

## Letter from Mr Able Seaman, Pacific Islands crew member onboard Alienlandic purse seiner, *Sweep the Ocean*

*Introductory note by Peter Sharples, SPC's Observer Support and Development Coordinator*

*"I am employed by SPC's Oceanic Fisheries Programme to advise tuna fisheries observer programmes throughout the Pacific Islands region, to train those observers and to coordinate and participate in some areas of data quality control, most notably the process of debriefing observers after they have completed trips onboard fishing vessels that are most often foreign to the country that the observer is from. For this, I travel extensively and cross paths with many Pacific Island fisheries observers and some crew members. I hear many stories, and sadly, more tend to be stories of woe than of good things, but then that is the nature of humans – to complain – and without doubt, observers work in difficult situations and often in very uncomfortable environments. They need to let off a bit of steam, and ... I tend to be as guilty as many others of being "too busy" to follow up. For the story that follows, it turns out that I was no better but the extra efforts that the crewman went to, to ensure that his story gets told may yet pay off.*

*A few years back now, I was given this letter by a Pacific Islands observer who was asked by a Pacific Island crewmember on a Taiwanese purse seiner to please pass it on. The observer did but sadly, I never did – it was one of those things that got lost in the "to do" list between missions. However, as I was about to begin another observer training workshop at the time, I edited the letter to use as a training aid article of interest. I recently came across this version, buried in my files and it seemed like a suitable accompaniment to some of the other articles in this issue of the Fisheries Newsletter. The edited version has the names and other means of identity changed, and the grammar tidied up a little. But otherwise, the message to Pacific Island politicians, fisheries managers and others remains exactly as told by this Pacific Island crewman."*

I have spent most of my sea time as an able fisherman, usually isolated from authorities. I take this great opportunity to explain my situation on behalf of other Pacific Islanders crewing onboard foreign fishing vessels. I thank the fisheries observer, Mr Seemore Carefully, employed by the Responsible Fisheries Authority, for allowing me this chance to express the concerns and comments on behalf of Pacific Island crew members onboard the vessel *Sweep the Ocean*.

There are four of us from Pacific Island countries. There are also five Vietnamese and the rest are mostly Chinese and Alienlandic. We, the Pacific Islanders, are currently working onboard this foreign fishing vessel as deckhands. We earn an average salary of USD 270.00 per month that is accredited to our individual accounts for the duration of our employment contract, which started 4 April 2003 ending 3 April 2004.

While being employed by this foreign fishing vessel and fishing in our Pacific waters, I feel that I am actually fishing in foreign waters, not my own Pacific Island waters. This is because foreigners who have been sweeping up the fish across the Pacific are labouring Pacific Islander crews almost to slavery in their own backyard and leaving scars that may not ever heal. They are polluting our waters, overharvesting our Pacific tuna resources and killing so many other species commonly referred to as "bycatch". Having worked for about 10 years onboard various foreign fishing vessels that employ Pacific Islanders as crew, I feel very embarrassed to say that we slave at great risk and uncertainty for just a little cash in return.

I understand that our Pacific Island countries may not yet have the technology, skills and ability to invest more in their own domestic fishing vessels, but in the meantime, more effort should be put into supporting fishing companies that are willing to recruit more Pacific Islanders as crew and who treat those crew fairly and with dignity.

The fact is, our island countries are probably feeling proud that their countrymen work onboard foreign fishing vessels. Our politicians boast that it boosts our local economy by providing employment to local Pacific Islanders, but which of them has had the initiative to check on the working environment, treatment, and salary of their countrymen who risk their lives for so little money to be able to feed their families and loved ones back home. Why can't we just quit this painstaking job? Well, our governments function on low budgets. Job opportunities, even for people with a good educational background, are limited, leaving us no options but to accept laborious employment with foreigners.

There are many Pacific Islanders who have worked 15 years or more on purse seiners and longliners, moving from boat to boat developing skills to become very able seamen but who still labour as deckhands, the lowest rank onboard vessels, without promotion or increase in salary simply because the foreigners use rank to dominate Pacific Island crew. It is unique to find a Pacific Islander that ranks over a foreigner.

Another aspect is safety. Recently, news has circulated among Pacific Island crewmen onboard foreign fishing

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vessels about two Pohnpeian crewmen that went missing from a Alienlandic longliner in Papua New Guinea's East New Britain Province. Stories such as these have a most discouraging and disturbing effect, contributing a great deal to the insecurity that Pacific Island crews must be feeling. Such a report dwells and lingers with us in every corner of the ocean, haunting us to live in fear, even though we fish in our own waters. We do so knowing vast waters prevent us from communicating with our brothers, uncles and fellow islanders that could protect us and/or speak on behalf of our safety and comfort. We work in a situation where one lives under strict orders and should the orders be disobeyed or hindered, the penalties are harsh. Anything can happen to us out here and nobody will be able to tell what really happened.

My final wish is that our Pacific Island countrymen recognize that being crew onboard foreign fishing vessels is a difficult lifestyle. More strongly, they must realize that such employment is next to slavery. All we want is to work and provide for our families the best way we can; however, to risk our lives for meagre wages is not what we had in mind. I kindly ask that our governments' appropriate authorities closely monitor the activities of the licensed fishing vessels and whatever circumstances may arise in the fishing grounds. We would rather struggle for the benefit of our own people and our nations rather than work as slaves to others who treat us like dirt in our own territory.

Thank you for your thorough consideration!

