

RTMCF3: Working with people in support of sustainable coastal fisheries and aquaculture



Noro, Solomon Islands (image: Francisco Blaha)

The Third Regional Technical Meeting on Coastal Fisheries (RTMCF3) was held at the Pacific Community (SPC) headquarters in Noumea from 5 to 8 November 2019. Continuing the momentum generated at the first two meetings, RTMCF3 brought together over 60 technical fisheries and aquaculture officers from 20 Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs) to address some of the main challenges and opportunities relating to coastal fisheries and aquaculture in the Pacific.

RTMCF is a highly valuable opportunity for members to engage in technical discussions and share knowledge and expertise on coastal fisheries issues and success stories. RTMCF3 is the first phase of the new and still evolving governance framework, and participants were asked to identify, discuss and agree on clear priority coastal fisheries and aquaculture technical and scientific issues and opportunities. These outcomes and key decisions will be submitted to the 12th Heads of Fisheries (HoF12) meeting in March 2020 for consideration and action and, where required, forwarded to the Regional Fisheries Ministers' Meeting and if necessary, to Forum Leaders.

The agenda and themes for RTMCF3 were developed in consultation with SPC members and partners, with specific priority topics this year having been selected through an online survey of SPC members:

- Science: new technologies, e-data processes and systems;
- Aquaculture: implementation of the Regional Action Plan on Aquatic Biosecurity; and
- Community-based fisheries: scaling-up community-based fisheries management.

Following up on specific actions and initiatives from previous RTMCF meetings, SPC reported on the progress made on implementing earlier RTMCF Action Plans, focusing on recent advances on coastal fisheries and aquaculture data collection and management, including ongoing initiatives on data storage, data dissemination and sharing, and overall

data governance. While efforts are underway to simplify data collection in certain Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs), there is a strong desire to establish a regional process to develop minimum requirements, standards and protocols for data collection. A new action was formulated for SPC to establish this process and for the Heads of Fisheries to identify the development and implementation of this as a priority for funding.

SPC presented the European Union-funded Regional Project for Sustainable Ecosystem Management (PROTEGE). The project is aimed at strengthening regional cooperation for European Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) in four areas: sustainable livestock activities, community-based fisheries management (CBFM), sustainable fishery and aquaculture products, and cooperation platforms. Introducing new actions for this year, participants welcomed the possibility of organising technical exchanges between OCTs and other PICTs under PROTEGE and the Pacific European Union Marine Partnership (PEUMP) project. SPC PROTEGE and SPC's Fisheries Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division will examine opportunities to initiate such exchanges.

Coastal fisheries report card and indicators

The Coastal Fisheries Report Card¹ provides annual high-level reporting on the current status of Pacific coastal fisheries in relation to the goals, indicators and strategies adopted in the Regional Roadmap². The Coastal Fisheries

¹ <https://fame1.spc.int/en/publications/roadmap-a-report-cards>

² The Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Fisheries, endorsed in 2015 by the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, set seven clear goals for oceanic and coastal fisheries for the following ten years, as well as indicators that can be used to measure progress.

Report Card, which was initiated in 2015, provides a snapshot to enable fisheries stakeholders and political leaders to monitor progress on implementing the Roadmap. Key improvements in the preparation of the Coastal Fisheries Report Cards for 2018 and 2019 were highlighted during the meeting while acknowledging the existing gaps that need to be addressed. The RTMCF also agreed to confirm the Coastal Fisheries Report Card focal points to ensure all PICTs are covered.

The meeting agreed on the template approach to progress and support national level Coastal Fisheries Report Cards as a system for measuring progress of coastal fisheries management. A draft national Coastal Fisheries Report Card template will be circulated to members for their feedback via the Coastal Fisheries Report Card focal points and RTMCF3 member representatives. SPC will then present a finalised national Coastal Fisheries Report Card template to HoF12 in March 2020 for their input and endorsement.

Innovative technologies to support management

Sharing successful new initiatives to support the management of coastal fisheries and aquaculture is a key feature of this meeting. Members have the opportunity to present informative, new or innovative technical initiatives and technologies for the benefit of others, and this is clearly appreciated. The presentations are available on the FAME meeting webpage³ and include:

- the implications of Samoa's new trochus fishery for other PICTs;
- updates on CITES and sea cucumbers;
- Aquanetix, the application of online software for farm data collection in Vanuatu;
- the 4FJ and Set Size campaigns in Fiji;
- the development of animated videos and short training movies for awareness raising; and
- the efforts towards sustainability of the demersal line fishery in Tonga.

REEFLEX

Raising awareness about the various fisheries rules is essential to effective management, and SPC has developed a new legal research tool to assist decision-makers, fisheries managers, specialists and researchers, as well as civil society. The REEFLEX web application (access link on the SPC FAME webpage)⁴ comprises three tools that allow the user to access laws and policies, and compare

legislation for coastal fisheries and aquaculture in Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs). This is much more than just a database: it allows the user to compare, analyse and understand coastal fisheries and aquaculture governance frameworks for each PICT. As with all such tools, user feedback and collaboration is necessary to fine-tune it as it evolves. SPC and members agreed to identify effective ways to include additional subnational legislation and management plans in the REEFLEX database, in collaboration with national legal officers.

