

Aquatic foods¹ and their role in nutrition in the Pacific



KEY MESSAGES

- Consumption of aquatic foods is high in PICTs, however, the volume and type of aquatic food consumed, such as shellfish, reef fish or canned fish, varies among sub-regions, countries and within countries
- Most Pacific Islanders live near the sea and consume large amounts of aquatic food, yet overall dietary diversity remains low
- There are large differences in the nutrient composition of aquatic foods consumed in the region and more data are needed on locally relevant species
- For aquatic foods to best contribute to food and nutrition security in the Pacific region consumption advice needs to be shaped to match the type of aquatic food already being consumed, its nutritional composition, and its place in contributing to dietary diversity with other foods, both domestically produced and imported

CONTEXT

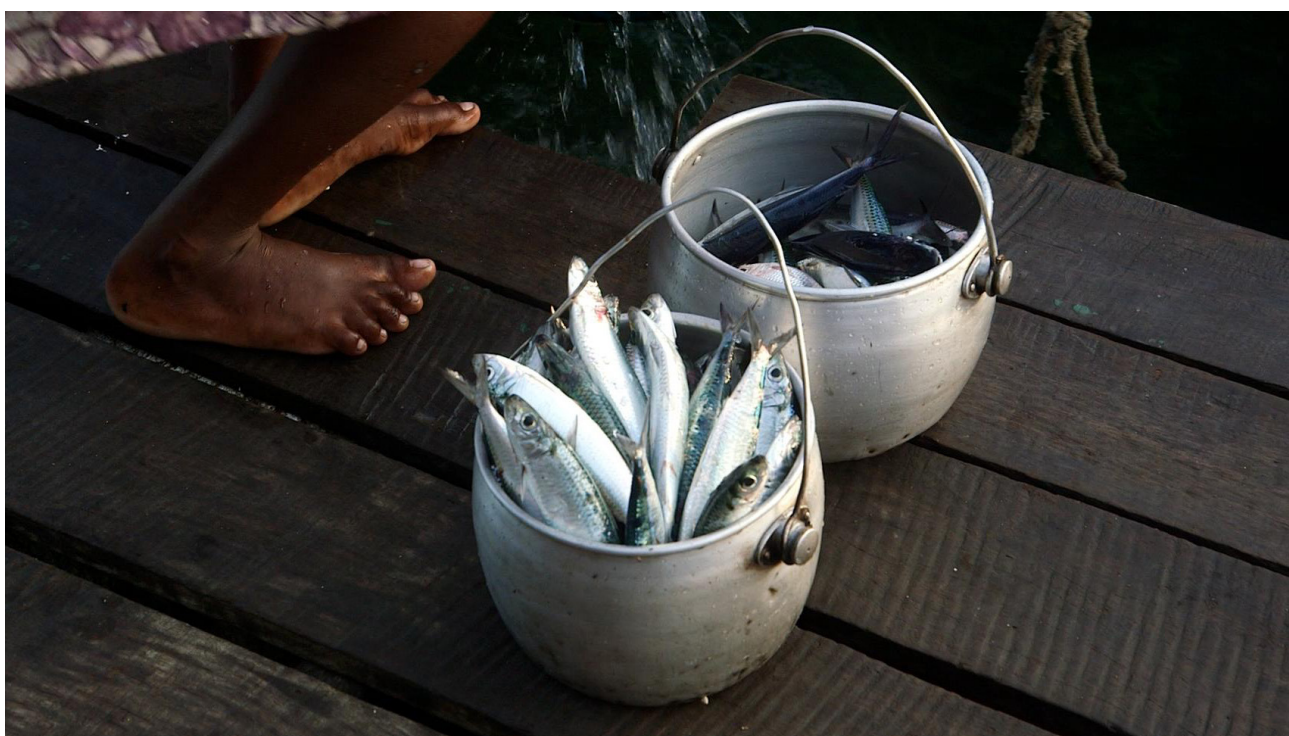
NUTRIENT COMPOSITION

There are large differences in the nutrient composition of aquatic foods commonly consumed, although nutrient composition data is available for only a small proportion of the thousands of aquatic foods available in the Pacific. Aquatic foods are an important source of quality protein and are rich in a variety of highly bioavailable micronutrients, of which several are of public health concern in the Pacific region. Small pelagic fishes, crabs and crayfish, and canned fish, for example, are good sources of calcium. Bivalves and gastropods, seaweed and small pelagic fishes are important sources of iron, while small pelagic fishes (consumed whole) provide more vitamin A

(106 mcg RAE/100 g) than most other aquatic groups. Differences in nutrients also exist within different types of canned fish available due to contrasting species as well as variation in ingredients such as oil, brine, salt, or tomato and the recipe of the final product. Aquatic foods can also contain high levels of sodium, particularly processed and canned fish.

NATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL CONSUMPTION

Dietary diversity on the whole remains low for many Pacific Islanders and there is substantial variation at village and household level in the overall diversity of foods consumed. In Solomon Island and Vanuatu, for people who report that they consume



Sardines (*Amblygaster* sp.) in pots, Solomon Islands. Wade Fairley.

¹ The phrase 'aquatic foods' is increasingly used in the international literature as an umbrella term to capture all animals and plants grown in, or wild-harvested from, fresh or marine water and used for food or feed.

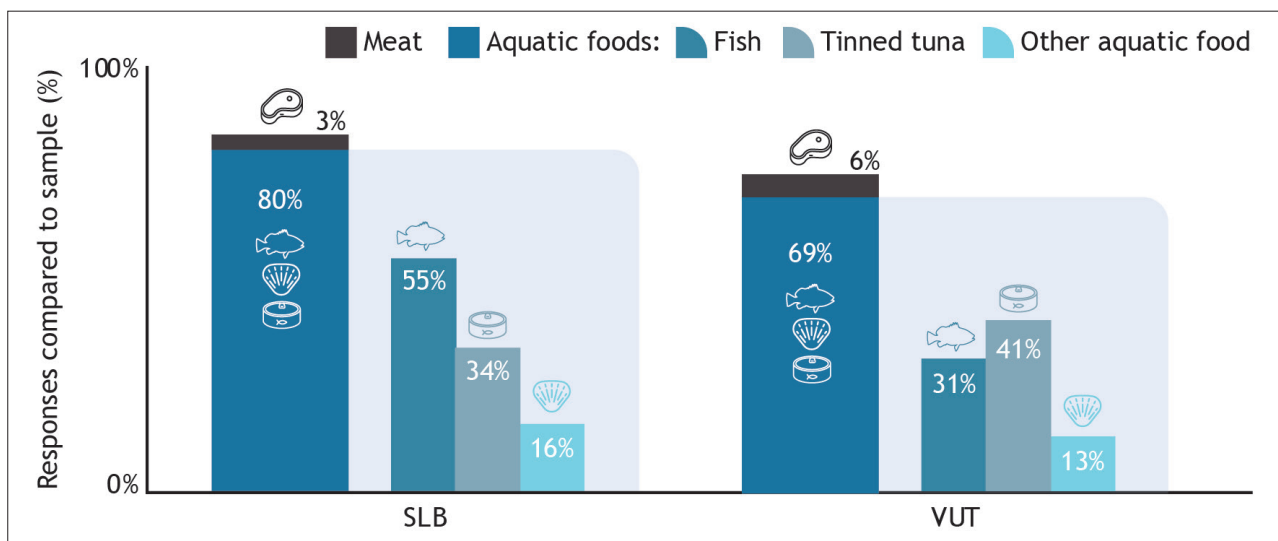


Figure 1. Women's dietary diversity in Solomon Islands (SLB) and Vanuatu (VUT). Frequency of consumption of aquatic foods and meat and proportion of aquatic foods.

meat, poultry, and fish, the vast majority of this consumption is from aquatic foods (Figure 1). The volume and type of aquatic foods consumed varies among countries, for example, shellfish account for over 15% of total consumption in Solomon Islands and 4% in Vanuatu. Consumption of aquatic foods also varies within countries, for example, variation can exist between rural and urban consumers and between communities, partially as a result of availability. In both Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, canned fish is consumed more by urban than rural consumers. Within Solomon Islands, shellfish account for 17% of rural aquatic food consumption and 7% of urban consumption. In Vanuatu, women report consuming canned fish more frequently than finfish and invertebrates, while women in Solomon Islands consume finfish more frequently than canned fish and invertebrates (Figure 1).

IMPORTS AND EXPORTS

The majority of aquatic foods consumed in PICTs are caught domestically, however, imports play an increasingly prominent role in Pacific Islander diets.

Canned mackerel, tuna, pilchards and sardines comprise the bulk of consumed canned fish. At the same time, large quantities of tuna are harvested from PICT waters and these represent a profound asset in terms of revenue, although in terms of food and nutrition security, the majority of this nutritional value is exported from the region.

THE FUTURE

While most Pacific Islanders consume large amounts of aquatic foods, this consumption is part of a diet that does not meet the recommended dietary diversity. More data are needed on the micronutrient content of locally relevant aquatic foods, as well as on whole diet composition at regional, national, household and individual levels, to improve public health, particularly in regions where aquatic food consumption is already high, yet overall dietary diversity remains low.

SOURCES

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ABOUT

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