

Marine conservation agreements as innovative financial mechanisms for biodiversity conservation and sustainable fisheries in the Pacific: The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park in Fiji

An innovative financial mechanism is being supported by the Pacific Community's RESCCUE (Restoration of ecosystem services and adaptation to climate change) project to promote marine conservation and coastal fisheries management in one of the Pacific's great wild places, the Vatu-i-Ra Seascape.

The Vatu-i-Ra Island

The Vatu-i-Ra Island lies at the heart of the Vatu-i-Ra seascape in Fiji (see map on next page), and encompasses an extraordinary 27,000 km² of forests, mangroves, sea-grass meadows, reefs, deep channels and seamounts. The island is located in between Vanua Levu and Viti Levu, about 15 km off the coast of the Ra Province. The Vatu-i-Ra seascape is home to the largest population of nesting hawksbills in Fiji as well as green and loggerhead turtles. It is one of the few remaining sanctuaries for the highly prized but globally endangered humphead wrasse and bumphead parrotfish.

Local people marvel at frequent sightings of resident pilot whales and dolphins as well as humpback whales passing through on their annual migrations. Strong currents run through the deep Vatu-i-Ra channel, which nourishes a magnificent diversity of more than 300 coral and 1000 fish species. These, in turn, sustain breeding colonies of seabirds.

The seascape attracts approximately 36,000 tourists per year, and is a world class diving destination. In addition, subsistence and commercial inshore fish catches in the entire Vatu-i-Ra Seascape are estimated at approximately 5360 tonnes per year. The annual value of tourism and fisheries in the seascape is estimated at FJD 72 million (USD 35 million).

The Vatu-i-Ra Island is listed as a Site of National Significance in the Fiji National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), and is one of the 28 internationally important areas for birds as recognised by BirdLife International for Fiji. The surrounding waters of the island support a diversity of marine life, and are a play-ground for a range of recreational uses including snorkelling, diving and game fishing.

The *qoligoli*, or traditional fishing grounds surrounding Vatu-i-Ra Island, is shared by all 28 villages in the Nakorotubu District. Traditionally, fishers from all the villages along the coast have long stopped on Vatu-i-Ra Island and opportunistically harvested both seabird eggs and chicks, and fished on adjacent coral reefs.

Today the Vatu-i-Ra Island ecosystems are subject to various threats, the main ones being invasive species, a lack of control of visitors, and overfishing including poaching from outsiders. Protecting these ecosystems is critical in order to maintain the benefits they provide to local communities, fishers and tourists.

The RESCCUE project

The RESCCUE project is implemented by the Pacific Community and funded by the French Development Agency and the French Global Environment facility over a five-year period (2014–2018). The overall goal of RESCCUE is to contribute to increasing the resilience of Pacific Island countries and territories in the context of global changes, resorting especially to economic analysis and innovative funding mechanisms. RESCCUE operates on seven pilot sites in Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Vanuatu. In Fiji, it operates in the Ra and Kadavu Provinces and is executed by a consortium led by the Institute of Applied Sciences from the University of the South Pacific, with Conservation International, the Fiji Environmental Law Association, Landcare Research and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park

To preserve this unique natural heritage, and associated local communities' culture and way of life, WCS has been working with communities from the district of Nakorotubu, the Ra Provincial office, key tourism operators, customary owners of the Vatu-i-Ra Island, and local NGOs since 2015 to create a conservation park and develop an associated management plan. The proposed boundaries of the conservation park surround the Vatu-i-Ra Island (see map on next page). The main habitats within the proposed conservation park are fringing coral reefs, lagoons, pinnacles, and shallow and deep terraces. The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park aims to support long-term sustainable development in Nakorotubu by maintaining the health and productivity of the district's ecosystems. One of the park's conservation objectives is the creation of a permanent no-take area for fishing.

Stakeholders endorsed the management plan at one of the district meetings in October 2016. A key issue to deal with, however, is how to financially support the long-term management of the park and generate income for communities to compensate for potential losses of income due to the no-take area.

