

Urgent steps required for increasing and sustaining the contribution of coastal fisheries to our communities

AT A GLANCE

Healthy coastal fisheries are vital for local livelihoods, food security, health and income generation. Regional policy and leaders are strongly committed to improving coastal fisheries management but progress is slow and patchy. Sea cucumbers are the most valuable coastal fishery but landings and value retained continue to decline. More than half the potential value of sea cucumber fisheries is lost to countries and communities due to lack of transparent and accountable governance.

The following key steps are essential to ensure the continued contribution of coastal fisheries as well as a doubling of the income from beche-de-mer to over 30 million US dollars annually:

1. Establish transparent and accountable governance of beche-de-mer and other valuable fisheries
2. Increase national investment in coastal fisheries management for a sustainable blue economy
3. Implement at least one nationally appropriate management priority in the coming year

1 The importance of coastal fisheries

The increasing demand for coastal fishery resources from growing populations, combined with a decline in fish from over fishing and habitat destruction, is creating a food security crisis, and the subsequent negative health (in particular non-communicable diseases) and economic impacts on Pacific Island communities will put ever greater pressure on the budgets and resources of national governments as they deal with these impacts. The improved management of coastal fisheries is vital in order to deal with the crisis.¹

In many communities the most valuable coastal fishery is sea cucumbers which when processed into beche-de-mer are the most valuable fishery export second only in value to the offshore fishery for tuna.

Implementation of coastal fisheries management at national level has seen some notable successes but overall progress is patchy and slow. The following brief outlines the two most urgent priorities for high level action which, if addressed, would shift the momentum towards ensuring healthy coasts and communities.

2 The loss of sea cucumber fisheries and millions of dollars for our people

High value coastal resources are generally experiencing decline and local extinction in some cases.² National fisheries management efforts for sea cucumber have not been able to control a sharp decline in landings and value generated by the fishery for communities and national government (Figure 1).

¹ Forum Communiqué, 47th Pacific Islands Forum, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, 8–10 September, 2016. Sea cucumbers are the live animal of the same group as sea urchins and starfish, beche-de-mer are the dried and processed product exported mainly to the Asian market.

² Anon. 2008. Status report: Nearshore and reef fisheries and aquaculture. Noumea, New Caledonia: Secretariat of the Pacific Community. 37 p. [<http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/66mrt>]

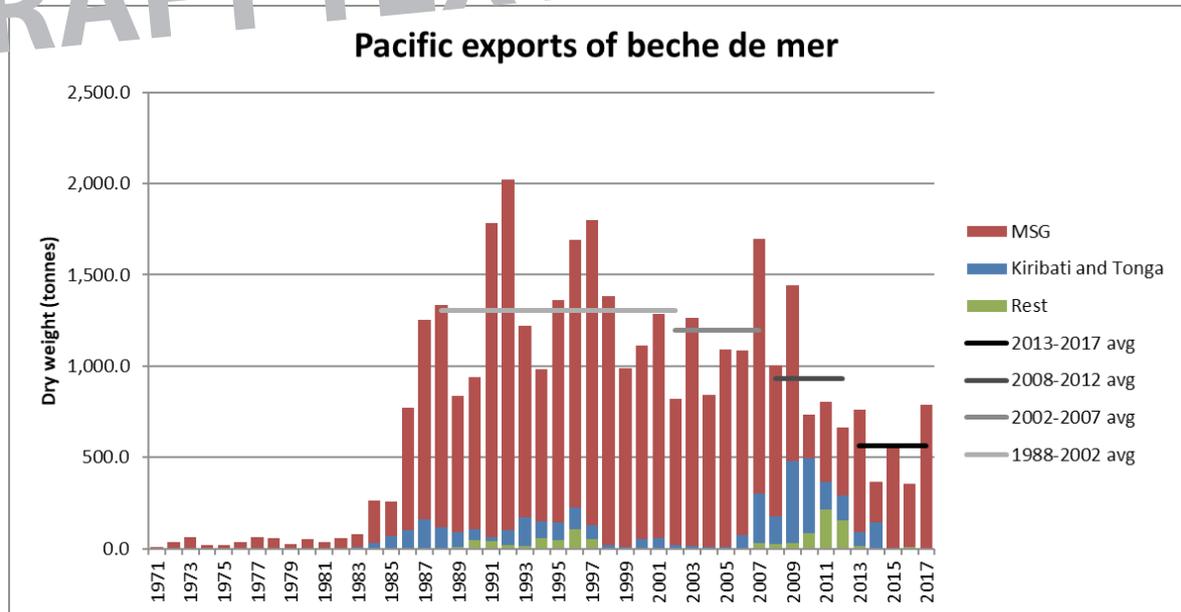


Figure 1. Pacific exports of beche-de-mer. MSG = Fiji, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

There is strong evidence (Box 1) that enforcement of simple management rules for sea cucumbers could generate at least **double** the revenue and improvements in processing and interventions to ensure fairer pricing could raise this to **triple** the revenue. For the major beche-de-mer producing countries, which are members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), the combined estimated export value of USD 14 million per year could exceed USD 40 million.³

3 Challenges to managing coastal fisheries

Pacific Island countries, because of isolation, capacity, and logistics amongst other challenges, often struggle to deliver services to coastal communities.

