

How the COVID-19 crisis is affecting Pacific Island fisheries and aquaculture

The following article has been adapted from a transcript of an interview with Neville Smith, Director of the Pacific Community Fisheries Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems Division that took place on 20 March 2020. At that time, New Caledonia was under strict confinement, meaning that all Pacific Community (SPC) staff had to work from home.

The Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division of SPC deals with three different sectors in the Pacific Islands region, and the COVID-19 crisis is affecting each of these sectors differently.

The tuna sector consists of large, industrial tuna fisheries; the coastal fisheries sector, which is at a much smaller scale and operates at the community level, impacts many more people in the region; and the aquaculture sector, which is split into food production for local consumption and high-value aquaculture production for export.

The main impact on the tuna fisheries sector is the ability of people to move about and keep the fisheries going. For example, fisheries observers are unable to travel and embark on fishing vessels. In addition, many ports are currently closed. There are also people-related issues, such as the observers with families at home, and these observers need to be repatriated.

At the same time, countries must find ways to keep their fisheries operating because this sector is crucial for the region. The tuna industry is worth considerable income for countries, and with tourism currently shut down, it is critical that this money continues to flow into the region.

The impact on coastal fisheries is also important. With the shutdown of tourism and the related loss of work, many people move away from urban centres, from their jobs, and go back to their villages. This means that more people are active in subsistence and artisanal fishing, resulting in increased pressure on coastal resources, which were already under pressure. In the longer term, our challenge of ensuring the sustainability of coastal fisheries will be greater.

For the aquaculture sector, some of the key issues relate to people's movement and the transport of products, but this crisis also significantly increases the demand for food production in order to address food security issues.

What are the risks associated with this situation?

The reliance on tuna fisheries in the region is significant, particularly within SPC member countries that are Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA).¹ One result of the COVID-19 crisis could be a significant drop in the gross domestic product of PNA member countries.

Another key risk relating to tuna fisheries is the flow of information. With fisheries observers no longer on fishing vessels, there has been a change in the flow of data available to us for future fisheries management. This will not be a problem this year because the information we are using for the 2020 tuna fisheries assessment is based on data from 2019. For 2021 and beyond, however, it will potentially be an issue, depending on how long the disruption to fisheries lasts.

For the aquaculture sector, some of the immediate potential issues pertain to the supply of feed. For instance, how do we ensure that feed for tilapia production continues to flow into the region? This could become a significant issue because a lack of feed could lead to a decline in production from this sector. Moreover, it occurs in combination with a potential reduction in the availability of coastal fish, due to increased pressure on these resources. These two factors could contribute to exacerbating any potential humanitarian crisis in the region, with respect to access to food supplies, and that is a particular concern to us.

How SPC is helping to support these sectors

In the tuna sector, SPC continues to provide scientific and technical advice to the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), which works on the management of tuna fisheries in the region. Very regular meetings are held with FFA, and with its member countries across the Pacific, and this integral piece of work continues to happen at a fast pace.

¹ The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) is a subregional agreement on the coordination of management of tuna fishing in the exclusive economic zones of PNA members: Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

SPC is also in the midst of preparing the annual tuna fish stock assessments for 2020. The team continues to work remotely on these assessments, which will still be delivered on time, just as they would have been in a year without the COVID-19 crisis.

In addition, SPC is helping members meet their annual reporting requirements for tuna information, which they must provide to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. This is happening right now, with a two-day online workshop with members, using the online communications tool Zoom. This workshop is going very well, and there are over 70 participants.

In the coastal fisheries sector, SPC is focusing on re-scheduling work for later in the year, but is also trying to be innovative in how it does certain tasks: What training can we deliver online? What are the other tasks that we can complete right now? For instance, SPC is updating manuals on how to utilise fish aggregation devices in national fisheries, and developing new data collection apps that can be delivered electronically to fisheries staff to help them better assess the impacts of fishing, supported by online training videos.

In the aquaculture sector, SPC is actively working with countries to ensure there is a continuous flow of aquaculture feed coming into the region, and that this feed and hatchlings

can continue to move from areas outside the lockdown to areas under lockdown inside countries.

How SPC keeps the work going

In terms of keeping FAME working, one of the key priorities for us is communication. We have used online communications tools previously, but we have had to change our use of online tools, and in particular the frequency of our online meetings. That obviously creates some challenges for staff, including fatigue with too many meetings, and too much time staring at screens. SPC has also been improving its approaches to communicating through both formal and informal networks in the region to ensure we are aware of any new or changing developments, and to help disseminate information, especially where fisheries officers are also in lockdown.

The FAME team has had to become quite inventive in order to smoothly handle the transition from working in the office or in the field to working online. It takes quite a bit of energy, and an important task for the FAME leadership team has been to make sure people's energy levels remain high, that staff stay motivated and focused on the work so that SPC can continue delivering services to its member countries and territories.

During the COVID-19 crisis, many seafood markets had to limit vendors selling at the market or close during lockdowns. Ongoing curfews are also limiting the ability of some fishers to travel into and sell at major market centres; Suva market, Fiji. (image: Sangeeta Mangubhai, WCS)

