

Sport fishing training workshop in Aitutaki, Cook Islands

“This was the first time in my entire life that I caught and released a fish alive, and the feeling was magnificent!” This is how trainee Dawn Marsters, an experienced Aitutaki fisherman aged 39, described his first experience with “catch-and-release” fishing at the closing ceremony of the first workshop ever organised by SPC for prospective sport fishing guides. This genuine comment alone was proof that the training had been successful in changing participants’ relationship with their lagoon, and raised hope that some may, in the near future, derive benefits from this new, non-destructive, and tourism-based fishing activity.

A feasibility study conducted in May 2009¹ concluded that sport fishing could be diversified in Rarotonga (a couple of operators doing jigging or casting techniques to complement a sustainable FAD-based big game activity) while a more extensive development could possibly occur in Aitutaki (flyfishing for bonefish, casting or jigging for large coastal predators, light casting inside the lagoon). After training two key stakeholders — Richard Story, Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR), Aitutaki; and Pupuke Robati Junior, small-scale sport fishing operator, Rarotonga — and after conducting a feasibility for the tourism-based bonefish fishery in Aitutaki,² SPC further supported the local development of coastal sport fishing through a specialist training workshop for several prospective guides selected by MMR (13–23 June). This training and the purchase of quality sport fishing gear and tackle were part of the action plan developed in May 2009. MMR purchased and will monitor the fishing gear while SPC conducted the training workshop. This workshop was one component of a comprehensive training programme that combined first aid, small

business management, hospitality and tourism, and a boat driver’s certificate course, with local training institutions involved and trainers flying to Aitutaki for the occasion.

All seven trainees were either small-scale fishermen or budding guides from Aitutaki. Resource people included Richard Story (manager of the Aitutaki Marine Research Centre – AMRC), Nga Makikiriti (course coordinator, MMR– Rarotonga), Pupuke Robati Junior (small-scale fisherman and sport fishing operator, Rarotonga), Etienne Picquel and Michel Blanc (Nearshore Fisheries Development Adviser, SPC). The first two days of the workshop were held in town at the Island Council meeting room. This was followed by four days of sport fishing practice with the last fishing trip (Tuesday, 22 June) conducted as a simulation exercise (i.e. with trainees acting as fishing guides and trainers as the tourists).

At the end of the workshop, a number of suggestions were made by the visiting team to help MMR further

All fish caught during the workshop were carefully released alive.



¹ Picquel E. and Blanc M. 2009. Feasibility study on the development of sport fishing in Cook Islands. Secretariat of the Pacific Community.

² Hamon H. and Blanc M. 2009. Report on a bonefish fishing feasibility study on Aitutaki, Cook Islands. Secretariat of the Pacific Community.



Casting inside the lagoon with light and medium tackle produced good results. Workshop participant Eietia Davey in action on day 1 of the workshop.



A nice brassy trevally (Caranx papuensis) proudly displayed by Nga Makikiriti (MMR-Rarotonga).

support the development of tourism-based sport fishing operations on Aitutaki. Some of the issues discussed below may be of interest to other Pacific Islands wishing to take the same development path.

Future training

- The workshop went very well, due to good coordination by MMR staff and their selection of enthusiastic trainees. The consultant trainer has emphasised key aspects of professional guiding, including the safety and cleanliness of boats, professionalism of guides, care of customers, and the maintenance of fishing gear and tackle. The workshop's format was suitable but another day or two of actual fishing would have enabled trainees to practice more boat driving and guiding skills. On-shore training (gear description, rigging, knots) also should have been extended by an extra half day. The other training components were completed before and after the sport fishing workshop (e.g. business management, tourism and hospitality, first aid). A boat master's course will be conducted soon on Aitutaki, and this will conclude this training programme and the process of certification and/or licensing of guides.³



One type of boat used on the island for a day of casting and jigging outside the lagoon.

The sport fishing context

- Aitutaki has the potential to be a multi-fishery destination (e.g. flyfishing for bonefish, blue fishing at FADs, reef and lagoon fishing). Flyfishing is already available to expert anglers, with a couple of excellent local guides ready to host visitors in a professional manner. Their "flat boat", which is suitable for fly-fishing, only requires some slight upgrading. Casting or jigging appears to be seasonal for giant trevally and dogtooth tuna, and year-round for tunas at the FADs. Very good ultra-light and medium-light casting for small trevallies can be found inside the lagoon. At present, there is room for two or three local guides but they were not yet ready at the time of the workshop (lack of suitable fishing gear and boats).
- Manue Atoll is potentially a prime destination for giant trevally "popping" and bonefish flyfishing. The promotion of sport fishing trips to Manue should, however, be approached cautiously because of the distance of the atoll from Aitutaki (50 nm), and the current lack of suitable vessels to undertake safe and comfortable charters. An exploratory trip with a reputable sport fishing tour operator is worth considering.
- Currently, Rarotonga appears to be more easily "marketable" overseas than Aitutaki. There is at least one sport fishing guide who can handle two customers on his potimarara and provide FAD fishing, trolling, reef casting and jigging. Because fishing areas are within seconds of Avatiu Harbour and because the island is so small, six-hour day trips or half-day trips are preferable to the eight-hour-long trips that are usually expected of tour operators. Other big game fishing boats operating in Rarotonga bring additional options for the marketing of Rarotonga as a sport fishing destination.

³ Under the bonefish management plan, in order to be certified as a fishing guide, a person needs to sit the first aid, hospitality and boat master's training modules.

