

MPA NEWS



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Involvement of the Private Sector in a Community-Based MPA: Case Example from Fiji

Think of a community-based MPA and you might well imagine a rural coastal village managing its ocean resources with little, if any, outside involvement. In Fiji, however, a unique mix of geographic, environmental, and political conditions has helped foster a partnership for the protection of small community-based MPAs, uniting the interests of community members and a nearby private resort. Now, as that partnership has shown positive results, other Fijian resorts are looking to follow its lead. This month, *MPA News* examines this case and its lessons.

Shangri-La's Fijian Resort stands alone on a 109-acre island, linked by a 150-meter causeway to the "mainland" (or Viti-Levu, the largest island in Fiji). The 436-room luxury resort attracts visitors from around the world who come to swim, snorkel and dive the reefs and clear waters rimming the island. Among the principal features now is a 1.7-km² marine protected area adjacent to the island, where no fishing or destructive activities are allowed.

The MPA represents a re-institution of the traditional Pacific-island concept of *tabu*, in which a local chief places areas of the sea off-limits to fishing. Full ownership of Fiji's nearshore marine resources are in the process of transfer from the Fiji Government to the customary Fijian owners, thanks in part to a policy change that arose subsequent to a government coup in 2000. The *tabu* area next to the resort - along with two other coral reef *tabu* areas and a mangrove *tabu* - received ratification from the Paramount Chief of the local Cuvu District in 2001.

Building a community-based process

In 2000, senior management at Shangri-La's Fijian Resort became concerned about the degrading state of the environment surrounding the island, with declining coral populations and reductions in the numbers of fish. The resort requested the assistance of a local NGO, FSP Fiji (the Fiji affiliate of Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific/Counterpart International), as FSP was becoming active in coral reef restoration. Following negotiations, the resort agreed to match project funds that FSP would raise from outside donors, enabling the next step: facilitating a community-based process with the resource-owning villages to identify and address the causes of the environmental problems.

After an initial public presentation, FSP was accepted as the project facilitator by the district chiefs. A "Cuvu District Environment Committee" was appointed by the high chiefs to carry out the work, and consisted of representatives of villages, clans, families, the resort, FSP, and various governmental sectors.

FSP facilitators led a series of workshops in the seven villages of the district. These workshops enabled the communities to document the process of reef degradation and determine root causes, in order to identify and apply solutions. As some 70-80% of the fishers of the district are women, the participation of the women in decision-making was a vital component of the process.

A long-term management plan to solve the problems of the district was developed, with the designation of marine protected areas as a key element of the comprehensive restoration efforts. Other particulars included the banning of destructive practices such as the use of fish poison and small gill nets, and rubbish disposal directly into the sea. Project activities included the removal of infestations of crown-of-thorns starfish (over 4,000 removed), restocking *tabu* areas with overfished shellfish species (giant clams, trochus, spider conch), mangrove replanting, tree planting in villages to absorb polluted groundwater leaking onto reefs, and coral transplanting to enhance fish habitat.

As part of the agreement, the resort is developing an environmental trust fund to support the *tabu* areas and the environmental restoration plans of the environment committee. Still under development, the fund will generate money through such means as fees for snorkeling tours of the no-fishing areas, a possible room surcharge fee, and guest donations. Revenues from the fund will be earmarked for activities prioritized by the environment committee and approved by a trust fund board, composed of resort, community, government, and NGO representatives. Such activities could include low-tech reef restoration, further restocking, training of reef guides, night duty for fish wardens, and deployment of marker buoys.

A local consultant, Resort Support, has been hired to train the resort water-activities staff as snorkeling guides, and, with FSP, has produced reef-awareness materials for display in the resort.

In addition to the reef work, the resort matched another FSP grant to solve a waste problem, and constructed a series of artificial wetlands to filter the resort's wastewater and reuse it for irrigation, with wetland plants absorbing nitrates and phosphates and keeping them from leaking onto the reefs. On its own, the resort also updated its pre-existing sewage plant. John Rice, general manager of Shangri-La's Fijian Resort, estimates that the resort has spent in excess of FJ \$150,000 (US \$70,000) in cash and in kind on activities to benefit the marine environment. The expense is worth it, he said. "A large degree of the success of our resort has to do with the health of the environment," he said.

Austin Bowden-Kerby, a marine biologist who has worked on behalf of FSP Fiji on its reef restoration and community- and resort-based MPA work, says the partnership between the resort and the local villages presents a win-win situation for both parties. The resort has tame and abundant fish populations to enchant visitors, he said, while local fishers get secure breeding populations of fish to restore stocks on the fishing grounds. "Locals are already seeing increased numbers of fish and other coral reef species," he said. "Fijian culture is tightly linked with the natural environment. When particular fish are gone, traditional stories about them tend to lose meaning. Prior to the project, health was also being affected by overfishing, as protein was no longer readily available to the poorer families. Social problems were resulting from widespread reef decline, as the youth were deprived of their traditional roles in fishing and food preparation. The restoration of the coral reefs of Cuvu District has thus helped restore the traditional Fijian culture and has resulted in great pride among the community."

FSP Fiji would like to see other resorts adopt the model. Chiefs from two nearby districts with resorts have come to FSP requesting assistance for marine restoration projects and resort partnerships. The NGO is presently in discussions with a hoteliers association that represents 15 resorts in Fiji, whose members have expressed interest in their each "sponsoring" a no-take MPA. "That is one of our goals at FSP," said Bowden-Kerby. And now that the reefs belong fully to customary Fijian owners, he said, the tourism industry realizes it could soon face usage fees for the waters and reefs, in addition to the high leases for the islands on which the resorts are now built. More than ever, it makes sense for these resorts to team up with local communities.

Challenges faced in partnering

Reviving the concept of *tabu* areas, particularly in the context of tourism, has presented a challenge, said Bowden-Kerby. "The traditional concept of *ofabu* was that the reef was sacred, that no one would even set foot within the *tabu* areas," he said. "Adapting the concept of *tabu* to allow for tourism is a cultural challenge. We have coined some new terms to begin this transformation in thinking *cakau taqomaki* for permanent reef reserve, and *cakau vuavua*, or 'fallow reef', for a temporary closure."

Restoring trust between the resorts and the reef-owning communities has also been a challenge, but it is crucial. "That is why having an experienced third-party NGO involved [like FSP Fiji] works best," said Bowden-Kerby.

The Government has also very much been a partner in this work, donating 500 giant clams for restocking and training 16 "fish wardens" in the communities. These fish wardens have badges and the authority to arrest violators, and although they are not paid, they have a heightened status in the community and are effective at enforcement. Bowden-Kerby says that because the plans were collectively developed by the fishers themselves, a high level of compliance has been evident.

Rice anticipates that the resort will use its partnership arrangement to position itself as an environmentally responsible operator in the international tourism marketplace, which should attract more business. More business would also help the local community, as the land-lease that the resort pays to the local village is pinned to the number of visitors it attracts.

Rice is also interested in exporting the lessons learned from the experience within the country, so that other resorts and communities in Fiji may benefit. As for exporting the lessons outside of Fiji, he wonders whether that is possible. "I think the success of this is largely due to the unique situation that we're in here," he said, citing the presence of a community 150 meters from the resort, a committed NGO, and the political driver of the ownership transfer. "I don't know whether you'd be able to find that set-up anywhere else in the world. However, if it is possible to export the lessons learned here, we will definitely do so."

The Cuvu project was recently chosen by UNEP as an International Coral Reef Action Network "model site for coral reef conservation", the first such designation for Melanesia.

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BOX: Donors who supported the Cuvu project through grants to FSP Fiji

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