

COMMUNITY-BASED FISHERIES MANAGEMENT PLANS FOR TOKELAU

Fishing is an integral part of the lives of Tokelauan people and is an activity pursued almost daily by men. While most women do not fish regularly as in other Pacific islands, they do take part in all post harvest activities. Fishing has been and continues to be part of Tokelauan cultural heritage and is important for subsistence consumption and, to a certain degree, in the exchange system between relatives living in Samoa and New Zealand. Any changes within the fisheries sector will certainly affect people's lives.

A community-based management approach to fisheries depends significantly on traditional institutions and the implementation of socially acceptable laws and regulations to monitor resource use. In

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Tokelau, a strong traditional institution and resource use ethic, and a participatory approach to management already exist.

In Tokelau, the *lafu* system — where reefs, lagoons or general fishing areas are tabu for certain lengths of time — has existed for generations and has ensured continued resource use and sustainable harvest mechanisms. As in other parts of the Pacific these tabus were, in most cases, implemented to ensure continued food supply and to protect fishing areas. Resource management is therefore not a new concept to the Tokelauan people. The

village mayor, or *Pulenuku*, has the task of overseeing village activities

and is also responsible for the enforcement of resource use mechanisms. Continued respect for traditional institutions in Tokelau has ensured the survival of such traditional management mechanisms, despite changes to fishing practices in the past few decades.

In March 2004, SPC's Coastal Fisheries Management Section and the Samoa Fisheries Department assisted Tokelau¹ in developing community-based fisheries management plans for each of the three atolls: Nukunonu, Fakaofu and Atafu. The implementation and success of these plans will depend significantly on the Tokelauan people and how committed they are to following through with proposals they made in the management plans, which are written in the Tokelauan language. Throughout community consultations, it was stressed that the plans belonged to the people and it was up to them to implement them, and that the SPC and the Samoa Fisheries Department officers were merely facilitators of the process. The *Faipule* (chiefs) of each island were very optimistic about the success of the plans and did not foresee any immediate problems at the



The reserve or lafu area in Fakaofu. There are no markers but people are familiar with tabu areas, as the boundaries are the islets, the divide between the oceanic and lagoon sides of the islands and reefs. Reefs close to the islands at the far side of this photo are where people can fish. The tabu also covers a part of the oceanic side of the lagoon



Rubbish disposal, as in the above photo, was a problem common to all the islands

¹ SPC's Coastal Fisheries Management Officer acknowledges the assistance of: Samoa Fisheries Officers Etuati Ropeti, Ulia Keleoli and Tanielu Talavou; and two representatives from each of the three atolls: Katieli Peleti and Telesoni Mika from Fakaofu, Peni Teaku and Ropati Toma from Atafu and Peter Alesana and Hehilia Lemisio from Nukunonu.

implementation stage, as these plans were simply modern versions of their traditional management systems.

According to Pio Tuia, the *Faipule* of Nukunonu, "We already have traditional management systems that were practised by our forefathers; only now we have a proper written plan, which we can check what we have achieved against. We also need this plan now as resources are not in the state they used to be before, so this plan is timely for us." Community-based fisheries management maximises traditional institutions, beliefs, skills and knowledge, and norms, making it easy for people to more readily accept and understand what the plans entail.

During the development of the fisheries management plans, three Samoa fisheries officers worked with a Tokelauan counterpart for several weeks on each atoll, participating in meetings, discussions and interviews. Meetings targeted the major political and community groups in the villages, including the *Taupulega* (council of elders), *Aumanga* (men's group), *Fatupaepae* (women's group) and the youth groups. Because the

Tokelauan people understand the Samoan language, there was no need for translations, which greatly facilitated interactions during these meetings. At the end of three weeks, the draft management plans were presented to the entire village on each atoll for comments and endorsement.

Also occurring at the time the community-based management plans were being developed, were discussions on a National Inshore Fisheries Management Plan for Tokelau². Discussions focused on the need for a national vision for the future of Tokelau's inshore resources, and what the *Taupulega* and people see as the future of their fisheries. This also included looking at the current structure of the Tokelau Fisheries Department and determining if there was a need for additional fisheries officers. Transportation difficulties and the distance between each atoll make it very difficult for a single officer, as is the current situations, to implement and monitor projects and fisheries development in the three atolls.

