

# Women fish wardens in Fiji

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*This article explores the fish warden system focusing on how the roles of iTaukei women have evolved over time.*

## Introduction

The fish warden system within rural communities in Fiji helps to effectively manage and safeguard fishing grounds to sustain the marine resources and livelihoods of communities (Joint SDG Fund 2024). Fish wardens play a pivotal role in supporting the compliance of regulations and combating illegal fishing activities within their designated areas (Joint SDG Fund 2024). This article shares the insights and experiences of Mavileko Ramoica from BirdLife International, based on his involvement in the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park and the implementation of the conservation management plan, which includes the use of fish wardens for monitoring and compliance. The article highlights the fish warden system in the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park, the need for including women fish wardens in the system, and the challenges they face.

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## Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park

The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park is the largest conservation area in Fiji, encompassing an area of 110.5 km<sup>2</sup>, which includes reefs, lagoons, terraces and pinnacles, and Vatu-i-Ra Island off the northern coast of Viti Levu. Established in 2017, the park was established by local communities and supported by dive tourism (WCS 2018). Vatu-i-Ra Island is between Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, and belongs to the Nagilogilo clan who reside in the villages of Nasau and Navuniivi in Navitilevu District, within the larger traditional Nakorotubu District of Ra Province.

BirdLife International has identified Vatu-i-Ra Island as a Key Biodiversity Area that hosts several important seabird species, including the black noddy, *Anous tenuirostris* (Naiqama et al. 2020). Major threats to the black noddy





Vatu-i-Ra Island. © Mavileko Ramoica

include human disturbance, which can lead to a catastrophic decline in the noddy population. The likely impacts of climate change and severe weather events in the future are also expected to threaten the existence of the black noddy (BirdLife International 2024). The red-footed booby (*Sula sula*) and brown booby (*Sula leucogaster*) are also common on the island (Naiqama et al. 2020).

The dynamic team of stakeholders who contributed towards the establishment of the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park management plan comprised the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), BirdLife International, Fiji Environmental Law Association, Ministry of *iTaukei* Affairs, Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, locally based tourism operators, liveaboard dive operators, Ra Provincial Office, *Turaga-ni-Koro* of Nasau Village, and communities from Nakorotubu District. More specifically, the *iTaukei* Affairs Officer (Lui Manuel), *iTaukei* Conservation Officer (Miriam Qoro), fisheries assistant (Sereima Masi), and the Regional Key Biodiversity Areas Coordinator at BirdLife International Pacific (Mavileko Ramoica).

These partners collectively developed a conservation management plan to protect the biodiversity of Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park. Apart from incorporating the inclusion of women fish wardens, the current conservation management plan is being reviewed to include people with disabilities. For example, the picture opposite shown three men reviewing the management plan, including a person who is visually impaired.

Development of the conservation management plan has led to the establishment of a voluntary contribution to the park conservation fund, which helps protect the park and supports the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park Education Fund that provides tertiary education scholarships to students from the area. To that end, all visitors are charged FJD 15 per person. This is a voluntary fee and visitors can also make extra donations to support the education system of the Nakorotubu *qoliqoli* (fishing ground) (WCS 2018).

According to the *Turaga-ni-Koro* of Nasau Village who is also the head of the fish warden team, illegal fishing is a major issue in Vatu-i-Ra waters, and so monitoring the sea around the island has recently begun (Tabureguci 2023). As a result of the monitoring by the fish warden team, boats of illegal fishers coming from outside of Ra Province were apprehended by the team and reported to the Ministry of Fisheries and Forestry, which seized their fish and vessels (Tabureguci 2023).



Mavileko Ramoica (in white and blue shirt on the right) and Lui Manuel (blue shirt on the left) with the fish warden team. © Mavileko Ramoica



Vitulina Buna reads the management plan for Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park to her children. © Mavileko Ramoica

### Inclusion of women fish wardens from Nasau Village

Four villages are involved in the women fish warden system in the Nakorotubu *qoliqoli*. Nasau Village is of particular importance because it is nearest to Vatu-i-Ra, and the villagers there have traditional rights to the island. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) initiated a management plan in 2009. The fish warden system began in 2008 and monitoring was done by fish wardens of Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park. Initially, there were only two male wardens who were trained by WCS but who had not received their fish warden identity cards. A refresher training was provided by WCS and the Ministry of Fisheries to provide awareness and capacity building to promote the inclusion of women as fish wardens. This was done because female wardens can physically touch both male and female poachers unlike male wardens who face restrictions on touching females.

Only nine people are allowed in a boat at one time, for safety reasons. For example, when Mavileko Ramoica went on a trip to visit the village, he was accompanied by two fish wardens, two observers, one boat captain and a fisheries officer. Presently, there are nine male and three female wardens in Nasau Village. All wardens, observers and the boat captain are trained but only the boat captain has a certificate. Only two people are qualified to drive the boats on surveillance trips.