Focused sessions on priority topics

Gathering regional technical fisheries and aquaculture experts together provides the ideal platform to tackle some of the existing challenges in this arena. During facilitated breakout groups, members collaborated to define next steps and potential solutions to the main issues and questions under the three topics of science, aquaculture and community-based fisheries. The resulting actions they identified are available in the "Outcomes" document, which has been published on FAME's meeting webpage.²

Science – New technologies, e-data processes and systems

Coastal fisheries generally does not have the same profile as offshore fisheries among PICTs as a contributor toward national GDP, despite the vital importance of coastal fisheries for community food security across the Pacific. Consequently, coastal fisheries data collection is poorly resourced, and there is less management capacity in coastal fisheries than in the oceanic fisheries sector. Fisheries data are essential to underpin the sustainable management of coastal fisheries and aquaculture, yet the region lacks long-term quality datasets for coastal fisheries. Further simplifying existing processes, as set out in RTMCF1 and RTMCF2, will assist in obtaining improved quality data for stock assessments leading to improved fisheries management. The challenge is to ensure that coastal fisheries data collection is standardised and distilled down to the most user-friendly level, while also maintaining data quality for informed fisheries management.

Presenting an overview of the evolution of fisheries data collection, SPC highlighted the progress made since the previous RTMCF meetings and emphasised the need for user feedback on the practicality of these approaches. SPC will continue working with PICTs to establish e-data collection systems that can accommodate the various fisheries data types and surveys, including the use of e-data systems to improve efficiency and robustness of data collection and dissemination and migrating existing coastal fisheries data into the new e-data systems. Meanwhile, in order for monitoring programmes to

³ <https://fame1.spc.int/en/meetings/248>

⁴ <http://www.spc.int/CoastalFisheries/Legislation/main>

be sustainable and comparable, it is important that a regional approach to standardised minimum data requirements (e.g. size, weight and reproductive data) is endorsed by the Heads of Fisheries and designated as a priority.

Ensuring community buy-in is crucial and requires training and awareness-raising activities. To this end, SPC will work with countries to inform local communities of the context and importance for fisheries monitoring tools and to increase community involvement in data collection. Existing e-data apps can be used for community-based reporting alongside the development of associated training for communities to implement community monitoring.

Chronic understaffing was identified as an ongoing challenge, along with the necessity to develop technical capacities of existing staff. The “brain drain” that many PICTs experience, combined with a lack of succession planning, severely affects the continuity of monitoring programmes. Added to this is the pressing need for clear and delineated roles for fisheries staff (e.g. separating compliance from science roles). These issues are related to short-term funding arrangements and it is, therefore, important to consider ways to build longevity in funding programmes, through government and donors, for coastal fisheries science and management. This will be raised at the Heads of Fisheries meeting in 2020.

Aquaculture – Implementation of the regional action plan on aquatic biosecurity

Aquatic biosecurity is the key to improving fish production. It aims at maintaining healthy aquatic organisms, reducing the risks posed by pathogens and invasive species, and meeting food safety standards in seafood products. Attention to aquatic biosecurity improves animal production, safeguards human health, and assists PICTs with meeting their international obligations in terms of trade and access to markets (e.g. New Caledonia is approved for export of uncooked prawns to Australia).

Achieving these goals requires political commitment by governments and administrations to the core values of biosecurity. Several different statutory arrangements are in place among PICTs in terms of the allocation of powers and responsibilities among agencies. Government agencies that work in isolation and do not share information, fragmented legislation, and unclear responsibilities can hinder progress in aquatic biosecurity. Members endorsed the draft Regional Action Plan on Aquatic Biosecurity, which was presented by SPC, and this will be presented to the Heads of Fisheries for their endorsement.

Members requested SPC to provide technical assistance, resources and capacity building in aquatic biosecurity planning, implementation and development of protocols. They also advocated sharing national aquatic biosecurity strategies, legislation, policies and plans between PICT governments and administrations, which would be highly beneficial to capture the benefits of effective biosecurity at the national level. Technical assistance and capacity building in aquatic biosecurity in the region should also include actions in support of improved food safety, such as in ciguatera outbreaks, seafood poisoning, and zoonosis from seafood-borne pathogens.

Community-based fisheries – Scaling-up community-based fisheries management

Community-based fisheries management (CBFM) is being implemented in PICTs in line with the ‘New Song for Coastal Fisheries’⁵, but faces several barriers to scaling up. Currently, it is estimated that 90% of coastal communities in the Pacific Islands region do not have CBFM regimes, despite many PICT governments and administrations having policies in support of CBFM. CBFM is important for food security and livelihoods, especially in the context of increasing human populations across the Pacific, which are dispersed over fragmented geographies. There are many partner agencies and organisations in the region that support CBFM efforts.

