

## Raising community awareness: A starting point for sustainable management

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In most Pacific Island countries, the marine environment has been seriously damaged and catches of fish and shellfish are very low. Most fisheries agencies and fishing communities realise that catches of the most accessible fish and shellfish of the lagoon and reefs have been declining over the years. Reasons for the decline in inshore catches include overexploitation, the use of destructive fishing methods (such as dynamiting, chemicals and poisons) and environmental disturbances. Environmental disturbances have resulted from natural disasters such as cyclones and storms, as well as from human activities. Governments are concerned about damage to the marine environment and about low fish catches in village communities but their ability to deal with these problems effectively is limited. Although most island countries have national regulations in place to protect fish stocks, enforcing such laws is still difficult.

Fishing communities respect traditional knowledge concerning fish stocks and have a high level of awareness of the marine environment. Most coastal communities are traditional owners of fishing areas, thus have some degree of control over immediate inshore areas. With this mode of ownership, communities are in an ideal position to be responsible for management of resources. To enable them to take this responsibility, one of the main starting points is to make people aware of problems that exist within their marine environment. If the majority of fishers are aware of the need for conservation and the purposes of fisheries regulations, compliance is likely to be high and fisheries management will be more effective. This article describes ways of raising community awareness and outlines a process devised to appraise management success.

### Environmental programmes in schools

Introducing environmental subjects to students at an early stage is most important, as young people are receptive to learning environmental values and behaviour. Communicating information and values to the young can also be a way of raising the awareness of parents and general public. In the longer term, education of the young is one of the

best ways to protect the marine environment. Education gives people the knowledge and skills to make decisions and the ability to act on them.

All relevant government and non-governmental agencies in Samoa assist with environment-related work in schools. In this regard, students participate in activities such as essay competitions, open days and career days. Information sheets and other printed materials can be produced for teachers and students.

### Radio and television

The radio can be an effective way of increasing environmental awareness in remote communities in Pacific Island countries. Radio presentations can range from brief environmental messages to interviews with extension staff. Environmental messages are often read by an announcer at the studio. The advantages of using the radio for public awareness are that it:

- is low cost, especially if radio stations are government owned;
- allows speedy delivery of messages;
- reaches very remote areas; and
- reaches a large audience, including those who cannot read.

Alternatively an extension officer can be videotaped demonstrating work in communities. This presentation can then be shown on national television as part of awareness work.

### Printed materials

Printed materials — including newspaper advertisements and articles, newsletters, leaflets, information sheets and posters — are commonly used in awareness work. Some media releases require photographs to illustrate the messages.

Arrangements can be made with the editor of a local newspaper to print a regular column (e.g. weekly) on environmental issues such as community-based management, destructive fishing methods, and fish farming. Producing such a column, however, requires strong commitment as the

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preparation is time consuming and, as time goes on, it becomes harder to come up with new ideas for articles. To minimise these problems, it is best to plan ahead by producing a list of prospective topics and committed specialist authors.

### Direct contacts

Most awareness work will involve some element of direct contact or face-to-face interactions with people in communities, such as through meetings, public talks, and displays. Such contact is very important for any community-based programme. Scheduled meetings with teachers, church leaders, village mayors and women's committees can be used to introduce and advertise many topics such as news of a community-based programme, a new fisheries development and destructive fishing practices.

Open days and public displays are useful to familiarise the public with the work of government agencies and non-governmental organisations. An

open day can be publicised by running school competitions (in which students produce hand-painted posters, creative essays and/or songs on a selected environmental theme) which will be judged at the open day. Local businesses will often agree to sponsor prizes for these competitions.

The community-based fisheries extension programme of the Samoa Fisheries Division has assisted 76 coastal villages to develop Village Fisheries Management Plans. It is referred to as "The Extension Process" as it is the process employed by Fisheries Extension Officers when they introduce the Fisheries Community-based Programme to village communities. One of the major components of the process is awareness work, which generally involves education, training and provision of information to the public. Such awareness work continues to be vigorously undertaken alongside encouraging signs of its progress, with more than 70 villages having developed their own village management projects.



Traditional meeting houses such as these are also used for awareness work.