

# Factors that assist and constrain the careers of Pacific Island fishery professionals

Robert Gillett,<sup>1</sup> Barbara Hanchard<sup>2</sup> and Esther Wozniak<sup>3</sup>

*Pacific Islanders now make up much of the staff of the regional organisations involved with fisheries, although most bilateral donors, foundations, development banks and other agencies doing advisory fishery work in the region rely almost exclusively on people from outside the region. This is surprising considering that tertiary education institutions in the Pacific Islands have been producing graduates in marine-related fields for over five decades. Recently, there has been a greater shift of Pacific Islanders to senior roles in those agencies in specific fisheries subsectors (e.g. law), and less so in other fisheries subsectors. To understand this shift, this article seeks to understand the factors that promote and constrain career advancements.*

For the purposes of this article, the following terminology applies unless otherwise specified.

- A Pacific Island fishery professional (PIFP) is a Pacific Islander who is an officer of a national government fisheries division, department or ministry. The term also includes Pacific Islanders who are employed to carry out fisheries work at a Pacific Islands regional organisation, international agency, foundation or non-governmental organisation. The categories “PIFP leaders” and “emerging PIFPs” are considered subsets of all PIFPs.
- A PIFP is considered to be successful if the following attributes apply to them: have a positive career trajectory; have regularly been promoted; are respected by

their peers and supervisors; have done well in collaborative efforts with outside teams (e.g. projects, regional organisations); have been productive; and have some major accomplishments, such as securing a job based on merit with the regional organisation or a position of responsibility in a regional or international forum.

- A mentor is someone who shares their knowledge, skills and/or experience to help another person develop and grow professionally. This is somewhat different from a coach who provides guidance to a client on their goals. Having stated that, in the region the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and several people interviewed equated a “formal mentor” to a “coach” because both are thought of as being paid positions.

<sup>1</sup> Director – Gillett, Preston and Associates. rgillett1@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup> Fisheries consultant. barbara@hanchard.net

<sup>3</sup> Officer, International Fisheries, Pew Charitable Trust. ewozniak@pewtrusts.org



Pacific Island fishery professionals with some mentors, regional organisation officers, and others at an SPC fisheries meeting. Image: © Jean-Pierre LeBars, SPC

## Methods

Considerable work has been done in the region on staff capacity development of national and regional fisheries agencies. Therefore, an initial priority for this study, which was sponsored by Pew Charitable Trusts, was to speak to the people who are familiar with that work and the issues relating to capacity development in the fisheries sector. Early discussions with 16 individuals who are knowledgeable about capacity development in the fisheries sector indicated that there were some fundamental considerations to take into account:

- The entire subject of capacity enhancement for PIFPs by all varieties of institutions is too large to be handled by a small study.
- While considerable work has been done in the area of capacity enhancement, there are major gaps.
- One of the largest gaps is what PIFPs themselves think are the major factors that have assisted and/or constrained their careers.
- The study should focus on both successful mid-career PIFPs and those who have been highly successful and are in leadership positions.

Additionally, those discussions revealed that it is difficult to distinguish efforts on what should be done to enable fishery professionals to move into advisory roles from many other kinds of development efforts, such as promoting Pacific Island fisheries consultants, hiring more Pacific Islanders at regional organisations, regional organisations enhancing the capacity of their Pacific Island staff, and efforts made at the national level to enable the advancement of staff within a government fisheries agency. All are part of the large subject of increasing the capacity of Pacific Islanders in fisheries, and it is difficult to draw boundaries between these areas.

Based on this preliminary scoping, the study consultants – in collaboration with Pew staff – formulated specific research questions that the study should address.

