

Breaking the boom-and-bust cycle *Sea cucumber a lucrative trade?*

The Pacific Islands are facing what could be the end of their longest surviving commercial export fishery. Sea cucumber and beche-de-mer (its processed form) is a source of livelihood for many communities but it is being overfished as a result of continuous fishing and lack of effective management by authorities. Communities are now feeling the pain of losing an important income source.

In the Solomon Islands' atoll of Ontong Java, 30 years of continuous fishing has brought the sea cucumber fishery to collapse. With few other sources of cash, people are now enduring hardship.

Beche-de-mer is a luxury food in China where it is called *hai sen* and said to have medicinal and aphrodisiac qualities. High demand for the product has provided a lucrative trade for small businesses throughout the Pacific.

In fact, the importance of sea cucumber as a commercial fishery is often unrecognised. In Fiji, Solomon Islands and New Caledonia for example, the value of sea cucumber exports is equal to around 19 to 32% of the value of tuna catches in their exclusive economic zones.

But years of intensive fishing and ineffective enforcement of management measures have depleted the region's resources. The results of a study of the state of coastal fisheries, carried out by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) from 2002 to 2009, are clear — sea cucumber stocks in the Pacific Islands are largely overfished.

While locally managed marine protected areas (MPAs) are helping to protect some breeding populations, the study, which was funded by the European Union, reveals that these managed areas are being increasingly targeted by fishers from within the community.

While subsistence fisheries are often best managed by communities under traditional practices, the sea cucumber fishery is clearly a commercial fishery that requires other management approaches.

History of boom and bust

As long ago as the late 1700s, Pacific Islanders were harvesting, processing and selling sea cucumbers to visiting merchant ships.

A boom-and-bust cycle has long characterised the fishery's history. The most recent boom occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when an increase in demand saw high production and exports.

For this fragile resource, periods of high production cannot last and are rapidly followed by busts when stocks

are so overexploited that the fishery remains dormant while it recovers, often for extended periods.

Today, sea cucumber fisheries in many islands are closed after being overfished. As traders seek to exploit the last remaining stocks, new fisheries are opening up in remote Pacific Island locations, but these opportunities are now rare.

French Polynesia and Cook Islands, where sea cucumber fishing was once unheard of, are now moving into the trade. Export production in French Polynesia has risen from 3 tonnes in 2008 to 125 tonnes in 2011.

The trend is no different for subsistence fishers — they too are finding it hard to get a good catch of sea cucumber to eat or sell at the local market.

What can be done?

Sea cucumber is a commercial fishery best managed under national government control. Countries that have taken the bold move of closing their fisheries are now on the right track.

The next challenge is making sure the closure is effectively enforced. But many countries do not have good management policies. Papua New Guinea and Tonga are exceptions with fishery management plans that have been successfully implemented.

With EU funding, SPC's Coastal Fisheries Section is assisting Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to develop national sea cucumber fisheries management plans.

These plans include limiting the number of export licenses, separating export licenses from processing licenses to make monitoring more efficient, enforcing permanent moratoriums and short fishing periods, protecting the rights of local citizens in the allocation of licenses, and providing assistance in improving the quality and price of beche-de-mer products.

SPC is also promoting improvements in resource monitoring through standardising assessment methods. Being able to compare assessments will enable resource managers to share experiences and advice.

Sea cucumber ranching is working in China for a temperate species (*Apostichopus japonicus*) but has yet to succeed for tropical species in the Pacific Islands. Although research is being undertaken, no one has made money from releasing hatchery-raised baby sea cucumbers in the wild.

Therefore the promises of huge profits from farming sea cucumber being promoted by some traders must be taken with a large grain of salt, if not regarded as false.

In some countries, communities have been victimised when such promises have allowed private companies to gain licenses to harvest and export existing wild stocks, resulting in overfishing.

Learning from Tongan experience

The good news is that the region's longest surviving commercial fishery can bounce back strongly if we learn from Tonga's experience.

Tonga closed its sea cucumber fishery in 1997. Eleven years later, it began reaping the benefits — 690 tonnes of beche-de-mer were exported in 2009 and 2010, generating some TOP 12 million (USD 7 million) annually for the local economy — an all-time record for a non-fish fishery export commodity in Tonga.

Tonga's results show that resting a fishery for an extended period is an investment, not a loss. And enforcing good management measures during an open season can bring in substantial revenue and employment.

These results should also reassure the people of Ontong Java in Solomon Islands that by respecting the current ban on harvesting sea cucumber, they can help their fishery recover and, with good management, provide benefits for years to come.

Source: Islands Business Magazine, August 2012.

US and Pacific Islands sign USD 630 Million Tuna Treaty

The United States has announced it has reached an agreement on a financial package with Pacific Island countries that are Parties to the Tuna Treaty. A statement from its Embassy in Suva today said the significant package “exceeds the benchmarks articulated by Pacific Islands Leaders.”

Key issues pushed by Pacific Island countries in the negotiations were the fishing opportunities afforded to the U.S. purse-seine fleet in waters under the jurisdiction of the Pacific Island Parties and the overall financial package. On June 22, at the most recent negotiations in New Zealand, the United States and the Pacific Island Parties reached agreement on this critical issue, said the U.S. Embassy statement. The U.S. has now agreed to provide USD 63 million annually to the Pacific Island Parties over the next 10 years, for a total of USD 630 million.

In addition, the U.S. will provide a payment per vessel day that is more than 50 per cent higher than the USD 5000 per day regional benchmark price established by the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA). The U.S. will also pay a 17 per cent return on the value of the fish caught by U.S. vessels licensed under the Treaty under current conditions, which it says exceeds the 10 per cent average rate of return desired by Pacific Island Leaders.

It will also pay fair compensation for fishing opportunities in the waters under the jurisdiction of non-PNA States. “This agreement on the overall financial package is a significant advancement in the negotiations, and creates a strong foundation on which the United States and our Pacific Island partners can continue to build a prosperous and sustainable future for the peoples of the Pacific region.”

“The United States looks forward to working with the Pacific Island Parties to address remaining technical issues and to reaching an early agreement to extend the Treaty,” said the U.S. statement. Since 1988, the United States' tuna purse-seine fleet has operated in the Western and Central Pacific under the terms of a Treaty with 16 independent States of the Pacific Forum. This mutually beneficial Treaty arrangement has provided unique access to Pacific fisheries for the U.S. tuna fleet and has served as a vehicle for the Pacific Island Parties to receive hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues, U.S. Government economic development funding and assistance with sustainable fisheries management and combating illegal fishing.

The United States is working closely with the Pacific Island Parties to negotiate an extension of this important Treaty beyond the current period, ending in June 2013.

Source: Atuna website (<http://pna.atuna.com/View-Article.asp?ID=11402>).