

Secretariat of the Pacific Community

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Country Statement for the Cook Islands



COUNTRY STATEMENT

THE COOK ISLANDS.

The setting of the Cook Islands is that of a small and remote nation. It encompasses 15 Islands that are dispersed over an exclusive economic zone of 2 million sq.km area. There is a population of only 20 thousand, half whom reside on the capital island Rarotonga.

ITS MARINE SECTOR,

Marine resources are rated as a primary economic sector. Over the past five years marine products have accounted for an average of 72% of total exports. Cultured black pearls are the main export and though the current export figures are about NZD\$5 million dollars the government estimates that production is actually of the order of NZD\$12 million dollars. This industry is second only to 50 thousand tourists in terms of annual foreign exchange. Other marine export products include the live ornamental fish trade, mother of pearl shell (which includes trochus) and the fresh fish trade. A relatively modest amount of revenue is received on behalf of the crown for licensing offshore fishing. Closer to shore, our small local fishing industry, trades mainly pelagic fish, almost exclusively on the domestic market.

In addition, marine resources are a fundamental source of food. Subsistence fishing (ranging from reef gleaning to near-shore fishing) is practised widely, throughout the Cook Islands. In a 1996 national census it was reported that 67% of households had engaged in this activity.

GOVERNMENT,

In the context of this being a meeting of Pacific nation Heads of Fisheries we would like to readjust the setting and focus on our current government situation. Since about 1996 the Cook Islands Government has embarked on a widespread program of reform. Some changes already effected include,

- 1) Downsizing of public servant numbers by 2/3rds in order to operate a responsible fiscal budget.
- 2) Initiating the devolution process of power from the central government on Rarotonga to the local government (i.e Island Council) on each Island.
- 3) An Investment Corporation is managing government assets or selling them with an intention to promote private sector development.
- 4) Heads of Ministries (HOMs) are now accountable by contract to an output performance and fiscal responsibility of their budgets.
- 5) Government ministries may be further restructured with an intention to better align functions. Possibly through the merging of Ministries.

AND MINISTRY OF MARINE RESOURCES.

Consistent with government aspirations the Ministry of Marine Resources has defined its mission statement as follows "To ensure the sustainable development of the living and non-living marine resources of the Cook Islands for the benefit of the Cook Islanders". We would like to highlight some of the current issues that define the boundaries of our abilities and pose challenges for the near future.

- 1) Digital Information and Desktop Technology: Instruments that collect digital information are proving to be field, cost and information efficient over traditional techniques. Similarly, e-mail is now the preferred mode of communication. In addition, desktop computing power has greatly increased our ability to process data in-house. Particularly in resource assessment where simple GIS and statistical analysis can be conducted. Computing packages can also be tailored to fit our needs.
- 2) Regional Networks: Regional bodies are adequately catering to our needs and we are grateful for the funding provided by major donor countries. The high level of specialisation in regional bodies is an important element and vital to small countries such as the Cooks, which cannot sustain that level of technical expertise themselves and yet periodically must have access to it.
- 3) Staff Capacity Building: The train the trainers concept has provided us the inhouse ability to more adequately maintain extension services to resource users, particularly fishers.
- 4) Awareness Raising in the Community: There is a heightened level of ecological and cultural awareness in society today, particularly of conservation issues and interest in reviving traditional management systems. Whilst access to mass media, such as television, newspaper etc., is readily available, one of the most difficult challenges is to reciprocate the community needs with quality and compelling information.
- 5) Environmental Monitoring: Recognising the threats to the marine ecosystem from resource over-exploitation, poor land usage, intensive mariculture, and etc., we are attempting to implement various monitoring programs. However as there is value in the long term data-set, it essential for the Ministries with its limited resources to ensure that key variables are targeted and the appropriate techniques utilised.

IN CLOSING.

we extend our appreciation to the South Pacific Commission for enabling us with this valuable opportunity that the Heads of Fisheries Meeting presents. We hope to be constructive by sharing our experiences and that in turn we may learn from others.