During discussions about the National Inshore Fisheries Management Plan, there was considerable interest shown in aquaculture, sea safety, and the development of fisheries

in general. Field surveys were made of areas that were currently designated as reserves.

Amidst all the work being done in the fisheries sector in Tokelau, the atolls are also undergoing changes to their governance systems. While the team was in Atafu, the first meeting of the Council for the of on-going Government of Tokelau was held. This council, a larger forum that includes the *Pulenuku*, *Faipule* and advisers, has replaced the previous Council of *Faipule* (chiefs). This council will now be the body that makes decisions for the country when the General *Fono* (parliament) is not in session. In addition to these changes, the *Taupulega*, as of July 2004, will have more statutory powers and will have the public service in their respective islands under their jurisdiction. Thus, the work on the community-based fisheries management plans and other developments at the island level will depend significantly on the *Taupulega* and the traditional authorities.

On Atafu, there was also a meeting of the *Fatupaepae* from the three atolls. This meeting — which had been reconvened after 15 years — was useful as SPC's Coastal Fisheries Officer and the three Samoan fisheries officers were able to discuss the intended projects on Tokelau with the women of *Fatupaepae* before they went back to their villages.



Left: Women in Atafu preparing food for the meetings
Middle and right: Tanielu Talavou and the Tokelau counterparts Peni and Ropati conducting survey work in the reserve areas in Atafu

² The community-based fisheries management plans for each atoll fall under the overall National Inshore Fisheries Management Plan for the country.

After the meetings on each atoll with different community groups, various committees were selected to collate information gathered from discussions, which would then be presented back to the people at a later meeting. People on all three atolls described what in their view contributed to resource depletion.

On Atafu, these problems included net size restrictions not being strictly enforced, the effect of petrol from boats on the marine environment, rubbish disposal and a lack of proper dumping areas, lack of awareness of rules relating to fisheries resources, and overharvesting. A declining clam population was a concern, also raised on the other two atolls. Over-harvesting appears to occur for two main reasons: 1) clams, coconut crabs and certain fish are sent overseas to relatives in Samoa or New Zealand; 2) fishing is

sometimes viewed as a game or sport, and becomes more a test of skills rather than a need to procure fish for consumption. Wastage is very common, with large amounts of fish thrown away almost daily, and some people fishing primarily to feed their pigs. Fish are plentiful in Tokelau and even very young children catch fish around the village boundary, so the problem of declining resources is not a reality to most of the people.

Village elders, however, recall larger populations in the past of certain fish species, clams and coconut crabs. Most of the solutions proposed by people were activities they themselves could do, as well as to support all of these, were suggestions for additions to existing by-laws to include specific fisheries regulations.

Most of the problems that were identified in Atafu were also raised in Fakaofu, including over-

harvesting, rubbish disposal, petrol spills, small mesh sizes, and a lack of awareness of existing rules and regulations. In addition, Fakaofu people were concerned about fish poisoning; the wreck of the *Ai Sokula* on a nearby fishing reef, was identified as a likely contributing factor.

On Nukunonu, highlighted problems were nearly the same, and more in-depth surveys, training and awareness work were identified as urgently needed. Village meetings were held with specific groups, including the *Taupulega*, *Aumanga* and the *Fatupaeapae*. Nukunonu's reserve area has many clams and there are signs of regeneration. Tabus are well respected on Nukunonu and people do not fish in areas declared tabu.

Most of the problems identified in the community fisheries management plans were common to all three atolls. With more than 5000 Tokelauans living abroad in New Zealand and only 1500 at home, the pool of qualified and specialised persons with fisheries development or management expertise is very limited. Thus, training is needed for community representatives and people living in Tokelau, to look after the resources themselves.

The community fisheries management plans are to be finalised and presented to the General Fono in June of this year.



The Village Management Committee in Fakaofu

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