



Community owned ecotourism business: Waitabu Marine Park

Waitabu Marine Park on the island of Taveuni was established in April 1998, initially funded by the New Zealand Overseas Development Agency, facilitated by New Zealand-based Tourism Recreation Conservation Consultants (TRC) as part of the Bouma Environmental Tourism Project. The project included four communities all with different conservation-based ecotourism businesses, and aimed to: (i) protect the Vanua Bouma forest and ecosystems, including the marine areas of Bouma; (ii) create sustainable livelihoods for the four villages; (iii) preserve natural and cultural traditions where possible; and (iv) implement projects managed by and for the local communities. Each project was set up as a cooperative venture, along the lines of existing community-based farming and fishing cooperative businesses, with a committee and a project manager paid from the income generated from tourism. Waitabu was the only project of the four with a marine component, the others being forest-based.

The marine park is a shallow fringing reef area 900 m long by 300 m wide, from beach to 100 m off the reef slope, including a deepwater channel and a seagrass bed (Figs. 1–2). It was set up as a traditional no-take *tabu* area, with consent from the heads of all clans, and registered with the district council in what was then referred to as a “*Tikina* lease”, recognised by traditional authority, but not in Fijian law. The period of protection was left open-ended with no fixed-term, and is now considered permanent. A second area, a temporary “*Tabu Tara*” was closed in 2012 for a period of 5 years, to create a future sustainable fishing area, subject to research and a management plan.

In 2001, Waitabu became a founder member of the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area (FLMMA) network, and in the same year, after business training from TRC, and snorkel guide training for community youths from a local consultant, Resort Support, the community started their own income-generating half-day snorkel trip business for tourists from the resorts on the island. Support for tourism management was provided by the National Trust of Fiji for many years, but has now ceased.

Since then the Marine Park has attracted small study-abroad groups from international universities, and nature and cultural heritage based adventure cruise ships. Financial benefits have not been large, averaging 15–20 visitors per month, at FJ\$50 per head, generating in the order of FJ\$10,000 per year. This has been sufficient to reinforce the community’s commitment to marine protection. All income goes directly to the community cooperative, which pays the project manager, snorkel guides, boat captains, refreshment providers and boat fuel costs. Remaining funds go into the project account to cover business expenses such as stationary, phone costs and snorkel equipment replacement. Any extra donations from tourists are used for sponsorship of local children’s school expenses. There is some debate within the village as to whether funds should be used for larger community “*Vanua*” commitments. The flow of benefits between providers and beneficiaries is shown in Figure 3.

Initially, observance of the traditional *tabu* was very high, but after fish numbers were seen to increase, poaching by nearby communities began. Night spearfishing of groupers and collection of commercial harvests such as trochus shell (*Sici*, *Tectus niloticus*) and of sea cucumbers became a recurring problem. In 2009, six community members received training and were certified as Fish Wardens by the Ministry of Fisheries, which gave them the powers to arrest illegal fishers, and to confiscate fishing gear. After some commercial sea cucumber fishers were found in the park and reported to the Ministry of Fisheries, their fishing licences were suspended. Unfortunately, this could not be applied to subsistence fishers, and when local fishers were apprehended, the community proved reluctant to press charges with Police and Fisheries officers, preferring instead to exert traditional pressures on the offenders, with varying levels of success.

Biological monitoring has been carried out annually since the start of the project, initially funded by the TRC. Financial support for monitoring ceased in 2000, since when the cost of biological monitoring and management of the site has been largely through the support of a local consultant (Resort Support) who partnered directly with the community and bears the cost of the support (approximately



FJ\$10,000 per year). These surveys are carried out largely by community members who are tasked to monitor the progress of the park, a process which reinforces understanding of, and commitment to, the project.¹ The community carries out active reef restoration and protection projects such as the removal of COTS, and coral transplanting onto constructed “Micro-Reefs” to enhance fish habitat.

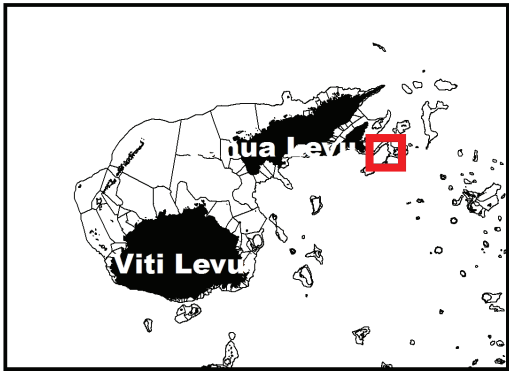


Figure 1. Map of the Waitabu Marine Park on Taveuni Island.



