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A proposed regional approach to improved management of sea cucumber fisheries

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A proposed regional approach to improved management of sea cucumber fisheries

Background

1. Sea cucumbers, and their processed form, beche-de-mer (BDM), have been fished and processed in the Pacific for hundreds of years for markets in Asia. Large catches of sea cucumbers have been recorded over time from the Pacific. In recent years, the huge demand has driven up prices and encouraged unsustainable fishing. Sea cucumber fisheries are the second most valuable export fishery for the Pacific region behind the tuna fishery, yet they are very poorly managed in most cases. Even when they were already overfished in the middle of the last decade, exports were valued at over USD 50 million per year. With better management and today's high prices the fishery could be worth much more – but the potential wealth and income for coastal communities is being lost.
2. This paper suggests that it is time that this fishery received some of the attention paid to tuna management, and consideration is being given to doing this through the same kind of subregional programmes. Recent meetings have highlighted the problems and some opportunities.

Sea cucumber fishery management workshop

3. SPC staff participated in a workshop from 15 to 18 November in Nadi, Fiji, organised jointly with the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). Fifteen participants from 12 PICTs participated, representing countries with different levels and sophistication of management arrangements. The meeting identified a number of areas in which research, training and support would be useful, but the key needs identified were:
 - To develop soundly based national management plans for the fishery in PICTs that do not already have them;
 - To develop capacity for enforcement in most PICTs – there is currently little or no training in this area for coastal fisheries;
 - The need to raise the profile of BDM fisheries in view of their importance to coastal communities;
 - The need for better information on markets and prices;
 - The need for a regional network to exchange experience and information on a regular basis.

Meeting to consider broader issues in Pacific sea cucumber fisheries

4. Researchers, technical agencies, regional organisations and donors met in Wollongong, Australia, on 3 April, to discuss the issues and look for possible solutions. Several donors are willing to commit funding to assist in the process, and the World Bank may be able to mobilise substantial funding assistance in the future under their Pacific Fisheries Engagement Strategy.

5. The meeting agreed that two technical studies would be useful as a first step:
 - An examination of historical levels of BDM production in the region, and quantification of the degree to which these fisheries could eventually be rehabilitated and their potential productive/economic value/contribution if they were producing optimal biological and economic yields (essentially an estimate of the benefits currently being foregone as a result of sub-optimal management arrangements);
 - Bio-economic modelling and analysis to investigate the degree to which fees and taxes or other economic tools could be expected to impact BDM fishery management, and their potential costs and benefits under a variety of scenarios. This study would include an assessment of the degree to which such measures could be further enhanced through regional cooperation among PICTs.
6. ACIAR will contribute AUD 150,000 to support these studies, and it is felt that this funding should be sufficient to undertake both studies. Other funding will be sourced as required.
7. TRAFFIC also offered to lead the development and commissioning of a regional study into trade patterns for BDM. TRAFFIC will seek funding for this study through its own networks. This would collect information similar to that provided by FFA to members to help understand the markets and business interests in the tuna fishery.

Meeting of the Melanesian Spearhead Group Fisheries Technical Advisory Committee

8. In order to take the process forward, SPC has consulted with fisheries officials of the Melanesian Spearhead Group countries. The reason for approaching this group in the first instance was:
 - These countries control the largest part of the resource, but it has been severely depleted with fisheries closed in three of the five countries;
 - There are cross-border issues with movement of BDM between PNG and Solomon Islands;
 - The countries face similar problems in regulating the harvest across remote rural areas;
 - The MSG countries had already expressed an interest in cooperating with each other on coastal fisheries management, and SPC has been assisting with the development of a draft MOU to facilitate this.
9. The meeting supported the proposed studies described above, and agreed to participate in a working group to advance improved management and development of the fishery.
10. SPC, in consultation with the MSG Secretariat, will develop the terms of reference for the two studies and advertise these to select suitable consultants for the studies.

Proposed process

11. SPC will coordinate an informal working group for BDM with representatives from countries and technical agencies, and invited experts. Other agencies that have shown an interest in being part of the informal working group include the following (with their areas of expertise shown in brackets):

- ACIAR (economic research, aquaculture and stock enhancement – funding agency)
- Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security ANCORS (legal and international policy expertise)
- TRAFFIC (international trade and control measures for endangered species)
- WorldFish (fisheries management and aquaculture with a strong presence in Solomon Islands)

and potentially:

- the World Bank (funding agency with expertise in economic policy measures)
- Fisheries officers of Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (MSG country members).

12. SPC will develop terms of reference for the working group that will oversee the development of the two technical studies and a concept or 'visioning' paper for BDM management and development.

13. SPC will work to transform the informal working group into a more formal task force with its own workplan so that a subregional approach can be taken for all management and MCS activities with capacity development at the national level. There is also scope for cost recovery from the fishery to allow for self-funding in the long term.

14. The working group/task force will liaise with the World Bank and keep the Bank informed of developments in the context of the Pacific Fisheries Engagement Strategy, as there is the possibility of substantial funding being available in the future.

15. SPC will present the findings of the studies and visioning paper to SPC Heads of Fisheries in February 2013 with recommendations for potential options and possible funding opportunities, and a progress report on the task force activities as a model for broader participation and/or the establishment of other subregional groups.

Recommendations

Heads of Fisheries are invited to:

- i. Discuss the concept of the two proposed studies and the proposed activities to move this process forward and provide comment; and
- ii. Note the proposed informal working group and its development into a more structured task force, with the potential for more countries to join or establish other subregional groups in future.