

A review of coastal fisheries in Fiji

In late 2014, a review of coastal fisheries in Fiji was carried out by three senior fisheries specialists with substantial work experience in Fiji and overseas. A summary of the report of that review¹ is given here. The results of the study were reviewed and endorsed by a workshop of senior Fisheries Department staff on 19 November 2014 and further discussed during a workshop of senior Fisheries Department staff on 18–19 March 2015.



This study reviews the status and management of coastal fisheries in Fiji, with the objective of providing suggestions to enhance the Fisheries Department's performance to a level similar to their accomplishments in offshore fisheries. Information on Fiji's key coastal fisheries resources was reviewed, including estimates of production, current status, financial and other benefits, and the likely challenges to be faced in the future. The structure and role of the Fisheries

Department in coastal fisheries management was examined. Links with NGOs and other agencies who are also active in this area, and the degree to which their activities link with those of the Department, were discussed. Based on this review, the study draws out the major governance issues associated with the management of coastal fisheries that need to be addressed to enhance the performance of the Fisheries Department in coastal fisheries.

The main points of the review are:

Limited information on coastal fisheries

Fiji has a wide range of coastal fishery resources, including finfish, invertebrates and plants. Estimating coastal fisheries production and the status of these resources, at a level that is useful for informing or monitoring management effectiveness, is a complex, expensive and challenging process. The statistical system that is used to provide coastal fisheries data in Fiji is no longer functional, primarily due to the prioritisation of scarce government resources. This has resulted in a shortfall of fisheries information, such that the success (or otherwise) of management is hard to determine. This also contributes to the inadequate recognition of the economic and social value of coastal fisheries.

Fully exploited with limited potential for expansion

The limited information available suggests that the finfish and invertebrates in many areas of Fiji, in common with many other reef fisheries in the Pacific, are overexploited. It is therefore unlikely that coastal fisheries production can increase markedly, creating a potential clash with those that favour the development of infrastructure for fisheries to stimulate economic growth. The key challenge is to maintain and, where possible, increase, the large existing benefits from coastal fisheries.

¹ Gillett, R., Lewis A. and Cartwright I. 2014. Coastal fisheries in Fiji: Resources, issues, and enhancement of the role of the Fisheries Department. 60 pages. The full report is available at www.gillettprestonassociates.com

Importance of coastal fisheries

There is no doubt that coastal fisheries production brings extensive benefits to Fijian communities, including employment and nourishment. The direct contribution of coastal commercial and subsistence fishing to the GDP of Fiji is about FJD 73 million, almost eight times greater than that from offshore fishing) with around 27,000 tonnes of fish produced. Export data are questionable but suggest that coastal fishery exports in 2007 and 2008 were FJD 25 million and FJD 46 million respectively. There is also a range of benefits that is difficult to quantify; they include social and recreational values.

Future challenges to coastal fisheries

While there are considerable challenges facing coastal fisheries today, the future is likely to add more pressure, which will provide additional threats. Current trends of over-exploitation and habitat degradation provide some insight into what the future holds unless action is taken. Increases in population and urbanisation are likely to lead to the following situations, which, in turn, have the potential to dramatically reduce the substantial benefits from coastal fisheries.

- ✓ Coastal fisheries accessible to urban residents will probably decline through over-exploitation and habitat destruction.
- ✓ Expanding urban populations fishing intensively will increase levels of overfishing close to those populations.
- ✓ A growing proportion of the urban population will not be able to catch sufficient fish to provide for household consumption.
- ✓ The above points will contribute to more expensive fish and the incentive for members of poorer households to go fishing and exacerbate the problem.

Focus of the Fisheries Department

Around 280 staff work in the Fisheries Department, 57 of whom are dedicated to offshore fisheries. Staff responsible for coastal fisheries management are spread across the most of the six technical divisions and four geographical areas of Fiji. While the department is deeply involved in coastal fisheries management, the focus and nature of this work is not directed to achieve specific management outcomes. The department focuses significantly more attention on offshore fisheries than coastal fisheries, the former having a dedicated management division, which has ensured adequate attention to key priorities.