1 Sykes H, Reddy C (2009) Sacred Water: 10 years of community managed marine protection supported by ecotourism-based income generation at Waitabu Marine Park, Fiji Islands. The 11th Pacific Science Inter-Congress, “Pacific Countries and their Ocean: facing Local and Global Changes”, March 2–6 2009, Tahiti, French Polynesia.



Waitabu Marine Park (Tabu) Map

Permanent Tabu is never fished
Temporary Tabu is used for sustainable harvest



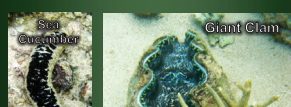
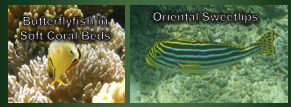
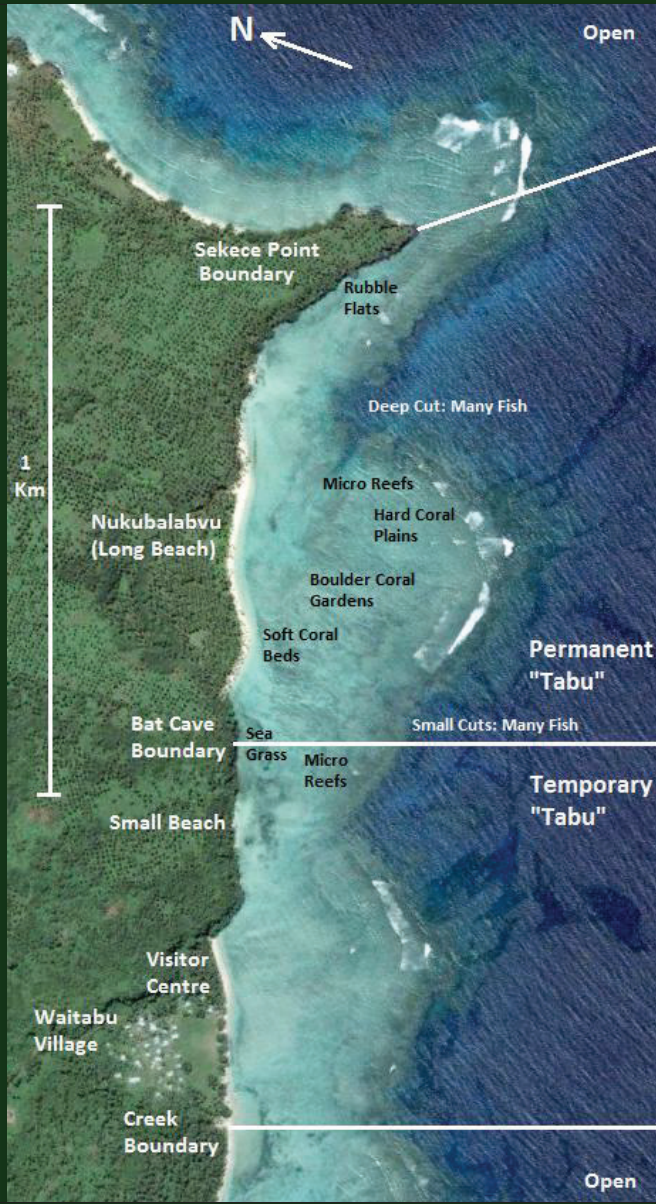
Marine Park Rules:

- Visitors must be with a guide
- No fishing or collection of any marine life
- No boat anchoring
- No "poling" of boat
- Please do not step on coral
- Please do not handle any marine creature

The Permanent Tabu is a shallow reef flat which almost dries at low tide, is about 1.5m deep at high tide, and slopes to deeper water in the cuts. There are several moorings for the park boat.

Micro Reefs located along the Bat Cave Boundary encourage fish to move from the Permanent Tabu into the Temporary area by providing new habitat.

In the Temporary Tabu, occasional sustainable harvests of economically important marine life such as Sea Cucumbers and Trochus Shells are allowed, and controlled fishing may be permitted for an important traditional event.



