

The Pacific Fisheries Officer Training Course – Where to from here?

Alec Woods¹

The Pacific Fisheries Officer Training Course hosted by Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology, has, since 1979, trained over 360 junior fisheries staff from 21 countries throughout the Pacific Islands region. Funding for this training has now ceased and it is time for Pacific fisheries managers to turn their attention to the future for this type of training.



Outboard motor maintenance, 2014. From left to right: Teaiti Beetana (Kiribati), Malcolm Linawak (Vanuatu) and Joe Tiatia (Samoa). Image: Alec Woods

At the 2017 Heads of Fisheries meeting in Noumea, New Caledonia, Ben Ponia (Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) Secretary, Cook Islands) posed the following question for delegates to consider: ‘What is the future fisheries officer going to look like?’ The point of this article is not to answer this question directly but rather to start some discussion on the topic and present some themes for consideration in an attempt to find an answer to Ben’s question. In doing so, the article will look at how formal training for junior fisheries officers in the Pacific Islands region has evolved.

Regional training for fisheries extension officers began in 1979 with the creation of the Pacific Community (SPC)/ Nelson Polytechnic Pacific Fisheries Officer Training Course, or ‘Nelson course’. It is now the longest-running training course in the region, and most managers regard it as a foundation programme for their fisheries officers. This

course has run almost continuously since 1979 and over this time, 369 fisheries officers have attended the training.

From March 2013 to December 2017, the Nelson course was conducted under the Pacific Fisheries Training Programme, an NZD 7.4 million programme funded by New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) Aid Programme. The aim of this programme was to increase Pacific Islands’ sustainable economic development through a greater contribution from the seafood sector. Over this time, more than 700 Pacific Island men and women received training in-country, regionally and in New Zealand.

For now, this training has finished. An end-of-programme evaluation was conducted in late 2017, covering the period March 2013 to December 2017. The reviewer’s findings will be discussed later in this article. The full report can be

¹ Fisheries Advice, Training and Consultancy. Pacific Networks Limited. Email: alecwoodsanz@gmail.com



Chartwork and navigation, 2013. From left to right: Scott Pelesala (Tuvalu), Aram Erietera (Kiribati) and Ioane Mamaia (Niue). Image: Alec Woods



STCW Firefighting course, 2013. From left to right: Sulia Peleni (Tokelau), Alice Mitchell (Cook Islands), Jobson Tabipala (Solomon Islands), Ioane Mamaia (Niue) and Bianca Bernicke (Nauru). Image: Alec Woods

found on the MFAT website² along with MFAT's response. Before responding to these findings it should be noted that MFAT has agreed to 'explore the option of a second phase of the activity'.³

When the programme was initially planned, the intention had been to provide junior fisheries officers with a multidisciplinary training programme that would give participants a grounding in a range of basic practical skills.

The course [was] designed for a fisheries extension officer working in an isolated situation with little technical or administrative support and needing the skills necessary to maintain and repair a variety of equipment, conduct or administer fishing operations and related activities and provide advice and technical assistance to village fishermen.⁴

In the early stages of the programme, applicants' background reflected these criteria; later years have seen more diversification. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for intakes to be a mix of recent school leavers; women wanting to transition from a desk job to one involving field work and practical skills; principal fisheries officers and experienced extension staff wanting to refresh skills; and the odd private fisher looking for a career change. As the duties of many fisheries officers become more complex, the course syllabus has both reflected this and become a means of moving from one role to another. For some applicants, the training in Nelson has opened the door to a new career path, which could mean further training at a tertiary institution or an attachment to a regional agency such as SPC. Any discussion on the future of this course will need to consider the wider implications for future training.

