

Fafa Island, a very special management area

In December 2013, the declaration of Fafa Island Resort and reef as a Special Management Area (SMA)¹ marked two landmarks in Tongan fisheries legislation: first, Fafa became the first non-community island to be declared an SMA; and second, Fafa became the first SMA island declared as a total fish habitat reserve (FHR) in Tonga. At the official opening held on the Island on 4 February 2014, the Honourable Minister of Agriculture and Food, Forests and Fisheries (MAFFF), Sangster Saulala, said in his address that this marked an historic day in Tonga.

Fafa Island Resort is 7 km north of Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital. Established in 1983, it is one of Tonga's premier ecotourism destinations. The 18-acre island has 13 traditional built *fales* for guests, and is serviced by approximately 30 staff, many of who live on the island.

Local authorities were first approached in 2010 by the island's owner, Rainer Urtel, with concerns about the decrease in marine life and the dubious "fishing" methods carried out by some individuals around the island — the use of crowbars and hammers as aids to extract sea cucumbers, lobsters or octopus from the reef was common practice.

Both the Department of Environment and Department of Fisheries were consulted to compare the respective pros and cons of SMAs placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Fisheries, and marine protected areas (MPAs) placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Environment. SMAs are monitored and maintained by the island communities they have been granted to. Each island SMA committee, established when an SMA is put in place, is also empowered to enforce compliance within the SMA. For MPAs, compliance can only be carried out by Department of Environment officers. It was,

therefore, decided that an SMA would be better suited to Fafa if it were made possible for a non-community island to be granted one.

An SMA that would be a total FHR also seemed important for both the Department of Fisheries and Fafa Island Resort operators. Previously, SMAs granted to community islands allowed fishing activities to be controlled by the island SMA committees, usually with only a small part of the SMA declared an FHR.

Establishing a total FHR at Fafa would make enforcement much easier for authorized officers because it is always easier to ensure that no fishing takes place, rather than control the type of fishing that takes place, gear used, catch size, and the size of individual specimens caught. A total FHR would also provide the Fisheries Department with a relatively wide and well-protected area for their comparative marine life abundance studies or experimental aquaculture operations.

Additionally, as an ecotourism resort with many returning international guests, it was important to provide guests with a lively and colourful coral reef environment around the small island.



Opening ceremony of the Fafa Island Special Management Area.

¹ According to Namu Gillett (2009): [In Tonga] an SMA grants a community management control of its inshore resources; in effect, providing a community with the basic tools and skills for better management initiatives. The main objectives of a management plan are to 1) enforce the authority to exclude outsiders from entering an SMA, 2) establish marine parks, and 3) implement restrictions on harvested resources, including, size limits and catch amounts. See: http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/InfoBull/FishNews/130/FishNews130_27_GillettM.pdf

NEWS FROM IN AND AROUND THE REGION

At the official opening of the SMA, the Minister for Commerce, Tourism and Labour, Dr Viliami Latu, expressed the importance for the various ministries to support ecotourism in Tonga — tourism, fisheries and agriculture being the mainstays of the country's economy. For resort operators, the ability to "sell" Fafa Resort as being set in a marine reserve would be a real marketing advantage. Conservation has become a very topical subject; the support for this initiative received from the Tongan government should be highly appreciated by the resort's guests.

A baseline survey was carried out in February 2013 by a team of divers over a four-day period. The resulting data raised concerns about an extensive build-up of algae on the reef, due to the lack of algae-eating fish, was killing corals; no fish over 30 cm in length and no commercial invertebrate (e.g. trochus, sea cucumbers, octopus or lobsters) could be found. It was clear that the reef was being overfished and action needed to be taken to protect it.

Over the following months, consultation meetings were held at the Department of Fisheries, after being advertised on radio and in the press, and local people were encouraged to participate and express their views and concerns.

The benefits of an SMA/FHR so close to Tonga's capital, which has experienced a decline in fish stocks, was promoted, with forecasts provided of improved fish stocks in a 5–10 km area around the SMA.

A management plan was drawn up and submitted to the Fisheries Management Advisory Committee (FMAC) and then submitted to the Honourable Minister for the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Forests and Fisheries (MAFFF), Mr Sangster Saulala, for approval. The boundaries of the SMA were defined, and the area enclosed, totalling 485 hectares. The SMA was gazetted in Crown Law, along with the management plan.

The Tongan government declared Fafa Island and reefs an SMA on 4 December 2013, under the Fisheries Management Act 2002.



The island's SMA committee and rangers have been empowered to stop, board and search any vessel if they believe an offence has been committed within the SMA. In serious cases, those caught can be taken to court and may face penalties up to TOP 50,000 (± USD 25,000). After nearly one year of operating the SMA, only a handful of incidences of illegal fishing have occurred.

Guests are now regularly reporting sightings of large size fish, sea cucumbers, octopus and even lobsters, which had almost disappeared from the area.

The Department of Fisheries has also used the SMA to restock juvenile trochus and giant clams produced at its aquaculture facility, and has started an experimental *Kappaphycus* algae nursery in collaboration with SPC.

The island SMA committee meets the costs of maintaining and monitoring the SMA, with funding coming from Fafa Island Resort. It is hoped that in the near future, projects such as the farming of *Kappaphycus* seaweed and half pearl oyster aquaculture will make the SMA self-funding.

The island also hosts "Education Days" that promote conservation awareness in schools and the local community.

For more information:

Vincent Morrish

Fafa Island Resort manager

fafa@kalianet.to

Siola'a Malimali

Deputy Secretary for Fisheries, MAFFF

siolaamalimali@gmail.com

Vili Moale

Principal Fisheries Legal Adviser, MAFFF

vmoale@tongafish.gov.to

Poasi Fale Ngaluafe

Principal Fisheries Officer, MAFFF

poasif@tongafish.gov.to