

SMALL BOAT SEA SAFETY IN THE PACIFIC

The Pacific Islands region is composed almost entirely (98%) of ocean, and most of that is unprotected, open water. The majority of Pacific Island countries and territories include many — in some cases hundreds — of inhabited islands. Small boats (less than 12 m long) remain the primary means of transport between islands, and are also used extensively by Pacific Islanders for fishing. Such craft number in the thousands, with an estimated 4500 skiffs and canoes in just one country (Kiribati), and perhaps ten times that number in the region as a whole. Many of these boats are used in offshore waters, and often make lengthy journeys, yet crews are rarely trained in how to avoid or cope with accidents, breakdowns and sinking, and most carry little if any safety equipment. While no accurate count exists of the number of emergencies that occur, there are hundreds every year; the cost of search and rescue activities in the region is estimated at between USD 5 and 8 million. Some of the most dramatic incidents — involving drift voyages of thousands of kilometres — do make headlines, but mishaps are sufficiently common that most create barely a ripple in the public consciousness.

What steps need to be taken to change this situation and improve sea safety in the Pacific?

Although there are many aspects to the issue, in the Pacific sea safety remains very basic: the ability of a vessel to safely complete a trip and return to its home village, island or port. Over the last four decades UN agencies, regional

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organisations, donors and others have focussed on various aspects of this issue, at different times addressing boat design, boat construction, fisheries training and safety equipment.

A regional study of sea safety conducted by the FAO in 2003, concluded that most maritime casualties in the Pacific Islands region are associated with small fishing vessels; typically these boats are also used for inter-island transport. These craft are generally not covered by legislation, construction standards, and enforcement strategies, and their owners typically receive no training on their proper use. The study identified five areas that should receive priority attention in future efforts to address sea safety:

- building awareness among fishery managers that sea safety is a legitimate and important objective of fisheries management;
- focusing more attention on small fishing vessel safety;
- improving systems for recording and analysing sea

accident data and making use of the results;

- public awareness programmes on sea safety; and
- a regional sea safety workshop.

The last recommendation was realised through the joint FAO/SPC Regional Expert Consultation on Sea Safety in Small Fishing Vessels, held in Suva, Fiji, in February 2004. Participants included artisanal fishers, a legal specialist, boat builders, and personnel from government fisheries and maritime agencies. The experts addressed the issue of sea safety regulations, sea safety awareness programmes, how to improve the safety of the small fibreglass skiffs commonly used in the region, and how to enhance data collection of accidents at sea. They concluded that improved small boat safety would best be achieved by carrying out coordinated national strategies. Important elements of such strategies include generating political will at the national level, identifying individuals at the national level committed to sea safety, and increasing awareness of sea safety through training programmes and incorporation of sea safety issues into fisheries management. To help build a continuing dialogue on these and other sea safety issues, the experts recommended that SPC establish a sea safety special interest group, and publish an associated newslet-

Risks and dangers at sea

Typical problems faced by Pacific Islanders when fishing or travelling in small boats include bad weather (the danger is heightened when radio warnings about bad weather aren't available), a loss of power (most boats are outboard powered, and carry no spare engine or emergency sails), fires, poor boat construction or design, overloading of boats (and taking small boats offshore or on prolonged trips), a lack of communication or other safety equipment, and an absence of navigation skills and equipment (many boats lack even a compass).

ter. The experts' recommendations were endorsed by PICTs through the 2004 Heads of Fisheries meeting, as well as through the 2004 meeting of the Pacific Community's Committee of Representatives of Governments and Administrations.

The results of the Expert Consultation reinforced the outcomes of an earlier (1991) FAO study of sea safety in the Pacific, which found that professional mariners were almost unanimous in recommending increased public awareness through educational programmes and publicity as being the one means most likely to improve sea safety in the region. That finding has helped guide the work of SPC's Marine Resources Division in the area of sea safety since then, and the training and awareness materials produced by SPC over the past decade are believed to have been instrumental in building awareness of sea safety in the region. The 2004 FAO study recommended continuation of the current awareness programmes, but with a change in emphasis: more effort should be made to

build awareness in remote areas (where this may be the only practical mechanism for improving safety). In addition, SPC safety awareness tools should be viewed as a complement to national awareness efforts, not as a replacement.

Materials produced by SPC to date include posters, stickers, laminated check list cards, leaflets, videos, radio programmes, TV clips, workshop and course curricula, model sea safety management systems for boat operators, and (beginning in February 2005) a Sea Safety Special Interest Group Bulletin (SIG). More information on materials available from SPC,

and an online version of the Sea Safety SIG, is available at:

www.spc.int/coastfish/sections/training/index.html

Much remains to be done to enhance sea safety for small boats in the Pacific Islands. Political will to improve small-vessel safety is important, and requires that committed people are identified who can help develop long-term national strategies. Well-targeted assistance from international organisations will also be needed. In this context, SPC remains committed to assisting its members on the issue of sea safety.



International and regional regulations

While an extensive body of regulations have been developed to address safety issues aboard large ships, there are no international agreements or conventions that address boat construction, training and certification of crew, or required safety equipment for small (under 12 m) fishing vessels. Some voluntary guidelines exist for craft 12–24 m, but these are not applicable to the small scale or artisanal boats common in the Pacific.



Sea safety training programmes are one way to increase awareness of this issue