Communities in the Solomon Islands want effective enforcement of sea cucumber ban

In the Solomon Islands, the communities of Marau and Sandfly want an improved system of managing the sea cucumber fishery. During a resource assessment training and management consultation in September and October 2011, it was revealed that sea cucumber resources continue to be fished despite the current ban.

The low numbers of sea cucumbers recorded in the assessment did not correspond with the capacity of the rich reef systems in these areas to support these resources. Sea cucumber numbers inside several marine protected areas (MPAs) were only slightly better. The communities put in considerable effort in setting up the MPAs with the support of non-governmental organisations.

Community leaders in Marau — represented by their tribal leaders and the Resource Owners Association Committee of Ngella and Sandfly (ROA-Ngella) — were concerned but said they expected to hear such results. "Our fishers continue to collect sea cucumbers in open access areas and inside the MPAs for sale to buyers in Honiara despite the ban and we have little power to control our own fishers as we are not fisheries authorised officers," they said. They also said that "it is the buyers who continue to buy sea cucumbers and we have no power to control these buyers".

Solomon Islands is the second most important producer of beche-de-mer in the Pacific Islands region, with an annual production of over 700 tonnes. Sales of beche-de-mer provide much needed income to rural communities in Solomon Islands but the overexploitation of resources led to the fishery's closure in 2005. Two years later, communities in Western and Choiseul provinces — which were affected by a tsunami that struck the area — were allowed to fish as part of the disaster relief effort provided by the government. This later led to nationwide fishing for two years as fishers in other provinces also fished for sea cucumbers, arguing that everyone needs an income and fishing should be allowed for all and not just for a few communities. The ban was re-enforced in April 2009 but the lack of an effective enforcement mechanism — a situation common to many other sea cucumber fisheries — has resulted in illegal fishing, buying and exporting activities.

For the communities of Marau and Sandfly, current illegal fishing activities will continue to deplete their few remaining breeding stocks, making it harder for the resource to recover. Because they are powerless to control the fishery, these communities look to the national ban as the best option to ensure total control and recovery. Leaders from these communities are calling for the extension of the current ban and, at the same time, asking relevant authorities to improve the current management and monitoring system to ensure that enforcement of the ban becomes effective.

Recording sea cucumber numbers using the manta tow technique (Image: Kalo Pakoa).

As preliminary results indicate, species diversity remains high in both areas, and remaining stocks are successfully breeding as seen by the presence of young sea cucumbers entering the population. There is potential for the resource to recover if given sufficient time. With regard to livelihood options, community leaders said "there are other opportunities in fish, agriculture, coral farming and forestry but sea cucumbers are an easy way for people to make an income". Therefore, enforcing a total closure would allow their people to look more seriously at other available options for earning an income.

Meanwhile, the Solomon Islands Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources has started a nationwide sea cucumber resources assessment, covering 40 sites in 9 provinces. It is expected to be completed in 2012. SPC is providing technical assistance to the Ministry with field training in resources assessment, as well as training in data management and reporting at SPC main office in Noumea. This support to Solomon Islands is made possible by the European Union-funded SciCOFish Project.

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