

My experience as a Pacific Islander Junior Professional with the Pacific Community

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I accepted the position of Pacific Islander Junior Professional (PIJP) – Fisheries Management and Policy with the Pacific Community (SPC) in early February 2018. Prior to this, I served as Chief Aquaculture Officer with the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR).

I never dreamed that one day I would join SPC as a Junior Professional. It all began in 2017, when the PIJP position was advertised on the MFMR email circulation list. I thought about the job requirements, the challenges, and its relevance to fisheries and aquaculture development in Solomon Islands, and most importantly about my career path. I lodged my application, was short-listed, interviewed and was very fortunate to have been offered the position.

The PIJP position is a capacity-enhancing programme offered by SPC through its Fisheries Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division. It targets young professionals from national fisheries and environmental agencies or non-governmental organisations working in the marine and/or fisheries field in the Pacific Islands region. This 12-month position is an opportunity to enhance capacity in coastal fisheries and aquaculture, and, particularly in fisheries science, management and policy. PIJPs are employed under a contract like other SPC staff but receive more mentoring and coaching as key components for capacity building.

For me, it was an opportunity to experience and work with a team of experts and professionals from the region. One of the expected results of this programme is the impact that junior professionals may have when they are back in their respective countries and contribute to positive changes in fisheries management.

During my term as a PIJP, I have learned a lot about coastal fisheries and aquaculture management, and policy in the region. My learning experiences drew from a variety of work areas, including: reviewing and formulating coastal fisheries and aquaculture policies and management plans; conducting consultations; organising and facilitating workshops and trainings; and visiting member countries to study how fisheries are managed. One of my main achievements was the completion of the Solomon Islands National Aquaculture Management and Development Plan 2019–2024²

and the National Strategy on Aquatic Biosecurity 2018–2023³. I worked under the guidance of policy specialists and marine biosecurity specialists from the time of the consultations to the drafting process. These learning experiences – together with a professional supervising team from SPC's Coastal Fisheries Science and Management (CFSM) Section – enhanced my ability to identify and address key management and development issues and the needs and aspirations at the national and regional level, and how to address them appropriately.

The difficulty of transferring scientific and economic information into national fisheries policies and management frameworks is one of the major limitations to robust fisheries management. Science, economics and management must be seen as complementary, they cannot work independently from one another. By providing convincing policy advices, one can win the political support to influence public policy directions. Management plans are formulated specifically to implement major policy objectives, particularly in fisheries. Fisheries management is shaped by various factors, ranging from legislation, policy, political influences, internal functions and powers at the national and subnational level, traditional and customary systems and the social hierarchy of a community. All of these factors shape the way our fisheries resources are managed, and for me, realising this has been truly a challenge and a worthy learning experience.

In the 12 months of my attachment, I have travelled on duty missions with staff from CFSM and the Aquaculture Section, to Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati (Tarawa and Kiritimati Islands), New Zealand, and Solomon Islands. Travelling with the team serves two



Sylvester showing classic catwalk style while 'modelling' a new fisheries officer vest, one of the more unusual tasks he kindly accepted to do for SPC. (image: Ian Freeman, SPC)

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² <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/mnvrz>

³ <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/4zomz>

purposes: 1) to assist the team with the mission objectives, and 2) to observe and learn. During these missions, I interacted with Pacific Islanders, understanding their issues and aspirations, and experiencing their culture and their way of life. Most importantly, I learned about the importance of fisheries to communities and the various fisheries management systems that exist in those countries.

The PIJP program also provided me the opportunity to build and expand my network within SPC and national fisheries agencies in the region. My interactions in terms of exchanging ideas, corresponding with other fisheries personnel, planning and interacting with other professionals about coastal fisheries management, participating in training (internal and external) workshops, has enabled me to build professional relationships within my expanded network. Building a network of people in different positions in the fisheries sector has certainly helped me to improve my ability to share information and collaborate.

Another unique experience as a PIJP was being part of an SPC interview panel that assessed regional candidates for a PIJP position. It was indeed a challenging task for me, as I had never engaged in interviewing applicants for regional positions. I accepted the challenge, and with guidance and advice from my supervisor, the interview was a success. The knowledge and skills acquired will equip me to deal with a similar situation in the future.

The working atmosphere at SPC is very conducive to learning and achieving objectives. There are no disruptions related to public visits or political requests. For example, at MFMR, people come to the office and expect you to immediately take the time to discuss their fishing or aquaculture issues. The serenity of the SPC office environment helped me to focus more on my work and, most importantly, allowed me to do research.

The beauty of working with the CFSM team is that they are always available and ready to help despite their busy work schedules. Staff members always demonstrate professionalism and are willing to help in any way they can from giving advice, providing guidance and direction, or simply answering any question. From my point of view, expecting the supervisors to know your problems and needs may be the only weakness of this programme. As long as I did not ask for help, my superiors assumed I did not have a problem. To overcome this, I evaluated and identified areas where I was confident and areas that needed development, and took the initiative to seek assistance from the CFSM staff in addressing those development areas.

The PIJP programme is truly a rewarding experience. It has given me a rare opportunity to expand my knowledge and build my skills in regional coastal fisheries and aquaculture. In terms of career development, it has given me a lot of clarity and confidence to look to higher challenging positions.

The encouragement and support I received from the CFSM team has empowered and motivated me to continue to improve professionally beyond the PIJP programme.

The programme has impacted me a lot in terms of my career as a fisheries and aquaculture manager and how I view coastal fisheries and aquaculture management and development at the national and regional level.

As I have now successfully completed my contract as PIJP, I want to encourage aspiring individuals to take advantage of this opportunity, and I would like to provide some recommendations for future aspiring young professionals and SPC to ponder upon.

I urge SPC to continue offering this programme and developing the capacity, knowledge, skills and courage of young professionals of national fisheries agencies.

Young professionals, my recommendations for you are to:

- challenge yourself and apply for a PIJP position;
- set your objectives and focus your efforts to achieve them;
- discuss your goals with your supervisor;
- build your capacity and use what you have learned to manage fisheries in your country and advance your career; and
- develop your self-confidence to aim for higher positions.



Sylvester at work under the supervision of Jacob Raubani, SPC Coastal Fisheries and Aquaculture Management and Policy Specialist. (image: Ariella D'Andrea, SPC)