

Engaging women in pearl meat farming in Fiji

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Pearl oyster farming is a potential source of livelihood in Pacific Island countries and territories. Deemed the region's most valuable and significant aquaculture activity, the culturing of pearl oysters has benefitted many coastal communities (SPC 2007). While the industry continues to develop in Fiji, opportunities in pearl oyster farming have provided women and youth groups with income-generating activities such as spat collection, mabe pearl production and pearl shell handicraft production (Southgate et al. 2019). Engaging women in aquaculture activities contributes to women's empowerment in terms of decision-making opportunities within households (SPC 2018) and is crucial in supporting livelihoods within communities.

J. Hunter Pearls Fiji, with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Pacific Community (SPC) are assisting Va'ulele and Urata villages in the Cakaudrove Province to establish community pearl meat farms. The project is especially supporting livelihoods for women and youth. The pearl meat farm initiative focuses on the culturing of black-lip pearl oysters, *Pinctada margaritifera*, for the production of pearl meat. This will be supplied either fresh or frozen in the shell to high-end hotels and restaurants in Fiji and to targeted export markets, for example, East Asia, in anticipation of post COVID-19 economic recovery (Whitford & Pickering, 2020). Pearl meat is a new product that will diversify the pearl aquaculture industry, simplifying farming processes and eliminating the need for highly specialised pearl seeding technicians, thus increasing the accessibility for entry into this industry for community groups (Vitukawalu et al. 2019).

The women of Va'ulele village have been actively involved in every stage of this aquaculture venture including consultations, financial literacy trainings, business planning, oyster theory trainings and pearl farm cleaning operations. Although the pearl meat farming operation is labour intensive and has predominantly involved mostly men, the women (>35 years) and female youths (18–35 years) in Va'ulele have risen to the challenge, despite gender norms, and have shown keen interest in dedicating four to six hours over two days per week towards this aquaculture initiative. Results from a Gender Risk Assessment undertaken in Va'ulele village showed that women in the community had existing knowledge and skills in land-based pearl farming activities such as knot tying, oyster cleaning and oyster shell drilling. Moreover, women in both communities have taken up roles on their pearl farming committee and been appointed as directors



The scrumptious meat of black-lip pearl oysters. © Vutaieli Vitukawalu/WCS



WCS Fiji staff facilitate discussion with the women's focal group during a consultation workshop in Va'ulele. © Vutaieli Vitukawalu/WCS



Representatives of the Va'ulele Yaubula Committee. © Fareea Ma/WCS

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Dr Timothy Pickering, Inland Aquaculture Advisor of SPC FAME, presents at an oyster theory training in Urata where women made up almost half of its participants. © Vutaieli Vitukawalu/WCS



Young women of Va'ulele village assist in the cleaning of oyster spats, floats and stabilisation of the pearl farm line in the Va'ulele community pearl meat farm. © Sirilo Dulunaqio/WCS

of their business entity, which would traditionally comprise mainly men making decisions on all levels.

The inclusion of women into each and every planning stage in discussion with the men in the village has resulted in the sharing of roles and responsibilities within households – in other words, men have agreed to take on some of the responsibilities of women such as cooking, carrying out household chores and looking after the children, while they are engaged in pearl meat farming activities. Both women and men agree that the active participation of women will strengthen relationships and allow women to take up leadership roles and acquire decision-making skills to ensure the smooth operations of the community pearl meat farm venture. This strengthens inclusion and diversity and brings about women's empowerment. "Being appointed as one of the committee members has given me the confidence to voice my opinion on issues concerning the community pearl farm and to ensure the team take full ownership in working together to achieve their goals" says Unaisi Seruwaia, Secretary of the Va'ulele Yaubula (Natural Resources) Committee.

Between November 2020 and June 2021, a total of 3000 m of spat ropes bearing oyster spats (juvenile oysters) were deployed in three batches onto the Va'ulele community pearl farm from J. Hunter Pearls' hatchery and nursery in Savusavu, making it the first established community-owned pearl meat farm in Fiji. The spats are expected to reach harvestable size in 18–20 months before they can be marketed to high-end restaurants as a new seafood specialty. In early 2021, a pearl farm assessment was carried out at the Va'ulele community pearl farm where the farm team were trained in tagging, measuring and counting oysters on spat lines for growth and survival monitoring throughout the production cycle until harvest.

At the last deployment, young women were part of the deployment team, learning how to stabilise the pearl farm lines, clean floats, tie knots and clean oyster spats. The cooperation between men and women and mutual understanding of differing roles could be the key to the success of Fiji's first community-owned pearl meat farm venture. The pearl meat farming initiative is a great opportunity to engage women to help support livelihoods through supplementary income within their community and promote the sustainable use of marine resources within their village *iqoliqoli* (traditional fishing rights area).

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