



## SPC supports the establishment of Va'ulele Yaubula, the first community-owned pearl-meat farm in Fiji

Va'ulele Yaubula pearl-meat farm personnel deploying 5-m lengths of spat rope bearing hatchery-seeded pearl oysters onto a backbone rope of their pearl farm longline. (image: © Tim Pickering, SPC)

*It was a proud moment for members of the community pearl-meat farm at Va'ulele Village in Savusavu Bay, when the farm's longline structures were installed in their traditional fishing rights area and spat lines bearing juvenile oysters were deployed.*

The farm aims to grow blacklip pearl oysters, *Pinctada margaritifera*, to a size of 80 g. This is different from what is typically done when growing oysters for pearls, where juveniles are grown to a size of 200 g<sup>+</sup> before they are seeded with nuclei to make round pearls. In anticipation of post-COVID-19 economic recovery, these smaller oysters will be supplied either fresh or frozen in the shell to high-end hotels, restaurants and oyster bars in Fiji and east Asia. Advantages of growing oysters for pearl-meat include: 1) the grow-out time is shortened from two to three years for round pearl oysters, to 18 months for pearl-meat oysters; and 2) pearl-meat farms are not dependent on highly skilled (and highly paid) pearl seeding technicians in the production process.

Through this initiative, the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems (FAME) Division of the Pacific Community (SPC) is working with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and JHunter Pearls (JHP) to bring about meaningful engagement in Fiji's pearl aquaculture industry by coastal communities. This is in fulfilment of commitment #2 of the 16 voluntary commitments made by Fiji at the United Nations Oceans Conference in 2017. This commitment recognises the sustainable initiatives of Fiji's pearl industry and the Fijian government's support in developing the industry through community-owned and -operated farms as a means

of providing tangible economic benefits for coastal indigenous communities while safeguarding coral reef ecosystems.

FAME, through its New Zealand Government-funded Sustainable Pacific Aquaculture Project, is contributing toward construction costs of this prototype pearl-meat longline farm, which is in the pristine waters fronting Va'ulele Village in Savusavu Bay. SPC's Mariculture Specialist, Jamie Whitford, is providing training to Va'ulele community members in the technicalities of farm management and maintenance. As described in an earlier *Fisheries Newsletter* article,<sup>1</sup> WCS has been assisting the Va'ulele community with business aspects of the venture, such as mentoring to set up a legal entity to farm pearls in their traditional fishing rights area, and in business literacy to manage their new farm operations. SPC has provided revenue and costings projections for the community's business plan.

In late November 2020, the first 1000 m of spat ropes bearing juvenile oysters were moved onto the Va'ulele Yaubula farm from JHP's hatchery and nursery at Savusavu. Guided in their tasks by JHP's Atish Kumar, Va'ulele community members involved in the farm were onboard JHP's barge in order to gain work experience in the handling and setting of pearl oyster spat lines. The spat will take around 18 months

<sup>1</sup> <http://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/yi8pz>





During a training session led via Zoom from Noumea by SPC Mariculture Specialist Jamie Whitford, Va'ulele Yaubula staff Salanieta Wavanua, Laisiasa Ravolaca, Akariva Rogocake and Vasiti Vakarauleka practice the correct knots for use in pearl farm longline operations. (image: © Tim Pickering, SPC)

to grow to a harvestable size, where they will be ready to serve steamed in the half-shell like a scallop, as a new seafood specialty in high-end restaurants.

In the planning stages of this initiative, it was envisaged that the training of pearl farm personnel at two communities in Fiji would be provided by SPC's pearl expert Jamie Whitford. COVID-19-related travel restrictions, however, have dictated that in-person training sessions be replaced by online training via Zoom, with practical components carried out through work experience attachments within JHP's farm operations, and with follow-up technical support provided by Jamie when COVID-19-related travel restrictions are lifted.

Va'ulele Village is just out of range of internet connectivity, so 45 community members travelled by truck to Ra Marama Hall in Savusavu for a Zoom tutorial by Jamie in Noumea on pearl biology. SPC's Inland Aquaculture Advisor, Tim Pickering, set up the computers for the Zoom conference, and WCS's Vutaieli Vitukawalu provided Fijian translations of key points. Practical exercises included dissection to show

the anatomy of a pearl oyster, and correct knots for use on a pearl oyster longline farm. Va'ulele participants expressed appreciation for the training, saying it was very useful and had increased their understanding about pearl farming.

This is the first of a planned series of community pearl farms associated with JHP, which will support livelihoods through supplementary income while promoting the sustainable use of marine resources.

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#### For more information:

*Jamie Whitford*  
Mariculture Specialist, SPC  
[jamiew@spc.int](mailto:jamiew@spc.int)

*Timothy Pickering*  
Inland Aquaculture Adviser, SPC  
[timp@spc.int](mailto:timp@spc.int)