

Hope in the face of adversity: Pacific Island countries unite to address challenges in fisheries

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In the past few years, the Pacific Islands region has experienced an unprecedented combination of events: a series of natural disasters, including cyclones, tsunamis and floods, have hit communities hard, caused severe damage, and impacted livelihoods. On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic has further devastated the vulnerable economies of the region, leading many into significant uncertainty and hardship. Considering these challenges, the need for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture practices has become more critical than ever before. For the Pacific, fish are more than just a source of protein – they are the lifeline that sustains the region's people and economies.

The Pacific Community Heads of Fisheries meeting is an event organised by SPC since the late 1990s and brings together SPC's members to discuss key issues facing the fisheries and aquaculture sector. During the 15th SPC Heads of Fisheries meeting, held at SPC's headquarters in Noumea, New Caledonia, delegates from 25 member territories and countries came together to discuss the resilience and adaptability of the region's fisheries and aquaculture sector. The meeting was a testament to the Pacific's unwavering spirit of unity and collaboration in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Neville Smith, Director of the Pacific Community's Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems Division, summed up the meeting by saying, "This *hui* [meeting/gathering] is our once-a-year opportunity for blue Pacific *kaitiaki* [guardians] to *korero* [talk/discuss], and brings the best of

history, knowledge and science to bear on solutions for our contemporary challenges. It is a privilege to share the journey of *kaitiakitanga* [stewardship] with our members."

The meeting was a diverse collection of success stories and best practices from members, with each one generously sharing an example of what can be achieved through community and cooperation. In Tonga, local fishers are diversifying their catches by targeting the giant diamondback squid beyond the reef, thereby alleviating pressure on reef fish populations and creating new economic opportunities for local fishers. The Federated States of Micronesia uses anchored fish aggregating devices to attract pelagic fish, which provides local fishers with better chances of successful catches. In Solomon Islands, fisheries officers have received training on regulations and enforcement, leading to more sustainable lagoon fishing practices. French Polynesia has made considerable progress in improving the monitoring of its offshore tuna fisheries using e-reporting apps, which ensure more accurate and timely data collection.

A delegate from Tuvalu summed up the collective sentiment of the meeting, saying, "We have made significant progress in improving our role as stewards of our Blue Pacific, but there is always more work to be done. We are grateful for this opportunity to collaborate with our Pacific family to address the challenges facing our fisheries and aquaculture sector."

The Pacific Community Heads of Fisheries meeting was a truly special event, especially considering that it was the first



in-person meeting after three years of virtual gatherings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Delegates appreciated meeting each other face-to-face again. The meeting highlighted the region's dedication to sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, and highlighted the deep connections that exist among Pacific Island countries and territories. The warmth and camaraderie that were present during the discussions demonstrated the power of unity and the strong Pacific spirit that drives the region forward.

As the delegates bade farewell to one another, they carried with them a shared sense of responsibility to build a better future for their fisheries and aquaculture. In the wake of unprecedented challenges, the meeting served as a powerful reminder of the unwavering spirit of unity that has come to define Pacific nations. With this spirit as their guide, these countries are willing to face the challenges ahead with the knowledge that they have the support of a strong community in their pursuit of a better future.

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Plenary session at HoF. ©SPC



Participants of the 15th Heads of Fisheries, held in Noumea, New Caledonia in March 2023. ©SPC