

## My experience as a junior consultant working on the Benefish study

In late 2022, as a new graduate from the University of the South Pacific, I was asked if I would be interested in working with a well-known fisheries specialist on co-authoring a book on fisheries and economics. The Pacific Community (SPC) was interested in having a junior Pacific Islander work with the main consultant, Robert Gillett, with the idea that the junior recruit would learn how the study is carried out and, hopefully, be able to do similar work in the future. After a lot of thinking about my career path, and discussions and encouragement from my mentors, and despite some hesitation, I finally submitted my CV and was interviewed by Mr Gillett, the man who was to soon be my boss and mentor.

Before getting started with the job, I had to familiarise myself with the work I would be immersed in for the next few months and did a bit of studying of my own. The project – called the “Benefish Study” – was first carried out in 2001, then revised in 2008 and 2016, and brought together various types of fisheries information on the benefits of fisheries to Pacific Island countries and territories.<sup>1</sup> The study was written into a series of three books, all authored by Mr Gillett, and each book includes a chapter for each Pacific Island country and territory covering: 1) recent annual fishery harvests: values and volumes covering six fishery production categories; 2) fishing contribution to gross domestic product; 3) fishery exports; 4) government revenue from the fisheries sector; 5) fisheries employment; and 6) fisheries’ contribution to nutrition.

Some of the work that this study entails was completely new to me but has been a good learning experience for me. Throughout the eight or so months that I have been a junior consultant, I have had the privilege of travelling with Mr Gillett to several Pacific Island countries for the purpose of learning how in-country visits work, the protocols for entering each country and organising meetings, as well as having the pleasure of making connections with some of the fisheries officials across the Pacific. Prior to the travelling, I assisted Mr Gillett with conducting internet searches relevant to fisheries in the Pacific, and learned how to analyse the information procured from fisheries agencies. At the early stages of the study, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, contingency plans for visiting countries had to be carefully devised and much time was spent with finding out the entry requirements for each Pacific Island country. Subsequently, I made trips to Nauru, New Caledonia, Samoa and Tonga, all of which provided me with new challenges and memorable experiences.

In October 2022, I made my first work trip to Samoa and Tonga, and learned much about the way the study is implemented. Because it was my first trip, I was optimistic about

the way in which we were received by the Ministry of Fisheries. The room was full of fisheries officials who were all evidently happy to gather as much information for us as they could. It was from this trip that I tried to observe and learn the processes by which things were conducted, as well as mentally taking in tips from Mr Gillett about getting the information we need. First, I learned that even though it might look positive conducting a meeting with a room full of people from various sectors, some fishery officials shied away from speaking. Second, Mr Gillett stressed the importance of getting the requested fishery reports and documents while in the country because promises to send them by email often do not happen, and I had to learn this the hard way.

By the end of the Samoa and Tonga trip, Mr Gillett had enough confidence in me to send me off to Nauru by myself to carry out the same work. Preparations for my first solo trip were difficult but most of all, I was nervous; not because I was a woman travelling alone or that I would not have anyone to rely on if I needed help, but because I was doubtful that my young, inexperienced self would not be able to do as good a job as Mr Gillett. Although I felt like I was “thrown into the deep end of the pool”, as Mr Gillett would say, I thought that maybe there is no better way to learn something. So, I took on the task and left for Nauru with a positive mindset. Because Nauru received its first COVID-positive case that year, restrictions were tight and self-isolation was necessary for a few days. Thereafter, I went back and forth between the Bureau of Statistics and the Nauru Fisheries and Marine Resources Authority and managed to speak to a few locals about their views and struggles, and I learned just how challenging collecting information can be. Nonetheless, I was able to appreciate the work experience and enjoyed the trip, regardless of the work pressure. I was also able to take up a colleague’s offer on giving me a tour of the country as it only took an hour to see the whole of Nauru.

