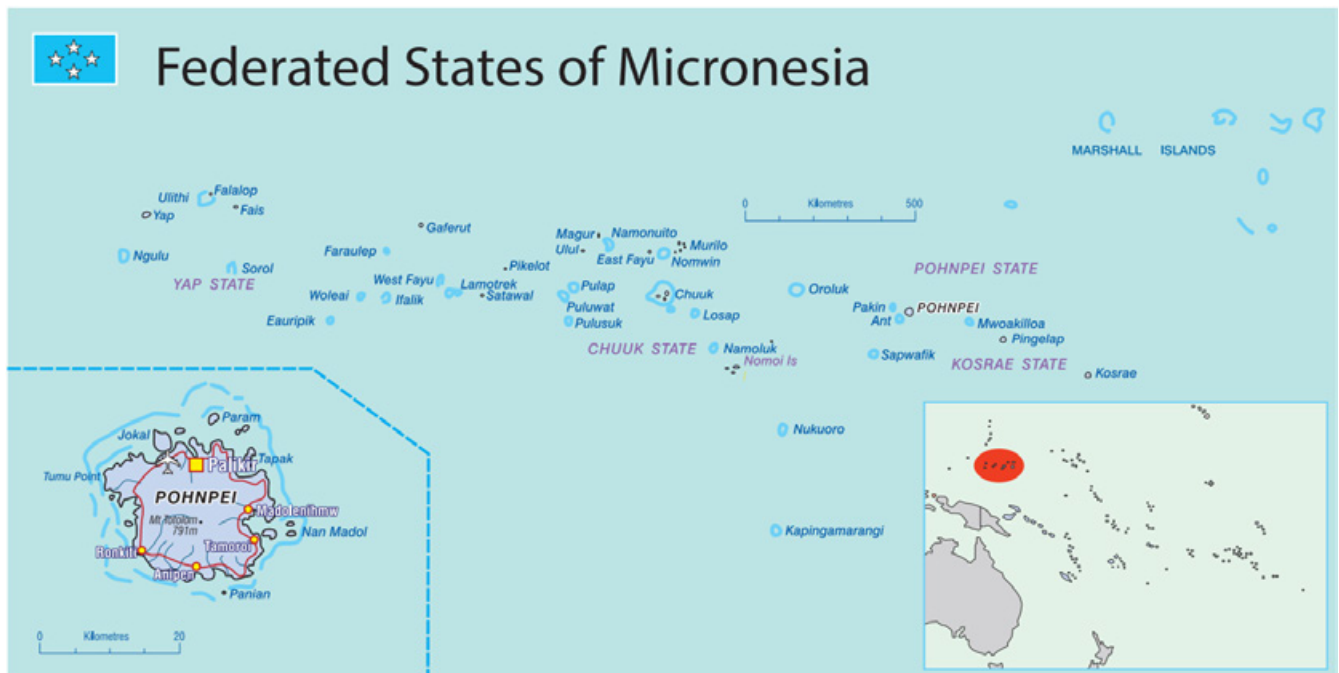


Better safe than sorry: Raising awareness about sea safety in Pohnpei

In a region where many coastal communities depend on the sea for food and livelihoods, being safe at sea is paramount. Yet tragedies at sea have revealed a lack of basic safety equipment on board artisanal and small-scale fishing vessels. A sea safety awareness and grab bag programme that began in 2021, has been well received in Pohnpei, and offers benefits to other communities in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).



In FSM, coastal fisheries play a key role in the livelihoods of coastal communities. It has been estimated that the average amount of fish consumed per person per year in FSM is 69 kg (with the majority provided by subsistence fishing), and more than 50% of households derive their primary or secondary incomes from catching and selling fish (Gillett 2016).

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Sea safety in FSM – the situation

Enhancing sea safety for all local fishermen in FSM is critical for fishermen, their families and communities. FSM does not yet have an established maritime safety code, which can lead to local communities not feeling the need or the support for any safety practice responsibilities at sea. A pervasive attitude is, “If you can drive a boat, you’re good to go!”

In recent years, however, numerous mariners have lost their lives at sea in the waters around Pohnpei. Most of these cases later revealed a lack of basic sea safety equipment on board, such as lifejackets, a communication device and a personal locator beacon (PLB). In an emergency situation where a PLB has been activated, the coast guard instantly sends out a continuous 24-hour satellite signal on the PLB’s location to assist potential rescuers.

Sea safety programme developed in Pohnpei

An integrated programme was started in Pohnpei in 2021 – a partnership among the Pacific Community, FSM’s National Oceanic Resource Management Authority (NORMA), and the Office of Pohnpei State Fisheries and Aquaculture (OFA). The programme focuses on the development and monitoring of artisanal FADs (FADs), data collection on artisanal catch and effort (and non-FAD related), data collection on stranded or lost drifting industrial FADs, and sea safety for small boats. This article focuses on sea safety, which has several components: communications and awareness related to sea safety; safety grab bags; and distributing boat stickers and painting small vessels bright orange.

