

Discovering Solevu reefs



Women of Solevu wade to mangroves to look for food for their families.

Picture supplied

Environmentalists help villagers bring sea back to life

By DR STACY JUPITER

I HAD come to the chiefly village in Solevu District with Waisea from our team and the mata ni tikina from Nasavu Village, where we are staying in Nadi District, in order to present our sevusevu.

When visiting a village in Fiji, it is traditional protocol to ask permission of the local chiefs before undertaking any marine survey in their waters.

In this village, their chief is a woman and she was particularly interested in how we could help her people restore their vanishing fisheries.

Although illegal under the Fiji Fisheries Act, I learned that the women from Solevu villages have been regularly using fish poison from derris root to obtain their catch. Lately, many women have come home empty handed.

"We're feeding our children (instant) noodles," the man next to me confided.

"This is not healthy."

As numerous bowls of kava were circulated, I listened as person after person recounted what they had heard about the positive benefits of management in Kubulau District, where the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has been working with communities since 2005.

One man whose wife is from Kubulau was amazed on his last trip there when he snorkeled inside



Dr Stacy Jupiter. Picture: ARC CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR CORAL REEF STUDIES



A diver surveys one of Solevu's reefs.

Picture: KEITH ELLENBOGEN

one of the marine protected areas. The Solevu communities were ready for help and they wanted us to start immediately.

Fortunately, that's why we are here. We are doing initial surveys of all of the reef habitats of Solevu District in order to make recommendations of where might be the best places to establish new protected areas.

We will present all of the results back to the villages later this year. Then the chiefs will weigh the science against the costs of closing off areas to fishing to ultimately decide the size and location of the fisheries closures.

So far, there have been pleasant surprises, but also some worrying signs.

The pleasant surprises have in-

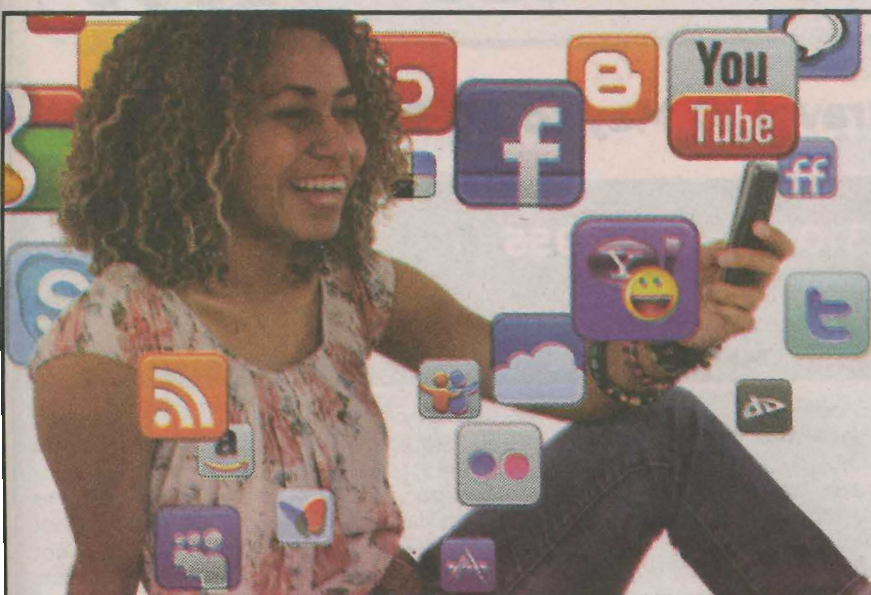
cluded a manta, a shovel nose ray, grey reef sharks, humphead wrasse and turtles - all rare, charismatic species which might draw dive tourism to the area.

The worrying signs on first impression are that the quantity and size of food fish are very low. However, there is opportunity to restore the fish populations.

The corals are thriving across

complex reef structure, which means that if the fish are given the chance, they will come back to feed future generations of Solevu children and bring them back to health.

Dr Stacy Jupiter is an expert on marine life and is the Wildlife Conservation Society Fiji Country program director



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