KOUMAC HOSTS THE 2002 PRACTICAL FISHING COURSE

Is there, in our region, a fisheries course more popular than the SPC/Nelson Polytechnic Fisheries Officers' Training Course? From SPC's point of view certainly not! But even senior personnel in Pacific Island fisheries divisions agree, and the consensus is that the course is, 'the ideal training for our extension officers'.

Between 1979 and 2001, 265 Pacific Islanders from 18 countries and territories have undergone training in Nelson, at the New Zealand School of Fisheries. This year, a further 10 trainees completed the Nelson component of the course on Monday, 27 June. After 18 weeks at school, it was time to put the theory into practice and go catch some fish, and big ones if possible!

Before flying from their home country in January none of the trainees had ever heard of Koumac and the Northern Province of New Caledonia, all except Lale from Tuvalu who had lived in Noumea when he was a teenager and his father Satalaka worked at SPC. Koumac, a small town of 3000, began its history at the beginning of the 20th century when chrome mining took off in the area. Located nearby a lagoon abundant with fish, catching emperor fish, coral trout and Spanish mackerel was a part of locals' life. But in 2001, fishing took another dimension in Koumac with the upgrading of the marina, the building an HACCP-compliant fish plant and, even more noticeable, the arrival of the first tuna longliners. Behind these innovations were a few men and women who firmly believed that industrial fishing was the way to create jobs and make money.

Northern Province politicians facilitated the project, Koumac's mayor made the council's financial and human resources available, and Claude Favy took the big risk. Their efforts are to be praised. Their collaboration made the dream come true, the Pêcheries de Nouvelle-Caledonie company was born. Now operating ten 16-metre fresh tuna longliners, PNC is the second largest fishing company in New Caledonia, after the Noumea-based Navimon.

The idea of running the 2003 fishing module in Koumac germinated at SPC last March and was confirmed after a one-day site visit later on, when everyone involved with course preparations realised that Koumac was the perfect place to hold the course! It has a modern and safe industrial-type vessel for training vessels; ice, bait and fuel are available; a brand-new plant for processing the catch, a FAD nearby, overseas markets through PNC, high standard accommodations, total support from the local community and institutions, plenty of fish ... and no night-clubs. Doesn't this sound like the ideal venue for a practical fishing course?

Upon their arrival, the trainees and Nelson module coordinator Brian Fossett were split in two groups. Seven trainees jumped in two minibuses hired by the Training Section and made the five-hour drive to Koumac while the remaining three went down to Noumea where they got straight into the job of loading training vessel FV Dar Mad under the direction of Lucky, the vessel skipper, and Velio, the chief engineer. Lucky and Velio have been associated with the operation of the practical module since the mid-90s when the course was hosted by New Caledonia.

When FV Dar Mad arrived at Koumac on Wednesday night, the other two training vessels were already on site. Our fleet consisted of FV Le Crabe, a six-metre, wooden boat owned by the New Caledonia School of Fisheries (EMM), the FV Breith Atao, a six-metre aluminium vessel hired from a local fisher, both for small-scale fishing activities, and FV Dar Mad, the 11 metre catamaran from the Service de la Marine Marchande et des Pêches Maritimes for demonstrating industrial-type fishing techniques.

Having spent the next day rigging the three boats and making some gear, the trainees could not wait any longer to have a taste of Koumac by sea. The warm-up took place on Friday onboard FV Dar Mad only, as mechanical problems prevented FV Le Crabe to go out and FV Breith Atao was not yet ready. In fact, that first trip on FV Dar Mad produced the lowest catch of the course, but this did not put down trainees' confidence. Despite the strong winds, they knew calm weather and good catches would be coming next.