The efforts of national fisheries agencies must be acknowledged and exciting examples of progress are increasingly evident. But the conclusion for most countries is inevitable: the work of fisheries agencies is not adequately supported and, in some instances, actively undermined:

3.1 Lack of transparency and accountability in management of beche-de-mer and other high value species

Management of beche-de-mer and other high value coastal species can be relatively simple, involving greater control and oversight of traders, markets and exporters to enforce key regulations and license conditions.

But the implementation and enforcement of management plans is consistently undermined by political and/or trader interference or influence which is nowhere more evident than in the beche-de-mer trade.

While some of these interventions may be motivated by mistaken political perceptions that the short-term benefits to communities outweigh the long-term sustained benefits intended by policy, others provide opportunities for corruption and malpractice. The losses to national and community revenue is in the tens of millions of dollars.

Box 1: The lost value of beche-de-mer

- Carleton et al. (2013) found that more conservative management and more rigorous enforcement of regulations would likely increase the average annual value to countries of beche-de-mer exports by 80–105%.
- Historical landings suggest that at least double the current average annual landings and revenue should be reasonably achievable if stocks are partially rebuilt and sustained (see Figure 1)
- Enforcement of minimum legal size limits for some of the valuable species would not only improve breeding stocks but increase landings up to 97% and revenue by 144% for some species (Lee et al. 2018).

³ Carleton C., Hambrey J., Govan H. and Medley P. 2013. Effective management of sea cucumber fisheries and the bêche-de-mer trade in Melanesia: Bringing the industry under rational control. A report prepared by Nautilus Consultants on behalf of the Secretariat of the Pacific Community. Noumea, New Caledonia, Secretariat of the Pacific Community. 55 p. + annexes + appendices. [<http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/3e9e2>].

Govan H. 2018. Policy brief to MSG. Govan, H. 2017. Sea cucumber fisheries and management in Melanesia: Review and policy briefs. For the MSG Fisheries Technical Advisory Committee [<http://www.msgsec.info/index.php/publicationsdocuments-a-downloads/study-reports>]

Wapot S. and Govan H. 2018. Melanesian Spearhead Group of countries addresses sea cucumber fisheries management. SPC Fisheries Newsletter 154:19–21. [<http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/v8ijp>]

Govan H. 2018. A review of sea cucumber fisheries and management in Melanesia. SPC Fisheries Newsletter 154:35–42. <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/fjzhm>

Lee S., Govan H., Wolff M. and Purcell S. Submitted. Economic and other benefits of enforcing size limits in Melanesian sea cucumber fisheries. SPC Fisheries Newsletter.

MSG FTAC agreed outcomes on coastal fisheries and plan of action on sea cucumber fishery management and bêche de mer trade. Outcomes of 6th MSG FTAC Meeting, Port Vila, 13–17 November 2017

By comparison, the value of aquaculture in these countries is considerably lower, around USD 4 million (Gillett 2016 [<http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/pyvuo>]).

Box 2: How to undermine a good management plan

- Declaring open season of the sea cucumber fishery before stocks are adequately recovered
- Declaring open season dates before regulations and/or management systems are in place and operational
- Interfering with due enforcement of regulations or penalties
- Exemptions or other mechanisms that suspend technical or best practice precautionary regulations
- Exerting inappropriate influence on licencing procedures
- Inadequate support of of key enforcement tools in management plans (e.g. minimum size limits, exporter monitoring and control).
- Setting inappropriately low minimum buyer prices or export values
- Inadequate data collection, management and reporting

3.2 Inadequate government investment in coastal fisheries management and targeted enforcement

Regional policy endorsed by the Pacific Island Forum Leaders urges the re-direction “of staff and resources into supporting community-based management and enforcing national regulations and restrictions where appropriate”.⁴ But such an increase is not yet apparent in most countries.