Shortly after returning to Fiji, I dove straight into writing Nauru’s country chapter after reviewing a few other country chapters written by Mr Gillett. Subsequently, I was also given the task of writing Niue’s chapter as well. Throughout the process of writing, editing and reviewing all country chapters, there were a lot of interesting features that emerged from the study, and a few stood out to me and are worth mentioning here. Evidently, a lot of the fisheries information was produced by national statistics offices and there sometimes seemed to be a lack of cooperation between national statisticians and fisheries officials on fisheries matters. Another interesting finding was the degree of reluctance of some of these countries with sharing their national fisheries information, especially financial data. Additionally, another

<sup>1</sup> The 2016 edition of *Fisheries in the economies of Pacific Island countries and territories*, the “Benefish study”, is available from: <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/pvyuo>

finding that stood out was the lack of knowledge or record-keeping of aquaculture production in most Pacific Islands countries. Considering the amount of money spent on developing aquaculture, it was astounding to find that very little was known about current production; so, this was an area in which Mr Gillett had to spend a lot of time. On a more positive note, although most fisheries agencies are usually dominated by men, Mr Gillett and I held a meeting with all female fishery officers in Samoa, which was very encouraging to see.

For a newly graduated young person, working on a project as big as this one presented a lot of challenges that I had to overcome. The first one was struggling to understand the economics part of the study, which I had no experience or background in. Mr Gillett helped me out a lot in this area, from conducting classroom sessions in his little office in Suva or even at airports during our travel, to pushing me out of my comfort zone and encouraging me to ask questions in meetings with statisticians. Another challenge during this study was, interestingly, planning each in-country visit and making sure every national entry requirement was met. I only realised later when I had to prepare for my trip to Nauru, just how much time is spent on carefully planning and considering dates and time schedules, especially having them correspond to when fisheries officials would be present in the country. Prior to travelling, a lot of time was also spent on trying to satisfy COVID-related entry requirements, but by the end of the study, almost all COVID restrictions had been removed. Lastly, a personal challenge I faced was going through a lot of self-doubt. Having to conduct meetings with highly experienced and senior fishery officials can be a little intimidating, especially when they are expecting a fisheries consultant but find a very young and timid woman instead. It was demotivating at first, but I am slowly learning to overcome this challenge as I gain more experience in this line of work.

Having joined Mr Gillett on his fourth series of the Benefish study has been a rewarding experience. Some of my successes from this study, I would say, include accomplishing a solo work trip to Nauru. This was something I never thought I was capable of doing. Nevertheless, I was pushed out of my comfort zone, and with Mr Gillett, I was driven to gain a better understanding of the processes of conducting this study and the many challenges that come with in-country visits. Another one of my successes is having the privilege of travelling to



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other Pacific Island countries and territories and expanding my network of people within other national fisheries agencies. This was further expanded after my last country visit to New Caledonia (SPC Headquarters) with Mr Gillett in early 2023. Visiting the headquarters in Noumea proved to be eye-opening; to see how things worked at SPC, as well as familiarising myself with various people from different fisheries sectors and positions, turned out to be a memorable experience. Having built connections with a variety of people in the fisheries sector will surely be useful for future collaborations as well as with sharing information. Finally, I have come to understand self-reflection and feel I have made a conscious effort to improve myself. After spending a lot of time with Mr Gillett

for the duration of this study, I have come to realise that it takes more than just knowledge and experience to successfully carry out a project such as this. Anyone who knows Robert Gillett would agree with me when I say he is a man of determination, and whatever he sets his mind to, he gets. This study, through Mr Gillett, has taught me the importance of extreme discipline and hard work. Although I have a lot to work on, I have progressed from the woman I was before taking on this study.

All in all, the Benefish study has provided me with the opportunity to expand my career in more ways than one. It has allowed me to grasp the careful preparations that are carried out before undertaking country visits, and to consider how best to conduct a meeting correctly for the purpose of effectively and efficiently procuring fisheries information. During my travels, along with building my network, I was able to connect with officials and locals and learn about the various fisheries systems in place. This study has enlightened me with interesting insights into fisheries in the Pacific, and throughout the process has brought me many successes along with tough challenges. With these lessons and experiences, I only hope to improve and develop my career in the fisheries sector.

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