This project is funded by tourism contributions, and we thank you for your visit

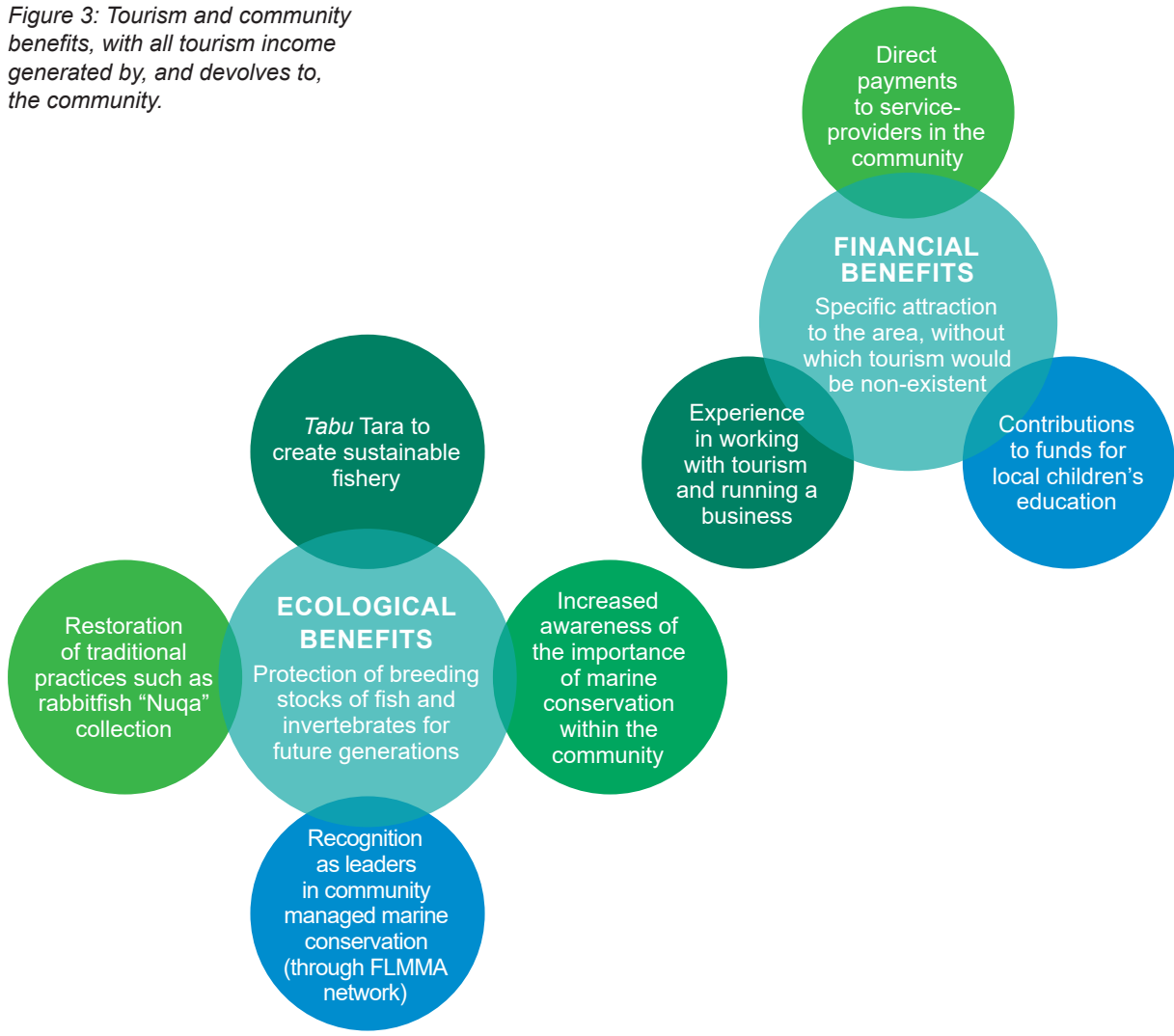
Poster and Photographs by Helen Sykes, Marine Ecology Consulting and Resort Support Fiji
www.waitabu.org www.marineecologyfiji.com www.resortsupportfiji.com



Figure 2. Map of Waitabu's tabu area and rules for use. © Helen Sykes



Figure 3: Tourism and community benefits, with all tourism income generated by, and devolves to, the community.



For more information on Marine Conservation Agreements

Sykes H, Mangubhai S, Manley M (2018) Contribution of Marine Conservation Agreements to Biodiversity Protection, Fisheries Management and Sustainable Financing in Fiji. Report No. 02/18. Wildlife Conservation Society, Suva, Fiji. 98 pp.
<https://fiji.wcs.org/Resources/Reports.aspx>

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