

Women playing multiple roles in the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative

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The Lakeba Fishermen's Association was formed in 2019 and registered as a Fishers Cooperative in 2023 to reflect the inclusion of women working in fisheries. The cooperative is currently made of both women and men fishers from the eight villages on Lakeba Island in the Lau Group, Fiji. Of the 65 members, 11 are women fishers.

In 2023 the Ministry of Trade, Co-operatives, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications (MTC SMEC) in partnership with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, provided a cooperative management training to 12 fisher groups and associations across Fiji, including the then Lakeba Fishermen's Association. Following the workshop the members registered to become Lakeba Fishers Cooperative, and was expanded to include women fishers to recognise their contribution to fisheries. The cooperative established some common goals for itself: (a) meeting market demand by enhancing fishing capacity through powered fishing vessel; (b) fishing training on preservation methods and value adding; (c) maximising fishers, cooperatives economic return through fishing business through sustainable utilisation of fisheries resources; and (d) [to meet] basic need and village obligations.

What commodities does the cooperative buy

The main commodity bought by the cooperative includes a range of species of finfish, mud crab (*Scylla serrata*) and lobsters (*Panulirus versicolor*, *P. penicillatus* and *P. ornatus*). The cooperative buys these fisheries products from

individual fishers and its members and sells it to the markets in Suva. The most common food fish sold by the cooperative includes longface emperor (*Lethrinus olivaceus*), yellow lip emperor (*L. xanthoculis*), Pacific yellow emperor (*L. atkinsoni*), thumbprint emperor (*Lethrinus harak*), great trevally (*Caranx ignobilis*), Indian goatfish (*Parupeneus indicus*), camouflage grouper (*Epinephelus polyphemadion*) and surgeonfish (*Naso unicornis*).

Food parcels are sold every Friday at the Lakeba Fishers Market which is owned by the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative and managed by female members. Farmers from around the island also use the facilities at the market to sell their agricultural produce. The fees for the usage of the facility are paid directly to the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative, providing an additional source of funding.

Cooperative boosting women fishers in Lakeba Mud crab fishery

There are four villages that harvest mud crabs: Waitabu (3 harvesters), Nukunuku (4 harvesters), Yadrana (7 harvesters) and Tubou (3 harvesters). Sixteen of the 17 harvesters are

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Fresh mud crab and mullet ready for sales at the fishers market. © Frank Jeremia

women, and all hold a valid fishing licence to harvest mud crabs. The mud crab fishery plays a vital role in terms of providing a livelihood to the fishers. The majority of the mud crab harvesters are semi-commercial fishers who catch mud crabs every week. The harvesters use both traps and traditional methods (stick is used to drive the mud crab from the hole and is caught using hands) to harvest mud crabs. The harvesters deploy mud crab traps three times a week during high tide and use fish, jellyfish and octopus as bait. The traps are secured to the prop roots of mangroves and left for four hours before it is checked and re-deployed. The women fishers mostly use the traditional methods to catch mud crabs during low tide, when it is easier to spot the animals in their holes. The mud crabs are sold both frozen and live to the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative at \$18/kg which is then sold to the market in the capital Suva. The crabs are kept in the freezer at the fishers market prior to shipping to Suva. The live crabs are covered with damp cloth and kept in baskets made from coconut leaves at the market facility.

Value added products

Women fishers and wives of the cooperative members sell food parcels every Friday. The women from the eight villages on Lakeba Island take turns every week to sell the food parcels at the fishers market. The fish used in the parcels include snapper, mullet, goat fish and trevally that are largely caught using a handline. The fish parcel would include fried fish with *rourou* (taro leaves) while some are cooked with coconut milk, which is served with cassava and salad at FJD10. The female fishers also sell *vakalolo* (Fijian dessert) at FJD5 per serve made from steamed taro (*dalo*) and breadfruit wrapped in giant philodendron (*drau ni via*) leaves. On average, one fisher woman can earn around FJD100-150 per week from

selling food parcels. The money earned from the sales is used to buy groceries, pay for the household appliances, bills and contribute to the basic needs of their family.

Conservation initiatives established by women fishers

A number of conservation initiatives have been established by women fishers in the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative.

- 1 There is a mud crab fattening project at Nukunuku and Waciwaci villages. Women fishers from these villages have constructed small cage structures using the bamboo and 25 litre plastic containers that are used to fatten the small-sized, mud crabs prior to sale. The mud crabs are fed with jellyfish, small fish and vegetable peelings to make them grow bigger. This technique is used because the boat services in the maritime islands are irregular (once a month) and the mud crab fattening project helps fishers maintain or increase the body weight and get better market price.
- 2 The Cooperative assists the Fisheries Officer based in Lakeba by checking the fish size and data collection. The women fishers who manage the fishers market weigh, measure and record the fish landing data from the individual fishers and submit these catch data to the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry on a monthly basis.
- 3 The establishment of community-based Marine Protected Areas at Tubou, Vakano, Nukunuku and Waciwaci villages. Furthermore, the women are involved in coral planting and monitoring the recovery of reefs at these four protected areas.
- 4 Mangrove planting along the coasts of Lakeba Island is done by women fishers, together with the youth of the village in efforts to protect the shoreline.

Challenges faced by fishers

Fishers (both women and men) encounter a multitude of challenges when it comes to selling their catch. One of the primary challenges is market access. The fishing communities find it difficult to connect with broader markets, resulting in reduced competitiveness and lower price for the fisheries resources. The shipping service provider travels once every month and air services are weekly. The return fare by sea is FJD280 while return airfare is estimated at FJD700 not taking into account travelling expenses plus additional baggage expenses.

In addition to this, price volatility is a common issue for fishers in Lakeba as they lack necessary infrastructure, technology, and market information to negotiate fair price for their catch. The Lakeba Fishers Cooperative tries to address these issues by buying fish and other marine species from its members and fisher associations from nearby islands and connecting them to markets on Viti Levu. Suva Market which enables fishers to access a wider customer base and get better prices for their catch. The major buyer for the mud crab fishery is Star Dragon General Trading Company Pte Ltd which has the buying target of 500 kg per month from the harvesters while the finfish and lobster is sold to Northern Foods Pacific Pte Limited.

Despite the challenges the women fishers are working closely with the cooperative members to boost fisheries in Lakeba. They are learning new skills such as fishing techniques, business management and marketing. For example, value adding training was conducted by FAO and Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry for women fishers. Women fishers also have diversified their livelihoods and sell meat and handicrafts at the fishers market during bad weather when they cannot fish. Finally, women fishers have also formed a network with other women groups from around the island and they share knowledge, resources and information to improve livelihood and protect the natural resources.



Fisher women and men often work together to slice meat for sale in the fishers market. © Frank Jeremia

Support provided by the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry

The Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry recognised the efforts and contribution of the Lakeba Fishers Cooperative towards sustainable fisheries, particularly the important role women fishers play in taking ownership of their natural resources. Hence, to boost the cooperative the ministry has assisted fishers with deep freezers, aluminium table for the fisher market, 75 hp engine and a 28-foot boat. Together with these there is a subsidy on ice at 13c/kg for licensed fishers and continuous technical assistance provided by fisheries officers.