

Tongan *mabe* pearl farmers trained in basic financial literacy

Tonga's mabe pearl industry is steadily growing, with around 22 small aquaculture farms operating throughout the country, and the majority of the farms located around Vava'u Island and the remaining in the Ha'apai and Tongatapu islands. In order to boost the financial skills of pearl farmers and national fisheries staff, the Tongan Ministry of Fisheries (MoF) and the Pacific Community (SPC) – through the Sustainable Pacific Aquaculture Development project (PacAqua), in partnership with the Tongan Business Enterprise Centre (TBEC), the training arm of the Tongan Chamber of Commerce – conducted a basic financial literacy training in Vava'u from 25 to 26 September 2019.

In total, 21 participants were trained, including 15 *mabe* pearl farmers from Ha'apai, Nuku'alofa and Vava'u, and 6 national fisheries staff. The training aimed at building the business literacy skills of pearl farmers. With the exception of one farmer who runs other tourism-based businesses, all other farmers operate in an informal subsistence manner, without a business license. Most, however, are members of the Tongan National Pearl Farmers Association (TNPFA).

As stated by Mr Sailosi Hemaloto, a pearl farmer from Vava'u, having a better understanding on how to operate and manage a small business will greatly assist pearl farmers in growing their own businesses. Prior to training, many farmers admitted that they did not know how to assess the real costs associated with running their business and, therefore, could not maximize their profits.

Learning to work with a cash book to monitor their cash flow was useful, and understanding how to estimate the cost of time required for the business as part of their investment, helped determine the real operating and production costs.

An additional benefit of bringing farmers from outside Vava'u to the training was that it assisted in developing networks among the farmers and the Pearl Information Centre and Workshop (PICW), with two farmers now given consent by TNPFA to send their raw pearl oyster shells to PICW to process and retail as jewellery. This allows pearl farmers from Nuku'alofa and Ha'apai to link into the strong tourism market during the whale-watching season in Vava'u. It will also benefit new shell crafters who may not have their own farms to access mature shells to develop new jewellery and generate income.

Most *mabe* pearl products are retailed through the PICW building, which is made available by the Tongan government. TNPFA and PICW also benefit from the technical support provided through Australia's University of the Sunshine Coast, with funding support from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. Currently, several volunteers through the Australian Volunteers International programme are helping to improve PICW operations. These volunteers have made an amazing impact through improved designing of *mabe* jewellery, capacity building for local crafters, and marketing pearl products for the tourism market.



Mr Afei demonstrates carving of elegant *mabe* pearl jewellery to participants. (Image: Avinash Singh, SPC)

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