

## COASTAL FISHERIES SCIENCE AND MANAGEMENT SECTION

### Bonefish catch-and-release sportfishing picks up in the Pacific

Bonefish sportfishing supports one of the most important recreational fisheries in subtropical and tropical regions worldwide. Flyfishing for bonefish is one of the most esteemed forms of sportfishing in the world. The fish are stealthy, fast swimming fighters that are challenging to catch. The silver-bodied fish spend much of their time swimming along very shallow banks searching for food. The sport is well established in many places, mostly in tropical areas of the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Africa, South America, USA (Florida), and now the Pacific Islands region, and attracts sport anglers from all over the world who are looking for new fishing sites and challenges.

In countries such as Cuba, Seychelles, Mexico and the Bahamas, tourism has developed around flyfishing for bonefish, bringing in foreign currency and creating income opportunities for coastal communities, including direct employment for local fishing guides and side benefits for the catering and hotel industries. In the Pacific Islands, flyfishing for bonefish is practiced commercially in New Caledonia and on Christmas Island (Kiribati) where weekly charter flights from Hawaii bring in flyfishing enthusiasts. On Christmas Island, with only about 1,000 visiting flyfishers a year, this tourism-based fishery is valued at a minimum of USD 2.5 million annually, excluding any side benefits to the community. The bonefish resource on Christmas Island suffered from a lack of any management control, especially from considerable gillnetting activities, until 2008 when a bonefish regulation was drafted (with assistance from SPC) and put in place.



A beautiful bonefish caught on a fly (Image: Being Yeeting).

Recent reports from bonefish fishers and local fishing guides on Christmas Island claim that bonefish stocks are becoming abundant again, which means the management plan has been a success.

Specialist bonefish enthusiasts are seeking new destinations that offer them a guarantee that they will catch many good-sized bonefish. An "exotic" natural environment and a high-quality tourism infrastructure are also important. Aitutaki in Cook Islands is seen as an ideal destination that meets these criteria. The local government, municipal council, hoteliers and the Ministry of Marine Resources see the potential for this fishery and have committed to developing sport fishing and tourism around Aitutaki's bonefish resource, and have asked SPC to assist them in this endeavour.

In January 2010, SPC's Senior Fisheries Scientist (Live Reef Fisheries) visited Aitutaki to hold a public meeting with the local community of Aitutaki, and to develop an appropriate management plan for the proposed bonefish fishery. This

visit was a follow-up to previous trips by staff of SPC's Near-shore Development Fisheries Section (see article in Fisheries Newsletter #128) who have taken the lead in assisting the Aitutaki Island Council in developing this tourism-based bonefish fishery.

SPC's Senior Fisheries Scientist spent five days working with Aitutaki Fisheries staff conducting interviews with fishers and village community members, as well as conducting a quick field assessment of bonefish fishing areas and known spawning aggregation sites. On the last day, a draft framework of the proposed management plan for the new fishery was presented to the community. Community members were very interested in and supportive of the new fishery and wanted to see the management plan completed and endorsed before the fishery was officially opened.

Following the trip, a draft management plan was developed and sent to the Cook Islands Ministry of Marine Resources and the Aitutaki Island Council for comments. This



Conducting interviews with experienced Nonouti bonefish fishermen (Image: Being Yeeting).



Gillnetting for bonefish – A big threat to the fishery (Image: Being Yeeting).



Franck Taunga Smith, flyfishing guide, releases a bonefish (Image: Éric Clua).

The Aitutaki bonefish management plan is currently being finalised.

In early February 2010, SPC received another request, this time from the Kiribati Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources Development (MFMRD), to assist with developing a tourism-based bonefish fishery in Nonouti, one of the outer islands in the southern Gilbert Islands. The island has abundant bonefish resources, and a trial visit by an Australian bonefish fishing group proved to be a success. The main objective for the request was to assess whether Nonouti's bonefish resources could support a tourism-based bonefish fishery, and if so, develop a management plan and regulations for the new sport fishery there. With the success of the Christmas Island Bonefish Fishery, MFMRD viewed this as a great and worthwhile outer island income generating opportunity and willingly covered all of the SPC Senior Fisheries Scientist's travel costs (airfare from Noumea to Nonouti and back).

The SPC Senior Fisheries Scientist was in Nonouti from 24 February to 3 March 2010, and during that time held meetings and conducted interviews with fishers and members of local communities. In total, 19 very experienced fishers (who have been fishing for bonefish in Nonouti for more than 10 years) were interviewed (fishermen ranged in age from 38 to 79 years). Field visits by boat were also made to look at spawning aggregations sites and sand flats in Nonouti's lagoon. On the last day of the visit, the fieldwork findings were presented in a public meeting. There was very strong support for developing the bonefish fishery into a tourism-based catch-and-release fishery. There was also general agreement to ban gillnetting for bonefish and to ban all forms of fishing at bonefish spawning aggregation sites during spawning periods. These findings were used to develop a draft framework for the Nonouti Bonefish Management Plan.

A draft Nonouti Bonefish Management Plan has been completed and sent to MFMRD and the Nonouti Island Council for comments and refining. The management plan emphasises the importance of maximising benefits and distributing these benefits equally among the island community. Once the management plan is finalised, it will be translated into the local I-Kiribati language so that Nonouti community members can fully understand it and its implications on their livelihoods.

For further information, please contact:

**Being Yeeting**  
Senior Fisheries Scientist (Live Reef Fisheries)  
Fisheries Science and Management Section  
(BeingY@spc.int)