For every full-day trip, a fish warden and a boat captain are each paid FJD 70. Fish wardens are responsible for looking out for and checking fishing boats, spotting poachers, entering a poacher's boat, and writing reports on the types of fish the poachers caught and the equipment they used. Wardens also check fishing licences, particularly within the

island's fishing grounds. If fishers do not have a licence, their boats and equipment are confiscated and they are reported to police officers, who also accompany the fish wardens on trips. Sereima Masi, from the Ministry of Fisheries plays a major role in monitoring, identifying and reporting poachers, and confiscating equipment.

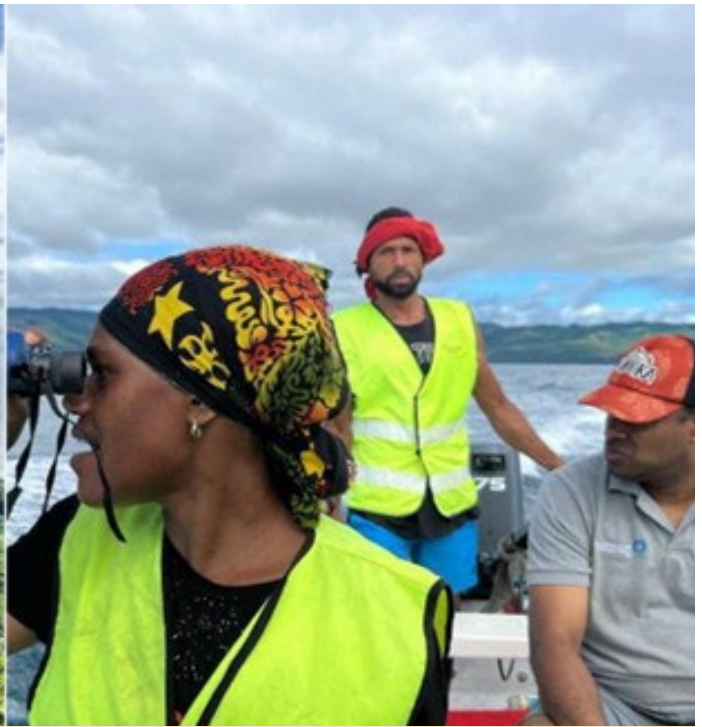
The first female fish warden, Vitulina Buna, joined in December 2023, and was followed by other women. In January 2024, two new female wardens, Turisi Lau and Wana-Naidole, joined and now there are three fish wardens. They are between 20 and 35 years, including two youths and one married woman. The three women have received training but are not certified wardens. Due to the boat capacity, all three female wardens do not go together. Since Vitulina Buna is now married, she does not go out to the sea. Turisi Lau goes instead. So far, these three female wardens have identified and caught eight poachers.

### Challenges faced by female wardens

Women face several issues in the fish warden system. One of the challenges is the fear of what happens when they catch poachers. The women sometimes fear for their safety because the poachers are likely to be men who can easily harm them. Women wardens may also be afraid of the fallout after catching the poachers. Their courage, confidence and determination, however, has strengthened over time. Due to cultural and gender norms, only men are allowed to work, meaning that husbands generally do not permit their wives to work to ensure that the women complete the household



Woman fish warden (Vitulina Buna) writing report at sea followed by inland writing of report. © Mavileko Ramoica



Women fish wardens watching out for poachers. © Mavileko Ramoica

chores and participate in village activities. Therefore, women need approval from their husbands to allow them to work apart from performing domestic duties. Sometimes the women's voices are not heard. As a result, there are attempts to find ways of organising informal sessions to help raise awareness of the issues faced by women in their communities.

Network issues are also a problem, especially when poachers are caught and the matter needs to be reported to the police. As a way forward, refresher training and capacity building on governance structure are needed to highlight the need for women's inclusion in the fish warden system. Some of the occupational health and safety issues faced by women fish wardens include shaky boats, which can cause fatigue, stomach problems, headaches and loss of balance during windy and adverse weather conditions.

## Conclusion

The inclusion of women in the fish warden system is mandatory ascribed to the contributions they provide towards effectively managing traditional fishing grounds. Women are now overcoming cultural and gender barriers that have traditionally limited the capacity of women to expand their skills and knowledge. These women are working together with men to help control illegal fishing activities, safeguard their fishing grounds and natural resources, as well as the livelihoods of community members.

Hence, stakeholders must support the inclusion of women in conservation management plans and strategies to promote natural resource management. The provision of awareness and capacity building programmes, training, and certificates could help to improve the participation of women in the fish warden system.

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