



Snapshots of the trochus button factory in Port Vila, Vanuatu

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During a visit to Port Vila from 23 to 25 May 2001 to attend the ACIAR trochus end of project meeting, Moses Amos was kind enough to organise a visit to the largest trochus button factory on the island of Efate.

We hope the snapshots provided in this brief article will give a good insight on the trochus fishery in Vanuatu and the operations of its largest button factory in Port Vila.

Trochus fishery in Vanuatu

Trochus shell is a valuable commodity to the artisanal fishermen in Vanuatu. Data provided by the Department of Fisheries (Fisheries Division Annual Report 1998 and 1999) indicated that

export of raw and processed shells fluctuated between about 28 t and 84 t in the last decade (Table 1).

The export value of the trochus shells was about USD 482,000 (VUV 77.1 million using a conversion of USD 1.00 = VUV 160) and USD 697,000 in 1998 and 1999, respectively. Since the export value for 1999 is about 45% higher than 1998 and yet the harvest is about half that of 1998, it could be assumed that most of the 1999 shells were sold as higher priced processed button blanks to overseas countries. This move to export semi-processed shells is highly desirable and is a good outcome for Vanuatu. By adding value to the raw shells, it creates additional employment and stimulates other economic activities in Port Vila.

Snapshots of the button factory in Port Vila

Port Vila has two factories producing button blanks. The larger factory produced >22 t of raw button blanks in 1999 with an export value of >USD 500,000. The processes involved in many button blanks are relatively simple and fairly labour intensive, and involves the following steps:

- grading the raw shells,
- producing blanks from the shells,
- automatic grading of blanks,
- semi-polishing of blanks,
- sizing of semi-polished blanks, and
- exporting.

The shell wastes resulting from the blanking operation also has a market value and are normally collected and packed in bags and exported. Figures 1 to 9 provide a snapshot of the production process of making raw button blanks for export.

Table 1. Trochus shell export (raw and processed) from Vanuatu, 1990–1999.

Year	Quantity (kg)
1990	51,000
1991	67,009
1992	19,539
1993	61,296
1994	25,400
1995	56,091
1996	84,317
1997	78,229
1998	57,049
1999	27,900

Source: Fisheries Division Annual Report, Port Vila, Vanuatu.

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Figure 1. Raw shells delivered to the button factory for sorting



Figure 2. A row of 'button blanking' machines



Figure 3. Workers 'punching' button blanks



Figure 4. Close-up of blanking



Figure 5. 'Waste' shell after blanking



Figure 6.
Automatic grading of button blanks

Figure 7.
Rough polishing of button blanks

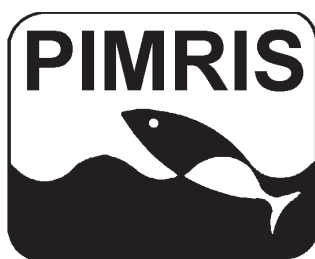


Figure 8.
Sorting of blanks into different size groups for export

Figure 9.
Packing waste shells for export



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