1. What are the important factors that have assisted or constrained the careers of PIFPs?
2. What are the important root causes of the factors that have assisted or constrained the careers of PIFPs?
3. What are the important aspects of the assisting and/or constraining factors, such as an exploration of the relevance across the region, how beneficial or severe, and any historical context?
4. How can the constraining factors and root causes be addressed?
5. What are the major lessons learned in past efforts to address the assisting and constraining factors and root causes?
6. To improve the situation (i.e. enhancing PIFPs' careers), what are the appropriate and necessary contributions that should be made by national governments, regional organisations, donors, foundations and PIFPs themselves?
7. How can national governments, regional organisations, donors, foundations and PIFPs take advantage of the new insights gained from the study?

These research questions were modified into questionnaires for interviews. The content of the questionnaire was a balance between thoroughness and length, so as to prevent “fatigue” of those being interviewed.

Three categories of people were interviewed for this study: 1) emerging PIFPs in mid-career who appear to be successful and are respected by their peers; 2) PIFP leaders who have been highly successful in their careers and risen to leadership positions in regional and international organisations; and 3) people who have been mentors to PIFPs or who are familiar with the issues

The study consultants – in consultation with relevant regional experts – determined which PIFPs would be appropriate for the three categories. In the selection process, efforts were made to: 1) pick people from the majority of countries in the Pacific Islands region; 2) obtain an appropriate gender balance; and 3) cover many of the fishery sub-sectors. Also considered in the selection process was the ease of contacting PIFPs and their willingness to participate in interviews. It should be noted that those interviewed represent a subset of individuals in the three categories (i.e. there are many more emerging professionals than those interviewed).

Because the information sought can be considered sensitive, it was agreed with the PIFPs interviewed that:

- information presented in the report would not be identified as being from specific individuals and, accordingly, when a response obtained during an interview could lead to the identification of an individual, it was anonymised and made more general;
- if the interviewees did not wish to answer a question for whatever reason (e.g. because of confidentiality, or no thoughts) there would be no pressure to do so; and
- answers to specific questions by specific individuals would be known only to the study consultants.

It is important to explain some of the limitations of this study. For practical reasons, not all types of PIFPs were interviewed. The study focused only on mid- to seasoned level career professionals with clear advancement opportunities, and not those people who, for various reasons, chose to emigrate out of the region. Therefore, it is difficult to generalise from the results of the study. In the selection of successful

PIFPs to interview, the study relied, to a large degree, on the knowledge of the two consultants (i.e. contacting fishery professionals known to them as being successful), which may have introduced a bias against the type of PIFPs unknown to them. Another limitation was that the small sample size resulted in the inability to do some planned comparisons, such as comparing differences among countries. The small sample size is an important reason why this research was undertaken. Understanding why so few PIFPs have reached higher career levels is one of the specific goals of the study.

## Results

The complete results of the study are contained in a report submitted to The Pew Charitable Trusts. A summary of the results is given here.