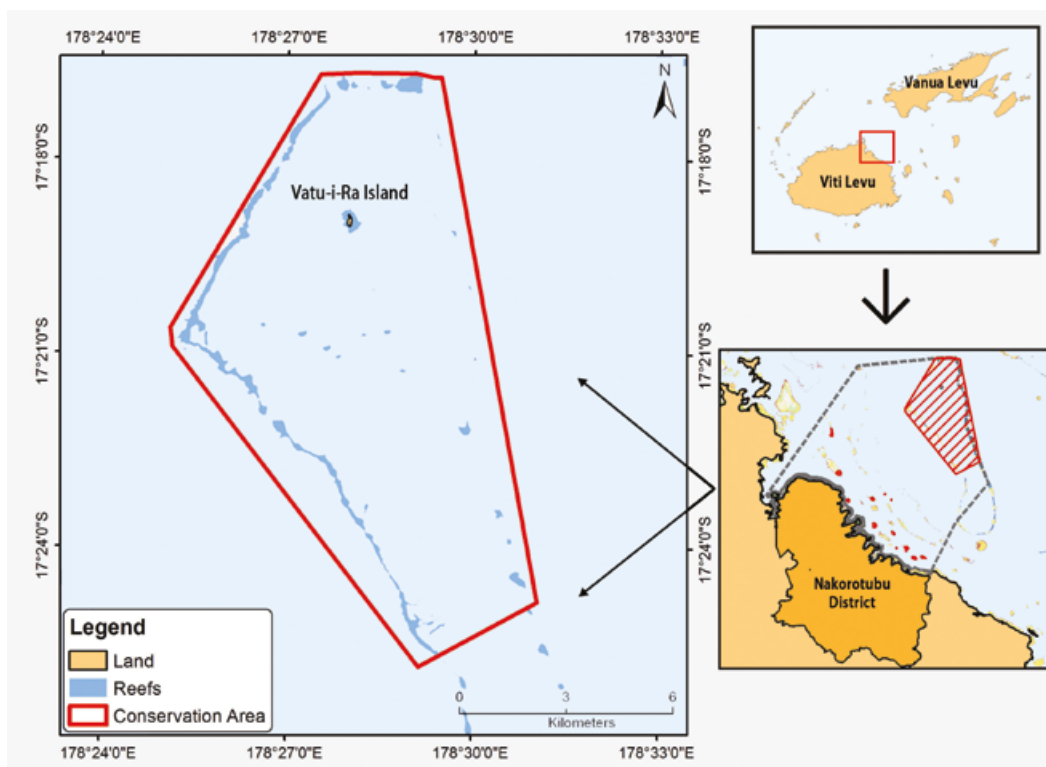
Setting up a Marine Conservation Agreement

One of the key RESCCUE project objectives in Fiji is to set up innovative economic and financial mechanisms such as Marine Conservation Agreements (MCAs) to ensure sustainability of integrated coastal management in the Ra and Kadavu Provinces. MCAs can be defined as *'any formal or informal contractual arrangement that aims to achieve ocean or coastal conservation goals in which one or more parties (usually right-holders) voluntarily commit to taking certain actions, refraining from certain actions, or transferring certain rights and responsibilities in exchange for one or more other parties (usually conservation-oriented entities) voluntarily committing to deliver explicit (direct or indirect) economic incentives'* (The Nature Conservancy, www.mcatools.org).

To support the implementation of the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park management plan, a partnership between local

communities in the district of Nakorotubu, the Nagilogilo Resource Management Committee (NRMC) and local dive operators has been facilitated by WCS to establish a voluntary contribution to the conservation scheme. Dive operators visiting the conservation park will pay a voluntary contribution to an administrative body that is established to manage and disburse funds in return for agreed conservation objectives, including the permanent no-take area for fishing.

Once the conservation park and administrative body are established, further consultations with stakeholders will determine and finalise what the donations can be used for and how to allocate the donations between the communities that have access rights to the traditional fishing grounds. In return for this contribution, the villagers will not fish in the no-take area. This reduced fishing pressure is expected to preserve healthy fish stocks, thus maintaining the dive experience for tourists and providing recruitment fish stocks for adjacent areas for the benefit of local fishers. In addition, this will provide biodiversity outcomes (through improved fish numbers and potential species diversity), which will directly contribute to the Fijian Government's NBSAP implementation as well as international commitments fulfilment (e.g. Aichi Target 11)¹.



Proposed boundaries of the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park (source: the Wildlife Conservation Society).

¹ Adopted in 2010 under the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Strategic Plan for 2011–2020, Target 11 provides that 'by 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascape'.



Community representatives, tourism operators and WCS – with guidance from the Fiji Environmental Law Association (FELA) – have now developed a governance structure and mechanism for the management of the conservation park and oversight of the voluntary contribution to conservation scheme. A Trust Deed is being drawn up, which will initially be overseen by a representative from the community, the tourism operators and WCS. A monitoring and evaluation framework has been developed for the conservation park, and baseline ecological and socioeconomic surveys have been completed.

It is expected that the fund, managed in an open and transparent way, will contribute to the conservation of this highly diverse area, protect the cultural and historical values that are important to local communities, while supporting education and community development that improves the quality of life and living standards of resource owners and communities in the Nakorotubu district. Given the level of engagement with communities around the use of this kind of mechanism, it is one of the most promising options for protecting marine areas while also providing a revenue stream for communities.

For more information:

Sangeeta Mangubhai

Director, Fiji Country Programme, Wildlife Conservation Society
smangubhai@wcs.org

Raphaël Billé

RESCCUE Project Coordinator, SPC
raphaelb@spc.int

From top to bottom:

Vatu-i-Ra Island;
Red-footed booby;
Reefs and dive operations surrounding the Vatu-i-Ra Island.
(Images: ©Stacy Jupiter/WCS, Lill Haugen).