Sea safety awareness and communication

Through the support of various Pohnpei partners, various awareness activities were carried out to ensure that our message on sea safety was well heard and understood. Activities included:

- **Community outreach** – Special awareness meetings were held with communities, village leaders, and title holders on sea safety related to small boats, and other components of the programme.
- **Billboards** – Two sea safety billboard signs were erected; one between a major boat ramp in the heart of town and another at a popular fish landing site on the other side of town.
- **School visits** – Several school visits were organised by NORMA and OFA.
- **Events** – Awareness activities were held during special events and functions such as World Tuna Day and International Women’s Day.
- **Fishing club** – With support from the local fishing club through its regular monthly fishing tournaments, we spoke with fishers about sea safety.
- **Island visits** – Travel to Pohnpei’s surrounding islands with the OFA team helped to deliver our important message about sea safety.
- **Radio** – A radio announcement was developed and included a two-minute message about sea safety, which was announced five times a day.

Promoting sea safety awareness through a variety of activities.



• SPC activities •

- ◆ **Newspaper** – Several newspaper articles were written regarding the launch of the programme, as well as important safety workshops and the delivery of safety grab bags.
- ◆ **T-shirts** - T shirts with sea safety messages were printed and distributed.
- ◆ **Local workshops** - Working closely with business owners and fishers, the programme provided basic outboard motor workshops as another opportunity to deliver the message regarding sea safety, and to ensure fishers know how to maintain and service their engines properly.

Sea safety grab bags

In September 2021, 86 safety grab bags – containing a PLB, lifejacket, compass, flashlight, mirror and whistle – were distributed to Pohnpeian fishers who had to meet the following criteria to qualify for this free giveaway:

- ◆ Own a boats with a single 60 hp engine or less; the assumption being that owners of boats with larger engines can afford their own safety equipment.
- ◆ Boats must have visible boat names on the sides, and must support the color of the municipality it is moored in. For example, Kolonia municipal's colour is black, Kitti municipal is white, Sokehs municipal is yellow, Nett is purple, U is blue and Madolenihmw is red. This will also assist with the Pohnpei vessel identification process.
- ◆ Every boat captain must undergo a short training session on how and when to operate each sea safety device.
- ◆ Must be willing to assist in search and rescue operations.
- ◆ Fishers who received a sea safety grab bag were required to provide their catch effort data to OFA, in support of the Pohnpei State data collection programme for coastal fisheries.

In addition to safety equipment, over 100 orange watertight buckets with lids for holding sea safety equipment and keeping personal items dry were also distributed, along with boat name stickers to help identify boats.



Orange bucket initiative for fishers to keep important things dry such as a cell phones, safety equipment, and food and water.

Fishers receiving sea safety kits and equipment.





Assisting fishers with boat registration – Fishers receive a sticker of their boat's name.

Distribution of boat stickers and boat painting operations

Orange paint – Tins of safety orange paint were purchased to improve visibility on boats to aid maritime search and rescue operations, as encouraged by the United States Coast Guard, which states that “A white or blue coloured boat in the middle of the ocean will look just like a white chop of waves”. Over 50 boats have since been painted and this initiative has shown other fishers who were not directly involved with this programme to also paint their boats with some amount of orange so they are more visible. One group (URMWAKA Inc) in Pohnpei took advantage of this opportunity and applied it towards their community by organising an event by the sea, where communities painted boats together.

Boat stickers – Recognising the challenges of fishers putting boat names on their boats, over 100 boat stickers were also printed and distributed to these boat captains and boat owners to assist with boat registration efforts.



Orange paint provided by SPC for the sea safety programme increases the visibility of boats during search and rescue operations.

In summary

This two-year sea safety programme can be considered to be positive, due to the following.

- The 86 sea safety grab bags provided by SPC, plus ongoing support from local donors and embassies, has meant a huge cost reduction in search and rescue operations in Pohnpei. Based on the latest data provided by a local sea safety distributor in Pohnpei, there was a noticeable increase in the sale of PLBs and EPIRBs (emergency position indicating radio beacons) from 36 units in 2020, to 222 units between 2021 and 2022.
- Each of the five islands of Pohnpei have now received the SPC grab bag three to five units based on the number of fishers on each island. One island in particular, Mwoakilloa, has created its own sea safety awareness campaign, and initiated its own community fundraising programme for the purpose of providing each of its active fishers living on Mwoakilloa and on Pohnpei with sea safety equipment.

Recognising that the success of this programme means there are now more sea safety-affiliated fishers in Pohnpei, a similar programme would definitely benefit other communities within the FSM states of Chuuk, Yap and Kosrae where sea safety for small boats is lacking.

Reference

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All photos in this article are by James Wichman, ©SPC, unless otherwise stated.

All Mwoakilloa Island boat fishers were equipped with sea safety gear, following a dedicated fundraising campaign.

