



Fishing is considered to be the world's most dangerous occupation – estimated in 1999 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to cause more than 24,000 deaths per year. Although Pacific Island countries have some of the highest sea accident rates in the world, most government fisheries agencies have limited involvement with safety issues. Data are insufficient to statistically demonstrate which activities are particularly risky, but there is a general perception that offshore trolling for tuna in small outboard-powered skiffs is responsible for many, if not most, of accidents at sea.



Michel Blanc © SPC

A typical trolling skiff from Tarawa in Kiribati, a country with one of the highest sea accident rates in the Pacific.

What is sea safety?

Sea safety or boat safety means the ability of a vessel to return to port (or more usually the island or village) at the completion of a voyage or trip. A sea safety accident is an event that may lead to a vessel not returning to port.

The cost of small boat accidents at sea

In addition to the emotional cost experienced by families and friends as a result of accidents on small boats, regional organisations have tried to analyse the financial cost of sea safety accidents and in particular, the cost of search and rescue (SAR) operations. With 22 island states and territories covering more than 25 million square kilometres of ocean and more than 50,000 small fishing vessels working the nearshore waters of these islands, the exact number of accidents occurring each year is impossible to calculate. What is known, however, are the hourly costs of patrol boats, helicopters and planes that are deployed to undertake SAR. Based on this available information and a case study undertaken for New Caledonia, SPC has estimated that the cost of SAR operations to the region is between 5 and 8 million US dollars per annum. Whatever the exact amount, one thing is for sure, it is a cost the Pacific Islands could well do without!

The causes of sea accidents

Various studies have highlighted the importance of human errors in sea accidents. Despite the scarce data available, we know that most sea accidents in Pacific Islands are linked to mechanical breakdowns (lack of knowledge in outboard motor maintenance and troubleshooting), losing sight of the island – particularly in atoll countries (lack of navigation skills), running out of petrol (negligence) and bad weather (unsuitable boat design and no pre-departure check of the weather forecast). Overloading of vessels and subsequent capsizing is also a common feature of Pacific Islands' small boat safety.



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Overloading of a small transport vessel in Papua New Guinea.





A world record of survival at sea?

On 18 November 1991, three I-Kiribati fishers left their village on Nikunau for an ordinary fishing trip. Two of them made land again on 11 May 1992... almost six months later, in Samoa! They had survived on rain water and the sharks they could lasso while drifting. This is the longest known drift in the Pacific and possibly in the world. Those two survivors were treated as heroes upon returning home, although the cause of their sea odyssey was pure negligence: they ran out of petrol while fishing. The result was one death and thousands of dollars spent to no avail in searching for their tiny fishing vessel.

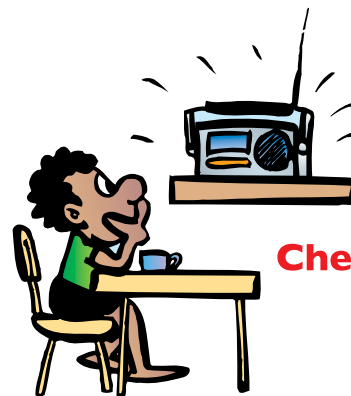


A worrisome fact

Most countries in the Pacific do not keep good records of small boat accidents at sea, making it impossible to analyse the extent of the problem and design tailor-made individual responses for countries. The collection and ongoing analysis of data on sea accident should be the first step in the establishment of any national small boat safety programme.

The importance of being prepared

Small boat users, particularly fishers, lack a culture of sea safety. To help change that situation, SPC has released a number of small boat safety awareness materials including two checklists (included in this information package): 'Five minutes which can save your life' and a recommended list of safety equipment for small boats. Of particular importance are the things to do before going out to sea:



Check the weather forecast



Tell someone who cares where you are going and when you plan to return

Make sure your engine is working well



Make sure all safety equipment is on board