The second and third weeks of the course were focused on bottom fishing. All three boats did that, fishing at different depths and locations and using a range of techniques. On FV Dar Mad, the highlight was two consecutive, amazing catches of red snapper (Etelis carbunculus) and...
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the course record, in the snapper category, for a 23-kg fala. Steve Beverly and the trainees will always remember the sight of these strings of beautiful fish floating up to the surface during the longline hauling process. But the small boats did very well too, despite fishing shallower and using hand-reels (Alvey type). Great catches of bottom fish were recorded with the usual mixture of snappers (gold-band – *Pristipomoides multidens*, yellow-tail – *P. flavipinnis*, pink – *P. filamentosus*), groupers (*Epinephelus* spp.), jobfish (silver-jaw – *Aphareus rutulans*, green – *Aprion virescens*) and even an odd 16-kg dog tooth tuna (*Gymnosarda unicolor*) caught by Nare from Vanuatu. Sia, the only female trainee this year, quickly became addicted to striking and hauling fish from the deep. For her, the personal highlight is undoubtedly a course record in the grouper category, with a 26-kg Malabar grouper (*Epinephelus malabaricus*). For our apprentice fishermen, the work did not stop at the fun of landing fish. The catch had to be processed to market specifications (i.e. gilled and gutted). Some preferred to do this at sea on the way back from fishing grounds, while others enjoyed the chilling comfort of PNC’s brand new processing plant. The end result was the same, an ultra fresh, perfectly handled product that surely has been enjoyed by consumers.

FAD fishing and trolling was done using the small boats, although results varied. The FAD, moored at about six nautical miles from the Koumac pass, was not in a ‘tuna mood’ during the practical module. Despite trolling and setting a couple of vertical longlines at each visit, trainees didn’t even catch one skipjack! Nobody really complained about the lack of tunas as the FAD produced plenty of adrenaline when the mahi mahi (*Coryphaena hippurus*) were around. And Nare got the biggest one, a male of 22 kg. The early morning troll along the barrier reef gave the opportunity to demonstrate the rigging of natural baits (pilchards) with ganged hooks. At first, some trainees thought the more expensive a lure is, the better….surely, they are now convinced there is nothing like a properly rigged bait for catching the big ones with sharp teeth. Wahoos, Spanish mackerels, barracudas, dog tooth and giant trevallies, all lost a few mates during the SPC course!

At the end of week three, the course had provided excitement and new skills to all, but tuna longlining was still to come. Three trips were made on FV *Dar Mad*, under the supervision of Steve, Lucky and Velio. Overall, catches were excellent (the CPUE for the three trips was 0.73 kg per hook, which is 50% higher than the regional average). Most importantly, trainees are now familiar with the monofilament longline technique, on-board handling procedures, and they even witnessed the tagging of a 55-kg bigeye tuna. It was too good to be true and something nasty had to spoil the final week! This was a mechanical breakdown on FV *Dar Mad* which prevented the trainees from experimenting with swordfish longlining. This was a pity as the whole group was excited about doing the night trips for catching the ‘pork of the sea’. Never mind, three privileged trainees made the return trip to Noumea with FV *Dar Mad* and again took part in something new: the deployment of an experimental FAD rigged with 10-mm polypropylene rope and 350 m of stainless steel cable. This FAD will be closely monitored over the next few months by FV *Dar Mad* and SPC staff.

The BBQ on Friday, 28 July put an end to six months of training. Our 10 Pacific Island students came to realise they would have to farewell each other the next

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**The SPC/Nelson course under review**

Following a request from two of the main course donors - the New Zealand government and the Commonwealth Secretariat - an external review of the training programme that was launched in 1979 will be undertaken within the next few weeks.

A consultant with proven experience in Pacific fisheries and training programme evaluation will be recruited to assess the impact of the course and assess the future of fisheries officer training in the region. It is expected that the consultant will travel to Noumea to meet with staff of the Coastal Fisheries Programme, and to Nelson to inspect the New Zealand School of Fisheries and talk with tutors. Chief Fisheries Officers in the region will receive a survey questionnaire and two or three countries will be visited for direct feedback from both ex-trainees and senior fisheries personnel.

A report, available in November, will be forwarded to fisheries administrations and course donors and future funding of the course will depend on the review outcomes.

If you are contacted in the context of this exercise, please provide the consultant with all the assistance required. It is important that your thoughts on this popular course are taken on board.
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day. A small town in northern New Caledonia will remain forever in their memories, not only for the fishing skills learnt but also for lots of great experiences….kava tasting, indoor soccer, petanque, mountain climbing, chrome mining and more!

The SPC Fisheries Training Section wishes good luck to the 2002 students. We also thank all the institutions and individuals involved in both the Nelson and practical fishing modules. From SPC’s point of view, Koumac proved to be an ideal venue for the best group of trainees in many years. Let’s hope the donor community will continue to see the benefits of such a great training course.

The SPC Nelson Polytechnic Fisheries Officers Training Course provides essential practical fishing skills [Photos: Michel Blanc]