clearly laid out. In the early days, I sometimes found I made mistakes that needed to be corrected at the end of the trip (during debriefings), but because I was conscious of why I recorded something the way I had, I was able to explain this to the debriefer who was then able to see where I was coming from and help to correct those errors, making it easier for him to teach me the correct method or approach.

The motivating argument

It was in 2004 during one of NFA's consultative meetings with experienced observers to meet and discuss observer issues. Peter Sharples from SPC, and a well-known regional fisheries consultant and character, Mike McCoy (teaching turtle tagging) were also present. We were all discussing a datafield that we understood differently from Peter's explanation. I was the most vocal about this and so we argued. Later, during our closing ceremony, I apologised to Peter. What he told me has never left my mind. He said: “It was good to voice your thoughts because only after such discussion can we be sure whether our thoughts are right or wrong.” After that, he said, “I am really looking forward to working with you,” a comment I will always remember. I know he does not recall this conversation, but to me, it was a huge motivating factor.

Becoming an Observer Trainer

In 2008, on a day that I was about to board a carrier vessel to meet my assigned host vessel out at sea, I received a phone call from my Observer Manager telling me that I will not board the vessel but will instead attend the

basic observer training at the PNG National Fisheries College (NFC) as one of the newly appointed national trainee trainers.

The Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer (PIRFO) training standards were still being developed and we were asked to contribute to this development. Six PNG senior Fisheries Observers were selected to attend the training, working alongside Peter, SPC Trainer, Siosifa Fukofuka and FFA Observer Manager, Tim Park. I do not really know how I was selected. During the training Peter told me that I had performed exceptionally and recommended my attendance in the Solomon Islands to assist in the next observer training. My PIRFO trainer development programme had been launched. In April, I went to Honiara and then in October, to Vanuatu for further observer training in the capacity of a PIRFO Trainee Trainer.

Observer Training Coordinator

In 2009, as a result of PNG being a founding cooperating partner in the development of the new PIRFO training standards, the NFC was in a position to run their own PIRFO observer training. They began looking for someone to coordinate the training, and despite

having no formal certification or qualification as a trainer or coordinator, I was chosen for the job. I was the first PNG Observer Training Coordinator, coordinating and undertaking PIRFO training. I was joined by fellow observer trainer, Glen English, as a full-time PIRFO Trainer, and assisted from course to course by selected senior observers (Glen is now working out of Fiji, as SPC's southern regional PIRFO Training and Support Officer).

In 2010, I suggested holding a PNG national debriefing training workshop. With Glen's assistance we facilitated and delivered this workshop, a first for a national observer programme.

Observer Debriefing Training and Support Officer

In 2011, the new position of Observer Debriefing Training and Support Officer was advertised by SPC, and I applied. Low and behold, here I am now, sitting next to my 2001 trainers at the SPC headquarters, writing this article. Actually, there is not much sitting involved, as my job is to provide PIRFO debriefing training to all SPC member countries.



From left to right: SPC's Debriefing Trainer, Manoi Kutan, and FFA's Observer Manager, Tim Park awarding certificate of successful completion of the Introduction to Debriefing course to Solomon Islands Senior Observer (and ex-Solomon Islands football international) Jeffrey Aruhe

SPC ACTIVITIES

Never in my wildest dreams in my early days as an Observer did I see myself being here, let alone in any one of those positions along the way. I saw myself as simply a Fisheries Observer, but I realise now that, like the data that are collected, the Observer's performance is constantly being monitored.

And I achieved all this with just an Observer Certificate. I know for sure that if it were not for my observer experience, someone with an academic degree would be sitting here in my place.

A tip: I believe that one of my strengths as a Fisheries Observer was to take my work seriously and to try to

understand at least the fundamental reasons for carrying out my observer duties, then doing my best to carry out the work properly.

Thank you.

For more information:

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Comment from Peter Sharples, SPC's Observer Support and Development Coordinator:

From the start, Manoi demonstrated communication skills and initiative beyond his quiet exterior. Accurate observations were also a natural tendency. This, combined with a willingness to share his view and the initiative to help and lead others, put him where he is today. It was we who were lucky to be in the right place at the right time to recognise Manoi's skills and later secure his services for our region. It is not incredible luck that got Manoi to where he is. Fisheries observing is a valued profession these days and there are many opportunities to move on once the long days, weeks and months at sea start to wear thin. Listed below are just some of the many Fisheries Observers that have gone on to do other things that they have been able to do, or been able to do better, because of their training and/or experiences as a Pacific Islands Fisheries Observer:

Karl Staisch (Australia) – WCPFC Regional Observer Programme Manager

Siosifa Fukofuka (Tonga) – SPC Oceanic Fisheries Programme (OFP) Regional Training Coordinator

Peter Sharples (New Zealand) – SPC, OFP Regional Observer Support and Development Officer

Deirdre Brogan (Ireland) – SPC, OFP Fisheries Monitoring Officer

Manasseh Avicks (Solomon Islands) – SPC OFP Observer Training and Support Officer (northern region)

Philip Lens (PNG) – PNG NFA Observer Manager

Glen English (PNG) – SPC OFP Observer Training and Support Officer (southern region)

Ambrose Orianihaa (Solomon Islands) – South Pacific FFA Observer Placement Officer

Fredrick Austin (Solomon Islands) – FFA Observer Support Officer

Bernard Fiubala (Solomon Islands) – Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA) Observer Advisor

Dike Poznanski (Marshall Islands) – MIMRA Observer Coordinator

Steve Peter (Federated States of Micronesia) – Pacific Islands Regional Fisheries Observer (PIRFO) and FSM National Oceanographic Resource Management Authority (NORMA) Trainer

John Still Villi (Solomon Islands) – PIRFO Trainer

Kevin Kisekup (PNG) – PIRFO Trainer

Adrian Nanguromo (PNG) – PNG National Fisheries Authority (NFA) Observer Coordinator

Iamo Airi (PNG) – Papua New Guinea (PNG) NFA Observer Trainer at the National Fisheries College

John Mahit (Vanuatu) – Vanuatu Observer Coordinator

Elton Clodumar (Nauru) – PIRFO and Nauru National Trainer

Ian Tervet (Palau) – Palau Observer Coordinator

Benaia Bauru (Kiribati) – PIRFO Trainer

Toetu Pasaleli (Samoa) – Samoa Observer Coordinator

Jacob Keju (Marshall Islands) – MIMRA Full time Debriefing Officer

Jimmy Belade (Solomon Islands) – Solomon Islands Assistant observer Coordinator

Ricky Narruhn (Federated States of Micronesia) – Trainee PIRFO Trainer and NORMA Assistant Trainer

Lucas Tarapik (PNG) – PNG NFA National Debriefing Coordinator

Linus Yakwa (PNG) – PNG NFA Observer Administration Coordinator

Henry Mabai (PNG) – NFA Madang Observer Port Coordinator

Herman Kisokau (PNG) – Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) VMS Officer

Vitolos Tomidi (PNG) – PNG NFA Observer Operations Coordinator

Juan Jose Areso (Spain) – Indian Ocean Spanish Fleet Liaison Officer

Filipe Viala (Fiji) – Fisherman / Engineer

Dennis Yehilomo (PNG) – PNG NFA Fisheries Enforcement Officer, then recruited as the FFA Surveillance Operations Officer

Glen Joseph (Marshall Islands) – Director of Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority (MIMRA)

Lamiller Pawut (PNG) – PNG NFA Monitoring Control and Surveillance (MSC) Executive Manager, then recruited as the FFA Fisheries Enforcement Advisor