The benefits of continuing to train applicants in New Zealand need careful consideration. New Zealand has a fisheries management regime that is both complex and comprehensive. While on the surface it might appear that there is little in common with the wider Pacific experience, closer examination shows that all fisheries in the Pacific seem to be facing similar challenges. The ever-present need for more data; the conflicting demands of shared fisheries; new monitoring, control and surveillance technologies; environmental changes; safety at sea; expanding tourism; and the changing geopolitical landscape are challenges faced by fisheries administrations everywhere. The fisheries officer of the future will still need some form of basic training but the transition to more specialised roles will require a clearer articulation of career paths and closer integration with a range of training providers than has happened in the past. Three case studies will show how the Nelson training has evolved in recent years.

The Nelson course was reviewed in 1984 and again in 2002. The recent evaluation of the Pacific Fisheries Training Programme did not get down to the level of syllabus content but such a reconsideration is well overdue and should be part of any review undertaken prior to the commencement of a Phase II of this activity. This should also include the linkage with the practical safety fishing and financial management course run by Vanuatu Maritime College (VMC).

In previous years, all those attending the training in Nelson went on to attend a practical fishing course in the region – first in selected countries, then in Noumea and, most recently, in Vanuatu. As the backgrounds of participants attending the Nelson course became more diverse, it was clear that not all of them would benefit from attending the practical fishing course and so a smaller number went on to VMC. Currently, the financial management course is taught

² <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Evaluations/2018/PFTP-Evaluation-report-final-Feb-2018.pdf>

³ <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Aid-Prog-docs/Evaluations/2018/MR-4-Web-Pacific-Fisheries-eval-2018.pdf>

⁴ Questionnaire on Fisheries Training, Background paper 3, 16th Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries, Noumea, 1984, p.1. <http://www.spc.int/DigitalLibrary/Doc/FAME/Meetings/RTMF/16/BP3.pdf>



Vessel safety, 2014. From left to right: Vea Kava (Tonga), Joe Tiatia (Samoa), Teaiti Beetana (Kiribati) and Malcolm Linawak (Vanuatu) with instructor Brian Fossett in background. Image: Alec Woods

both in Nelson (with a project management focus) and at VMC, where the emphasis is on the economics of a fishing operation. SCTW⁵ Basic Safety is part of both courses. Not only is it a convenient ‘bundle’ of core skills, but it is an excellent team-building exercise and an opportunity to use the self-contained breathing apparatus skills that many already possess.

In 2004, Port Sampling and Observer Skills were introduced into the Nelson course. By 2011, the Regional Observer Programme had advanced to a point where this training was able to be supported in the region or as part of national programmes. Monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) had by now become a function of most fisheries departments and this topic was introduced into the Nelson syllabus, albeit as a part of the wider compliance picture that included the role of the observer, linkages with the agencies of other countries, and coastal MCS activities. The intention was that this module would serve as an introduction to further MCS studies (Certificate IV) at the University of the South Pacific (USP).

Fisheries management has always presented a challenge in that each country presents its own unique blend of management priorities. With some of these in mind, the decision was taken to look at some themes common to all, study the New Zealand treatment and see if any lessons could be taken

from this. Recent case studies have included charter fisheries, community-based fisheries management in Kaikoura, tourism and fisheries management and iconic species management with an emphasis on the importance of consultation. Many of these issues are present in Kaikoura, and the three-day field-trip based at Takahanga Marae has evolved over time to become a central feature of the course.

There has long been an expectation that training will contribute to a certified course, and discussion needs to happen as to why progress towards this end has been so slow. Short courses suit certain topics and timeframes. Distance learning via online platforms such as Moodle⁶ means that students no longer have to spend long periods of time away from home. Perhaps a start could be made by aligning the Nelson course with MS206 Marine Skills and Techniques course run by USP.

There is no doubt that the training landscape is short on oversight. The focus now needs to be on sustainability and whether New Zealand should continue to fund this training or whether Pacific nations should be prepared to shoulder some, if not all, of this responsibility themselves. Only once responsibilities have been defined and apportioned can work then begin on delivering the training needed to equip fisheries officers for the future.

⁵ SCTW = Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers

⁶ Moodle is a free and open-source learning management system. Moodle (acronym for modular object-oriented dynamic learning environment) allows for extending and tailoring learning environments using community sourced plugins. Source: Wikipedia