<p><b>Factors that have assisted careers</b></p>	<p>Each PIFP interviewed provided 3–7 factors that assisted their careers. Factors that were cited by more than one interviewee were (in decreasing frequency):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having a mentor</li> <li>• participating in short-term training, internships and attachments</li> <li>• having a postgraduate degree</li> <li>• having a deep interest in fisheries</li> <li>• having had a positive upbringing and home environment</li> <li>• attending workshops</li> <li>• having good supervisors</li> <li>• having family support</li> <li>• having luck</li> <li>• attending fisheries meetings</li> </ul> <p>In terms of gender differences in the identified assisting factors, the major disparities were in the importance of a postgraduate degree (more important to women), interest in fisheries (men), good supervisors (men), family support (women), and luck (women).</p>
<p><b>Factors that have constrained careers</b></p>	<p>Each PIFP interviewed provided up to 4 factors that constrained their careers. Factors cited by more than one interviewee were (in decreasing frequency):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not possessing writing skills</li> <li>• having family and/or community commitments</li> <li>• not having public speaking experience</li> <li>• inability to do continue studies</li> <li>• cultural restrictions on being assertive</li> <li>• no constraints</li> </ul> <p>In terms of gender differences in the identified constraining factors, the major disparities were that the writing skills and public speaking constraints were cited much more often by men than women. Cultural restrictions on being assertive and family and/or community commitments were the factors most cited by women.</p>
<p><b>Mentoring</b></p>	<p>Mentoring was cited by more interviewees than any other assisting factor; therefore, the subject was further explored. Some of the features on mentoring that emerged in specific areas were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentorships in the past: All PIFPs interviewed had experience with mentors and most had experienced several.</li> <li>• Types of advice from mentors that were valued: The valued types of advice cited included both career and technical advice. In general, there was considerable diversity in the types of advice that was appreciated by the interviewees.</li> <li>• Advice to be given to student and young PIFPs on the value and need for a mentor: all expressed value in having a mentor, and many PIFPs were very enthusiastic.</li> <li>• The appropriate relationship with a mentor: The most common response was that the relationship should be one of trust.</li> <li>• The attributes and background of an appropriate mentor: The most common response was that the age, gender and culture of the mentor did not matter much, but some interviewees did not agree with this view.</li> <li>• The involvement of the regional organisations in mentoring: Most PIFPs thought that this was a good idea, but a few either had no opinion or could not see how it could happen.</li> </ul>



Writing skills	<p>Because interviewees cited writing skills more than any other constraining factor, the subject was further explored. Some of the features regarding writing that emerged in specific areas were as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 19 of the 21 emerging PIFPs interviewed (95%), indicated that writing was an important part of their job.</li> <li>• Eight of the emerging PIFPs interviewed (38%) indicated that poor writing skills was negatively affecting their careers, and was either a constraint, sometimes a constraint, or a constraint early in their careers.</li> <li>• The most often cited way for improving writing skills was practising, emulating good writers, reading, assistance from a supervisor or mentor, and feedback from colleagues and /editors. Only four interviewees (19%) had a formal writing class since completing university studies.</li> <li>• The gender disaggregated responses on writing show considerable differences. All female respondents (100%) indicated that their writing skills were such that they were either helpful in their careers, helpful after training, or sometimes helpful. Of the 12 male respondents that supplied information on this question, only four (33%) indicated their writing skills were helpful or sometimes helpful.</li> </ul>
Differences in responses between PIFPs in coastal fisheries and in offshore fisheries	<p>The responses showed that: 1) coastal fishery specialists seem to be more constrained than offshore specialists by a lack of opportunities for further training and studies; and 2) offshore specialists seem to be more constrained by family and social obligations. Although this could easily be an artifact of the small sample size, there is some logic in these results. Many countries in the region focus more resources on offshore fisheries, and often those extra resources include opportunities for advanced study. Offshore specialists' constraint due to family and social obligations could be related to the remarkably large amount of duty travel undertaken to the many meetings related to offshore fisheries.</p>
Could outside agencies address the assisting and constraining factors?	<p>When PIFPs were asked if the assisting factors could be transferred to other PIFPs (i.e. promoted by an outside agency), the responses were that factors such as experience and the drive and will to do the job would be difficult to promote to others. By contrast, PIFPs interviewed indicated that other assisting factors such as mentoring, scholarships, English courses, and attendance at workshops and meetings could conceivably be replicated.</p> <p>Of the 5 major constraining factors cited, PIFPs indicated it would be difficult for an outside agency to deal with two of them: family commitments, and cultural restrictions on being assertive. It is conceivable that an agency could deal with three other constraining factors: writing, further studies and public speaking.</p>
Going forward	<p>Rather than the study consultants deciding on the institutionalisation of the study findings, a more appropriate approach would be to convene a small meeting of regional stakeholders (especially regional organisations) to validate the study's findings and explore the interest by entities in the region in taking on some of the recommendations.</p>

## Recommendations

Two types of recommendations are given below: process-type recommendations and recommendations for specific interventions.