Management vs. development

Appropriately, the early focus of the Fisheries Department was on increasing production of coastal fisheries and surveys of new resources. Over time, there has been a growing recognition among stakeholders and the Fisheries Department that the over-exploitation of coastal resources is the major threat to fisheries in Fiji. Despite this, there continues to be emphasis on increasing production through direct assistance and subsidies to the fishing industry to encourage more fishing to meet demand. Ironically, in the long term and without adequate management in place, this assistance is likely to result in less rather than more fisheries production.

NGOs and FLMMA

More than 20 NGOs and other agencies are significantly involved in coastal fisheries, with a focus on conserving fisheries resources. They include the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network (FLMMA), which has been recognised as very effective. The network encourages coordination among agencies that work with communities to better manage traditional fishing grounds, using a well-established and documented process. These NGO activities, while not well coordinated nor necessarily aligned with government priorities, have gradually assumed a number of government-type functions. While there is a strong case for the Fisheries Department to take on some of the FLMMA/NGO roles, there is also a need for NGOs and donors to accept and assist such a transition. The recent establishment of conservation officers within the i-Taukei Affairs Board does not appear well coordinated with the Fisheries Department.

Improving governance

This report suggests a number challenges that need to be addressed by the Fisheries Department if it is to be more effective in management and ensure that the benefits of coastal fisheries are not further eroded. Currently, the department addresses the major issues by default rather than design, and a new approach is needed.

¹ FJD1.00 = USD 0.49 (May 2015)

Dealing with over-exploitation	Few department staff appear dedicated to dealing with over-fishing, mostly due to a continuing focus on development and increasing production. Distractions such as reef ranching and alternative activities such as continuing experimental aquaculture are unlikely to be effective in addressing over-exploitation.
Declining capacity	Key elements of Fiji's coastal fisheries management services have degenerated over the years. They include: fisheries statistics, enforcement of coastal fisheries regulations, effective management tools, formulation/implementation and updating of management plans, and consultation with stakeholders.
Addressing the management / development balance	Currently there is no lack of high-level directives that focus on urgent actions to improve the management of coastal fisheries. There is, however, no national policy or plan that lays out a clear pathway to implement these high-level directives at different levels or re-focus the work of the department.
Improving resource knowledge	To address gaps, it will first be necessary to determine the additional information required for achieving management objectives and reconciling those needs with the current programme of marine resource inventories. Updating the existing resource profiles with more recent information might serve as a catalyst for such prioritisation.
Consolidating services	One reason for the strength of offshore fisheries management is the fact that it is managed by a dedicated division within the department. Given that coastal fisheries produce far more food and jobs, as well as a greater contribution to GDP, it seems logical to create a division for coastal fisheries. Such a division would focus, consolidate and coordinate the supply of fisheries management services to that sector. It would also provide the impetus for achieving adequate funding and staff. An appropriate level of decentralisation of the new division to the provinces will need to be determined.
Improving communication	Stakeholders have reported that there is very limited interaction between departmental staff, NGOs and coastal fishers/communities. There are many ideas for improvement of the current arrangements and increased communication would have multiple benefits.
Other actions	<p>Fisheries legislation has not kept pace with the changing requirements of coastal fisheries, particularly community-based approaches for fisheries management. A review, update and revitalisation of regulations and their enforcement would be an important action to underpin improved coastal fisheries management.</p> <p>Fiji is not unique in its challenges regarding coastal fisheries; advantage should be taken of the many good examples of successful re-orientation to coastal fisheries management that took place in other countries facing similar challenges.</p>
Fundamental change required	<p>Simply creating a new division in the Fisheries Department will be insufficient to meet current and future challenges. Two fundamental changes must also occur:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Acceptance by senior government leaders that: (i) landings from coastal fisheries are approaching their limits in all but the most isolated areas, and (ii) urgent management action is required to safeguard existing production. Where stocks are heavily depleted, reduced fishing may well increase production.✓ Fisheries staff must be committed to the suggested new, more focused, approach to coastal fisheries management. This will not be easy, given the decades of efforts to increase and subsidise production through development initiatives.

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