



## Women in fisheries profiles

### Janet Saeni-Oeta

#### Country lead for WorldFish Solomon Islands

*Janet Saeni-Oeta<sup>1</sup> and Anne-Maree Schwarz*

My name is Janet Saeni-Oeta. I am from Lau Lagoon in North Malaita, Solomon Islands. I came from a family of five, of which I am the only female and the eldest child. A fun fact about my home village, called Hatodea, located on the island of Manaoba, is either you succeed in school and get formal employment, or you grow to be a fisher and fisher vendor your whole life. I completed a Bachelor of Arts degree (majoring in Sociology and Marine Affairs) at the University of the South Pacific in 2009 and in 2010 was successful in my application for a job as a research analyst at WorldFish, based in Honiara, Solomon Islands.

I have worked extensively with communities around Solomon Islands since that time, focusing on all aspects of community-based coastal resource management including food security, gender and social inclusion and climate change aspects.

I left WorldFish in 2015 to complete a Master's degree at Lincoln University in New Zealand, and then worked as a project coordinator in 2017 on an FAO project based in the Statistics Division of the Ministry of Finance and Treasury in Honiara. I returned to a new role as a Senior Research Analyst in WorldFish in March 2018, all this while building our family of four children with my husband.

#### What is your position now?

In May 2023, I was successful in my application for the position of WorldFish Country Lead for Solomon Islands. I am excited about what this represents as having progressed my career to a senior management position in an international organisation.

I am now responsible for programme management, programme administration, resource mobilisation, strategies and operational plans with our research partners in Solomon Islands and through participating in international networks. There are currently around 16 staff in the Solomon Islands programme; 14 based at three locations in Solomon Islands and 2 based at the University of Wollongong in Australia. I am based in the capital, Honiara, and travel regularly to WorldFish satellite offices in Malaita and Western provinces as well as internationally.

I have developed my leadership skills and style over the years and am excited to be able to use and build on them in this role. With a relatively small team I can maintain one-on-one communication and I can call people up to talk things through – I like that approach.

Your role has a much bigger component of meeting with and discussing strategies and research activities with senior government officials and senior international researchers now. How have you found that experience?

So far, the experiences have been positive. I haven't had to take a lead on that sort of responsibility in my previous jobs, but I have already gained my confidence in briefing provincial premiers and permanent secretaries, and have found that following all the proper procedures and protocols, and having my experience to draw on, means that they accept me and respect my position. This has boosted my self-esteem.

You are clearly enjoying this new challenge, what continues to inspire you to be working in fisheries?

I remember my first conversation in my first interview for a job at WorldFish in 2010. I said then "I want to work in this space because I came from a place (in the Lau Lagoon of North Malaita) where the livelihood of the people is mostly reliant on fishing". When I went to do my Master's degree at Lincoln University in New Zealand in 2015, they told me – there's no fisheries programme, you can only do environmental management, so I said OK, but my research topic will be focused on fisheries. And that's what I did. The interest is there because of where I came from.

In my research role, from 2020 to 2022, I visited around 60 communities in Malaita Province and 13 communities in Temotu Province, conducting resource management awareness and investigating community livelihoods. I draw inspiration from this experience now – we have opportunities that bring in significant funds for project activities, but I see that the level of engagement with communities is still not where it could be. So that is what keeps me going.

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What are some of the challenges that you see to be addressed?

The most common question that I hear from rural people in communities doing resource management, is what's next? In my FAO job when I was based in a government ministry, I experienced how there were restrictions in terms of availability of data to make good decisions for better lives for our people. So, I'm still seeing this as a challenge in terms of research. I see that new livelihoods-focused research projects can play a role, but this needs to be supported by better information from

and for communities. I see that I am now in a position to be able to directly talk to someone who's in charge. These experiences are helping me set my goals for this role, to see where I can have some sort of influence.

Personally, I have set myself the challenge of ensuring that the Solomon Islands context is adequately represented and championed in the international context of WorldFish strategies. I see the opportunity to leverage international expertise as an important area to explore, and where I, as a Solomon Islander with practical field experience, can bring a unique perspective to the discussions.

What would you say to young women who might look at your career path and ask if you have any advice?

Looking back, I would say that it is a matter of working to achieve what your supervisors expect of you, and being able to work effectively with minimal supervision. That requires you to be driven and to keep driving yourself. Also, as women, whenever we want to make a decision we tend to ask others. This comes from our home lives where, in the family, you have to ask your husband, or your brothers or your parents. That's OK to do that but you have to drive yourself. You have to work hard, believe in yourself and go above and beyond.

I am also a fairly straightforward person and this has helped when I have had to manage situations in the field while working in communities where the norm is for men to have the say in how things will be done and also when managing tensions with external researchers coming in to communities. I have had some good mentors who I have learned from. Formal leadership training has also given me additional skills and confidence to manage such situations to reduce the potential for conflict.

All of these experiences have been steps on the way to getting where I am now.



Solomon Islands field work. © Alick Konamalef