The resource

- The management and conservation needs with regard to developing sport fishing in Aitutaki are wide-ranging. While the draft bonefish management plan deals specifically with managing the bonefish fishery, it is important to also address the issue of lagoon use in order to avoid conflicts between the different users of the island's reef flats and motus (e.g. lagoon cruises, kite-surfing, flyfishing). Some guidelines, and possibly a management plan for lagoon use, should be developed in consultation with different users, either as part of the Bonefish management plan or under a separate document.
- From the workshop, we learned that trevallies require some management attention as well. Four species are common in Aitutaki's lagoon: giant trevally (*Caranx ignobilis*), brassy trevally (*Caranx papuensis*), island trevally (*Carangoides orthogrammus*) and bluefin trevally (*Caranx melampyus*). The two motus that we have prospected (central-southern part of the lagoon) are ideal places for targeting those species as well as bonefish. We suggest that fishing around these motus be only permitted for professional fishing guides with customers. Fishing gear and fishing effort should be controlled in order to ensure the sustainability of the resource and the sport fishing activity in those areas. For instance, fishing at those motus could be limited to two groups of customers weekly. Treble hooks should be banned there and only lures with one barbless single hook allowed. Small trevallies are still found in good numbers around Aitutaki. They can be fished inside the lagoon from a boat (casting towards reefs and "bommies") or by wading. They fight well on light gear and will please many customers.

- Casting or jigging outside the reef was not productive during the workshop because weather conditions made fishing difficult. Locals, however, say that the season for catching giant trevallies is when the baitfish go inside the lagoon (November to January). Casting for giant trevallies could be marketed for that period.

The guides

- Two of the trainees (Dorn Marsters and Junior Palampera) are experts in the art of tuna handlining at FADs. If they fish the FADs using a "buddy system", clean and upgrade their boats, and acquire a couple of sets of jigging rods and tackle, they will be in a position to take tourists out, have them jig for albacore and yellowfin tunas, and have them watch or practice local fishing methods (e.g. drop-stone fishing).
- Itu Davey and his brother Etetia are likely to succeed in their bonefish guiding activity, having displayed excellent guiding skills at the workshop. Since our previous visit in November 2009, Itu has successfully guided several customers. A video documentary produced by "On the Fly Productions" will also undoubtedly raise the interest of expert anglers to come to Aitutaki to catch some "trophy" bonefish. Itu is currently negotiating a bank loan to buy an engine and upgrade his boat.
- During the workshop, the need for cohesion and teamwork was stressed and the idea of a sport fishing association was raised. One of the trainees, Punua Marsters, was particularly interested in the idea of an association, and he could play a leading role in promoting it. The SPC-based DevFish-2 project is in a position



Junior, a skilled tuna fisherman, enjoyed learning the tricks of sport fishing with light gear.

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to support the establishment of such an association. For instance, an executive officer could be recruited to undertake the much-needed liaison role between individual customers (or overseas tour operators) and local guides and accommodation owners.

- One key prerequisite for successful sport fishing ventures is professionalism. In that respect, most workshop participants fell far below the standards expected by tour operators in Australia, Europe and the USA. Weaknesses included lack of vessel cleanliness, sea safety equipment and guiding skills. Training has obviously focused on those areas, and many tips and advice have been given. The progress of prospective guides needs to be monitored, and we suggest that a follow-up visit by the consultant trainer be organised in about six months' time (early 2011). The purpose of this visit would be to go fishing with the local guides to evaluate their guiding skills and give them further advice and training.
- The trainees enjoyed the workshop and seem comfortable with the concepts and ideas introduced during the training. If they want to establish themselves as fishing guides, they will, however, need to change their current way of working and upgrade their assets (i.e. boat, safety gear, fishing gear). A national scheme exists to support outer islands development and grants are possible. Some fishermen, like Itu, may prefer to take a short cut and seek a bank loan.

SPC and MMR involvement

- SPC has completed its commitment to support coastal sport fishing development in Cook Islands. With complementary funding assistance from Taiwan/ROC, two feasibility studies have been carried out (bonefish fishing on Aitutaki, casting/jigging on Rarotonga and Aitutaki), the bonefish management plan has been drafted, two training attachments have been funded (Pupuke Robati Junior and Richard Story spent some time with a New Caledonian sport fishing operator in 2009), assistance was provided to MMR for procuring demonstration fishing gear and tackle, and this workshop has been implemented. The suggested evaluation of the Aitutaki guides in 2011 could be SPC's final input into this project.
- MMR will fine-tune and implement the bonefish management plan, and will contribute, with the police, to its enforcement. MMR should also maintain the momentum by conducting regular sport fishing trips with two or three trainees at a time. This will put to good use the fishing gear and tackle recently purchased by MMR.



Richard Story (MMR) with a good-size brassy trevally (Caranx papuensis).

Conclusion

Aitutaki has very good potential for developing a tourism-oriented sport fishing sector. While bonefish flyfishing has a great potential and appears ready to be marketed, some work remains to be done with other fishing activities (e.g. jigging and casting techniques). The strict conservation measures currently taken to enhance the bonefish stock are a good step forward; however, lagoon use and other key sport fish species require a similar attention.

The trainees who attended this workshop seemed enthusiastic about being part of this sport fishing development. While their knowledge of Aitutaki's marine resources give them a solid base, they need to adopt and put into practice the concepts demonstrated at the workshop if they are to succeed as commercial fishing guides. MMR has an important role to play by managing the resource (e.g. developing a bonefish management plan) and supporting the local guides as they set up their sport fishing operation (e.g. by providing advice on financial support schemes, training and monitoring).

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