

Establishing a community pearl oyster farm in Vatulele Village, Fiji

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Pearl oyster farming has become a vital source of income, improving livelihoods and significantly contributing towards economic development in Pacific Island countries. Because pearl oysters are filter feeders and sequester carbon into their shells, they can be regarded as sustainable elements fostering marine conservation in the region.

Surrounded by the clean pristine waters of Savusavu Bay, the village of Vatulele in Fiji's Cakaudrove Province makes an ideal location for culturing pearl oysters. Efforts to establish a community or private-sector partnership within the village *iqoliqoli* (traditional fishing rights area) are currently underway, with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Pacific Community (SPC) and J. Hunter Pearls Fiji, collaborating to make this a four-way partnership with Vatulele Village over the next two years. The project seeks to explore an integrated production of both round pearls and pearl oyster meat through the aquaculture of blacklip pearl oyster (*Pinctada margaritifera*) by the community. Pearl meat oysters are a new product that will diversify the pearl aquaculture industry, simplifying farming processes and eliminating the need for pearl seeding technicians, which will increase the accessibility for entry into this industry by community groups.

J. Hunter Pearls Fiji is an established company in Savusavu that strives to work with the government and local communities to create a positive pearl aquaculture industry in Fiji that is sustainable, viable and beneficial to local communities. Through this partnership project, WCS will work closely with J. Hunter Pearls, SPC and the Vatulele community to develop business plans to ensure equitable distribution of benefits that will cover future costs of wages, new pearl shell stock, and any other priority community development activities. Additionally, all project partners will support and strengthen the benefits of pearl farming for the community through training, consultations and workshops. J. Hunter Pearls Fiji is the recipient of an award under the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs Sustainable Pacific Aquaculture project, which is administered by SPC to facilitate and support the establishment of community pearl farms in Cakaudrove Province. This intervention has also been made possible through funding to WCS by the Blue Action Fund, which is supporting a project to expand networks of locally managed marine areas, embedded within or adjacent to larger-scale, multi-use marine protected areas, within which marine resources are sustainably utilised and conserved.

The pearl oyster farm project is currently in its early stages, with supporting partners assisting in carrying out a series of



Mother-of-pearl of the blacklip pearl oyster *Pinctada margaritifera*. (image: Bulou Vitukawalu, WCS)



The meat of pearl oysters, lightly steamed and delicious! (image: Sangeeta Mangubhai, WCS)

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WCS-Fiji staff facilitating discussions with the women's focal group at the workshop in Vatulele Village. (image: Sangeeta Mangubhai, WCS)



Discussions at the project consultation workshop in Vatulele Village's community hall. (image: Fareea Ma, WCS)



The proposed pearl aquaculture site in the pristine clear waters of Vatulele Village. (image: Bulou Vitukawalu, WCS)



Discussions between Justin Hunter (centre) and representatives of the Wildlife Conservation Society, Pacific Community and Vatulele Villagers about potential pearl farm sites. (image: Fareea Ma, WCS)

village workshops and a socioeconomic survey from September to December 2019. These community engagement activities followed a grievance mechanism and a free and prior informed consent process to ensure continued clarity with the community. The initial engagement, which was an awareness workshop followed by a socioeconomic survey, helped to capture the community's existing structure, knowledge, perceptions and expectations of the project. Two project consultation workshops followed suit, with WCS and SPC assisting the community in understanding the business aspects of the project while also helping them set up a Vatulele pearl farm committee and providing options on establishing a legal entity for their community pearl oyster farm. Moreover, two potential sites for the pearl oyster farm have been determined during a site visit. It is envisioned that the second site, which is in close proximity to the village, would be trialled by J. Hunter Pearls in the first quarter of 2020.

The joint aquaculture venture has progressed well over the past few months with a high level of commitment from all project partners and the community. A few community engagements are yet to take place in early 2020, with objectives including officially setting up a legal entity for the community venture, obtaining a license for their pearl oyster farm to operate in marine space, developing a business plan, and finalising the actual growing site for the farm within the licensed area. It is anticipated that the installation of the infrastructure of the pearl oyster farm will take place in mid-2020. The successful operation of this pearl oyster farm project in Vatulele will determine the possibility of replicating it in other community pearl farms in Cakaudrove Province. The pearl oyster farm project is a great opportunity to help support livelihoods through supplemental income within their community and promote the sustainable use of marine resources within their *iqoliqoli*.