### Process-type recommendations

1. After the full study report is released to the management of the regional organisations involved with fisheries, determine if the management of those organisations have an interest in their organisations being part of a small meeting that would include selected organisation officers and study consultants to validate the results and determine their interest (or reluctance) in carrying forward some of the suggestions.
2. If the regional organisations express interest, hold a meeting (either virtually or in-person) to articulate what can and should be done to institutionalise the recommendations of the study, and the interest of the various organisations in taking on some of the work.
3. The meeting should validate (or modify or refute) the following study recommendations:
  - Mentorships, short-term training, internships and attachments, and postgraduate degrees should be recognised as being important and appropriate for promotion by an outside agency.
  - Writing skills, public speaking and the inability to continue studies should be recognised as being important constraints and appropriate for mitigation by an outside

agency. Because of the prevalence of writing as a constraining factor, it should receive additional attention, including the potential for writing workshops or communication training.

- It should be recognised that family and community commitments and cultural restrictions on being assertive, although important constraints, are not amenable for addressing by an outside agency.
- In the interventions to enhance the assisting factors and mitigate the constraining factors, there should be a realisation that the requirements are different for men and women, with examples being that postgraduate degrees are especially important for women, and improvements in writing skills are especially important for men. In general, addressing c will be more difficult and/or expensive for women. Such considerations must be taken into account during capacity building efforts.
- Regional organisations should acknowledge the value that PIFPs place on short-term training, internships and attachments, and continue their roles in these areas.
- It should be recognised that addressing the assisting and constraining factors (i.e. enhancing PIFP tools) is a large departure from the common practice of regional organisations in human resource studies of focusing on technical skills and knowledge in specific fishery subsectors.
- Action by outside agencies on the factors that assist and constrain should be considered as mainly small interventions to bolster, rather than replace, personal drive and determination.

*Specific interventions* (to be discussed at the regional meeting). These are, roughly, in order of priority.

1. Publicise the relevant results as advice to young PIFPs: a brochure, poster or social media article giving career advice based on this study to university students and young PIFPs, with attention to mechanisms for getting the messages to those people.
2. Future fisheries-related human resource studies in the region (i.e. training needs analysis) should pay particular attention to the perceptions of PIFPs, and what they feel are the major issues related to assisting and constraining factors.
3. Promote the assisting factors identified in this study, with the idea that mentoring, scholarships, English courses, and attendance at workshops and meetings are common assisting factors that can be externally promoted.

4. Mitigate the constraining factors identified in this study, especially recognising that a) writing skills, public speaking and the inability to continue studies are common constraining factors that can be externally addressed; and b) most of the common constraints could be addressed by mentoring or targeted training courses.
5. The New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industries has had some successful experience in enhancing the writing skills of Pacific Islanders; therefore, it is worth exploring their interest in sponsoring national or subregional fisheries-oriented writing workshops.
6. Explore the cost-effectiveness and suitability of online writing courses for PIFPs.
7. Explore the interest of the universities in the region in enhancing their efforts in the area of technical report writing.
8. Recognise that addressing the “root causes” of the constraints (e.g. family or social obligations, poor schools, lack of money) would probably be more appropriate for addressing by national governments across all sectors, and not just fisheries agencies or donors focused on the fisheries sector.

## Concluding remarks

With respect to the study’s findings, the top identified assisting factors and constraining factors are not surprising. They are well known to most people who are intimately familiar with Pacific Island fisheries. What is noteworthy is that significance factors have received scarce attention from regional organisations and other agencies involved in human resource development in fisheries in the Pacific Islands region.

The findings point to the opportunities and need for outside agencies to help address many of the identified assisting and constraining factors in the careers of PIFPs. A priority type of support would be for the “low hanging fruit”: interventions to promote mentoring and improve writing skills. Regional stakeholders (especially regional organisations involved with fisheries) need to assess the extent to which they are willing and able to provide various types of identified support to the careers of Pacific Island professionals.