A number of local communities in PICTs have made great strides in establishing CBFM, including the adoption of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management. While these initiatives continue to progress, there is still room for improvement. This session dedicated to CBFM involved sharing experiences, what has and has not worked, success stories and lessons learned, with sustainably implementing and scaling-up of CBFM to ensure a wider impact of the CBFM approaches.

A number of actions were proposed (which are detailed in the Outcomes and Agreed Action Plan document, available on the meeting webpage²). Members agreed that there needs to be greater support for CBFM in terms of development,



⁵ <http://coastfish.spc.int/en/component/content/article/49-other-documents/461-a-new-song-for-coastal-fisheries.html>



implementation and resourcing. In particular, there is a call for all members, SPC and partners to prioritise a collaborative, coordinated, gender-sensitive and holistic multi-stakeholder approach to CBFM with clear identification of the roles of those involved. It is also vital to recognise that where management strategies lead to catch restrictions, alternative livelihoods for communities will need to be addressed within the programme. A review of CBFM experiences in the Pacific will be led by SPC, focusing on lessons learned and identifying effective approaches in the region.

Priority, new and emerging coastal fisheries and aquaculture issues and opportunities

A presentation by Southern Cross University canvassed a new regional project proposal being developed on 'a new era for sea cucumber fisheries'. In close partnership with SPC and other organisations, the project would comprise a regional symposium to assemble recent lessons learned from sea cucumber fisheries; individual support to PICTs on technical capacity in management, awareness tools and monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement; and monitoring of fisheries performance and a new and modified management regime. The meeting supported the proposal concept to be developed jointly with selected PICTs and requested SPC to provide an updated report to HoF12 on sea cucumber fisheries management and monitoring.

Following this, participants engaged in small group discussions to identify priority, new and/or emerging issues and opportunities in coastal fisheries and aquaculture in the region that are in addition to the topics covered in RTMCF. Priority issues identified for coastal fisheries included: livelihoods (fish and non-fish based); increasing political will; coastal fisheries legislation and management; and external

environmental pressures (climate change, coral bleaching and micro-plastics). Priority issues identified for aquaculture included: exploring new species; post-harvest value adding; feed and technology and equipment development; improving the enabling environment (legislation and capacity); and sea ranching. This information will be used to inform SPC and the next RTMCF agenda.

Workshop on coastal fisheries and aquaculture monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement

After RTMCF3, a one-day workshop was held on monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement (MCS&E). Coastal fisheries and aquaculture are vital to the livelihoods of many small Pacific Island countries and territories, as well as providing a major source of animal protein. Off-shore fisheries MCS&E is often given higher priority due to the significant financial gains from access fees and fines for infringements and, consequently, benefits from more resources to ensure compliance. By contrast, coastal fisheries provide far more employment than offshore fisheries at a national level, but they need to compete for a limited amount of national resources and often, education, public health and infrastructure take priority. The first challenge faced in the development and implementation of an effective coastal fisheries MCS&E strategy is how to prioritise and raise the profile of these fisheries.

Case studies from New Zealand, Kiribati and other Pacific Islands highlighted the necessity to control illegal activity at the initial stage to prevent it becoming a large-scale problem. Recognising the significance of these crimes also encourages a compliance culture within the community. Some countries

also gave presentations on positive experiences in coastal fisheries and aquaculture surveillance and enforcement.

Evidence gathering and correct documentation are fundamental to any successful law enforcement. It is crucial to get the basic details right before confronting larger-scale infringements. As a way of assisting fisheries officers with doing this, a simplified approach to enforcement for coastal fisheries and aquaculture infringements was proposed for members to discuss. The approach includes a number of actions such as awareness raising and education, ongoing training of authorised officers, adoption of a step-by-step incident interview book for inspections, and the use of administrative penalties, such as warnings or spot fines, as well as a database to record coastal fisheries and aquaculture enforcement data and information that could reveal trends in offences over time. Ultimately, it is vital for fishers and enforcement officers to understand the national coastal fisheries and aquaculture legislation and regulations in order to promote compliance.

Feedback

Delegates were asked to rate aspects of the meeting, including the content, organisation and opportunities for feedback. In brief, the majority of delegates rated the meeting content good or excellent (96%), and highly rated the

relevance of the meeting for their work (also 96% good or excellent). Participants appreciated the chance to share experiences with people from other PICTs, with 96% agreeing that members were encouraged to share their experiences, with suggested improvements also calling for more opportunities to share success stories. Participants were positive about group work, with 88% rating this as good or excellent. And although more time was allocated this year to group discussions, some members still felt that this was not sufficient and that future meetings could be more focused on group work. Some members commented on the formality of the meeting and requested that future meetings be more informal. Encouragingly, 92% felt that they had gained new knowledge from the meeting. The detailed feedback report will soon be available on the RTMCF3 meeting page and used to improve the format and content of next year's meeting.

The next RTMCF meeting will be held in late October or early November 2020 in Noumea, New Caledonia.

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