Project and infrastructure investments should not be confused with the provision of routine fisheries management services such as information and awareness, support for community management and enforcement of regulations in commercial operations. Such services need to be guaranteed with recurrent national budgets and adequate staffing to ensure continued operations. Capacity building and other partner support will only result in sustained benefits if countries ensure adequate institutional structures are in place.

Increased and sustained returns to communities, local business and national taxes should justify the increased budgetary investment. But the good news is that in most countries considerable scope exists for cost recovery in the form of penalties, license and other user fees targeting traders and exporters.

3.3 Slow progress in key coastal fisheries management actions

National policy development for coastal fisheries management is making steady progress, however, the distance between policy and action remains high. Some key management actions do not receive enough priority and may require cooperation with other government agencies (e.g. Environment, Customs, Police, Education, provincial authorities and agencies) and require high-level encouragement:

- Provision of effective and integrated public awareness and education messages relating to threats, possible community responses and regulations aimed at achieving sustainable coastal fisheries.
- Monitoring and control of markets, traders and exporters to reduce the commercial incentives for over-exploitation requiring coordination with customs, town council, police and other authorities.
- In larger countries, the provision of these services invariably requires substantial increases in support to subnational, provincial or island fisheries offices.
- MSG countries have agreed to harmonize and standardize sea cucumber management systems. First steps have been taken but progress is slow and needs high level encouragement.

4 Two key steps to saving coastal fisheries and making millions

4.1 Establish transparent and accountable governance of beche-de-mer and other high value coastal fisheries

With assistance from SPC and the Coastal Fisheries Working Group; assess and, where necessary, design transparent and accountable decision-making processes for high value coastal species which are robust to interference and regain public confidence:

- Public awareness of data on the performance of the fishery and the rationale for management regulations and opportunities for complaints and feedback mechanisms
- Public disclosure of official documents, licensing processes and possibly e-governance as part of an anti-corruption policy in coastal fisheries
- Improving governance structures (in particular boards or committees for price control, setting fees and licensing) which ensure accountability, transparency and independence through, for instance, involving other ministries, financial and legal authorities.⁵

⁴ FFA and SPC. 2015. Future of fisheries: A regional roadmap for sustainable Pacific fisheries [Leaflet]. Noumea, New Caledonia: Secretariat of the Pacific Community. 4 p [<http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/xnc9f>]

⁵ “Involve legal and administrative reforms to codify and formalise licensing processes. This should include broadening the responsibilities for licensing and setting of fees and other conditions that involve agencies such as so that the responsibilities do not lie with a single Minister or senior official” (Clark 2006). See also Carleton et al. 2013.

4.2 Ensure national investment in a sustainable coastal blue economy

With assistance from SPC; current government budgets and fisheries revenue should be assessed in relation to coastal fisheries management and, where necessary, strategies developed to increase and secure recurrent budgets for coastal fisheries management and core management functions secured for the long term:

- Assess the levels of support to coastal fisheries management in relation to the challenges using indicators such as the value of the fisheries, GDP and overall government budget.
- Explore the strategies and costs for carrying out minimum adequate resource management functions including at subnational level and the absorptive capacity in terms of donor partner support.⁶
- Determine opportunities for budgetary support and cost recovery options from appropriate taxes, fees and penalties etc.
- Accelerate efforts in Melanesian countries on harmonizing and standardizing beche-de-mer management in line with commitments under the MSG Roadmap for Inshore Fisheries.

4.3 Implement one key action for coastal fisheries management in each country

High level political support of coastal fisheries could directly and very visibly turn into increased management action by choosing one key management action in each country as a high level initiative for sustainable fisheries. This could remedy some of the deficiencies outlined above and turn that into opportunity and success stories. Emphasis should be on visible actions rather than policies or statements and could draw from amongst the following as possible priorities as appropriate to countries:

- Public awareness, information or education strategies and campaigns relating to sustaining and where possible increasing the value of coastal fisheries.
- Stricter enforcement of regulations at markets, traders and exporters to ensure fair benefits to communities and country.
- Specific interventions in support of community-based management such as expediting local management plans or designation of local authorized officers (fish wardens, monitors, rangers, etc.).
- Other potential actions from the *Noumea Strategy – a New Song for coastal fisheries*.

5 Conclusion: three actions for healthy coastal fisheries

To ensure the continued contribution of coastal fisheries, including a doubling of the income from beche-de-mer to over 30 million US dollars annually, all stakeholders should encourage leaders to commit to:

1. Establish transparent and accountable governance of beche-de-mer fisheries
2. Increase national investment in coastal fisheries management for a sustainable blue economy
3. Implement at least one nationally appropriate management priority each year.

⁶ Referring to the need for capacity building to work with adequate national structures and staff.

