

Fishing to sustain livelihoods in Nauru

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With the economic downturn in Nauru, the drastic change in people's purchasing power, loss of paid employment, standardised salaries and working without wages have forced a change not only in lifestyle but also in social arrangements. There has been a rekindling of traditional systems, with people bartering food, helping out disadvantaged families and building up communal ties and social activities. Families are moving into larger groupings – some households have up to 26 members — with everyone sharing what they have.

Emerging social problems include vastly increased unemployment. Younger people especially have become victims of the situation, with little opportunity for education or employment. The small portion of the population who work have to support large and extended families. Alcohol and cigarettes are luxury items as people struggle to meet costs. Kava drinking has picked up in the local population and is seen by some as a cheaper alternative to alcohol.

Food security is the biggest need of the people. In the absence of financial security and with limitations on alternative food sources, the problem is chronic and will be so for the next few years. Food insecurity and financial insecurity have in some cases translated into social instability, with petty thieving, illegal trading and black-market niches for basic items, such as fuel, cigarettes and alcohol, on the rise.

Items in the shops are not too expensive compared to other PICTs, but they are expensive for the local people. Prices are high in comparison to people's purchasing abilities; thus, many households go without most imported items and purchase only basic necessities. Price control on food and other basic items is non-existent, and fuel scarcity – with electricity regularly being turned off for most of the day – also has a lot of influence on prices (fuel costs, cost of fish, frozen food, etc.). With the lack of fuel, work in most government offices and the private sector has slowed down.

Dietary changes

Realistically the ability to buy determines the choice of food. Seafood now provides the main source of protein for more than 98 per cent of Nauruan households. It is also the main source of income for the majority of fishers. Nauruans who

have for the past few generations not had to fish for food are learning fishing technologies and adapting to a new way of life, with men, women and children out on the reef daily, gleaning and fishing.

Many households now have 'kitchen' or backyard gardens, initiated with FAO's assistance, where they have planted vegetables and fruit trees. The country has good soil and sufficient land area to support small-scale gardening. More people are eating cassava and breadfruit instead of rice. Kitchen gardens are gradually helping out in the provision of vegetables and fruit, but many households have only two meals a day, with leftovers from breakfast kept for children's meals during the day. The social system has provided a way out, with people firming up family bonds and bartering of food taking place. In addition, preparation of food has changed drastically. With the shortage in fuel supply, people now cook on open fires and kerosene stoves.

Apart from increased fishing participation, people have adopted coping strategies such as a shift to other protein and general food sources. Noddy birds, a local delicacy that in the past was targeted only on ceremonial occasions, are now caught in large numbers on a daily basis for food and income. Every evening men go out in groups to catch birds in the pinnacles in the mined-out areas in the middle of the island. Catches are between 40 and 60 birds per group of 5–6 men; some groups catch up to 100 birds a night. The birds are sold at \$1.00 each.

Changes to fishing activities/catches

Fishing pressure and intensity have increased dramatically in the last three years, with almost all households involved in fishing. Fishing and fisheries resources play a major role in sustaining people's livelihoods and have become the fall-back option for most people. The dynamics of fishing have totally changed, with children, women and men increasing fishing participation, targeted species changing depending on what people can get, and distribution systems changing with increased selling and sharing of seafood. Those who are in paid employment buy imported food-stuffs and exchange them for fish with family members who are unemployed and engaged in

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fishing. In some instances where most members of a family fish, or where they have good fishers, catches are distributed for free to other families.

Children are not usually at school because of the fuel shortage, and are increasingly taking up food-gathering and fishing activities. In some districts men have organised themselves into fishing groups and the catches are sold and the money shared among the group.

Although fishing involvement has rapidly increased, the gear used has largely remained the same. The use of powered boats, night diving and other advanced gear is restricted by lack of fuel, lack of affordability, an inability to buy batteries, and so on. Outboard motors are rarely used and pelagic fishing is dominated by those with canoes (usually Tuvaluans and i-Kiribati).

People are generalists, collecting all invertebrate or finfish species they come across. They are starting to walk longer distances to fish or glean, and sometimes do not catch anything at all. There is a decrease in the size of catches, and also a decline in the number of catches. People are moving into harvesting and consuming species not harvested before (e.g. certain types of *bêche-de-mer* and sea urchin).

Everyone fishes around the island and there are no specific tenure restrictions to limit people fishing in areas outside their own district. The reef area of Nauru is very narrow and has an immediate drop-off that allows people to spear-dive and fish for pelagics. In some ways this has helped to keep total pressure off reef fish as people can still access these fish without boats. People are consuming finfish species that were not usually targeted in the past. All sizes of fish are caught and consumed, which could mean the total loss of certain species if management strategies are not implemented.

Management

The recent increase in intensity of fishing has placed a lot of pressure on reef resources. Given the increase in fisheries exploitation, there is a need for some form of management of resource use. At the moment there is no form of fisheries management, although at the district level people have started to adopt mechanisms that could address the issues, and there are continuing attempts to put in place marine-protected areas. Nauru's open-access tenureship means that everyone is free to fish anywhere on the island. This is very different from other Pacific Island countries. Because of the lack of traditional authority, the protocols seen in other countries are not practised in Nauru. There are no customary regulations, district laws or unwritten understandings on fishing activities, such as size limits, quotas, gear restrictions, use of scuba, or imports (coastal species).

The dietary trend in Nauru is a reversal of the pattern in other Pacific Island countries, where the shift is from dependence on traditional foods to dependence on imported and processed foods. The Nauruan people are first-timers to fishing, bird hunting and kitchen gardening. It is a challenging time for those trying their hand at budgeting on their small pay packets. Women and children are the most affected. The enthusiasm people have and their ongoing attempts at building communities, linking up with families and helping each other will help households in the future.

The challenge will be putting in place management interventions that ensure food security and sustain the long-term livelihoods of the people. The ecosystem approach to management and the need to protect and sustain ecosystems, as well as resources and the people who depend on them, will be the way to go.

Every day, women are out gleaning on the reef top



Children also engage in all forms of fishing.
A young boy showing his catch