

Vhalik: Young Pacific Island students take the mic to preserve fisheries

“Sustainable fishing”: What does that mean today in New Caledonia?

Students from the University of New Caledonia (UNC) explore this question in a 20-part series of creative, lively and sensitive audio broadcasts. They’re produced through a partnership among UNC, the Pacific Community¹ and New Caledonia’s “La 1ère” media network.

Connecting science and culture

The students who participated in the project are enrolled in a research and mediation class as part of their bachelor’s degree programme in literature, languages and the humanities at UNC. Non-commercial fishers are responsible for 75% of New Caledonia’s fish production, so the social aspect of fishing is uniquely important there. Thanks to the students’ passion for the Pacific cultures and local languages, and to their training on awareness and legal aspects of coastal fisheries, they can now tell these stories from a unique perspective, connecting marine environmental management and culture.

“Did you know that New Caledonia is home to the world’s biggest lagoon?” one student asks in a mischievous tone. Another, discussing the trochus snail, explains, “If they’re caught when they’re too small, they won’t be able to reproduce.”

With each episode of the *Vhalik*² radio series on sustainable fishing, listeners are introduced to species such as parrotfish, Spanish mackerel or octopus, different ways to fish for them, and the clever tips that elders used to catch them not so long ago. And every episode has a common thread: to tell the story of fisheries, their importance in the daily lives of Pacific societies, and the need to preserve them for future generations.

Rich and personal stories

To produce their radio programmes, the students interviewed fishers from every corner of New Caledonia and Futuna. They asked about changes in the fisheries resources, the regulations in force, and fishing practices. In consultation with fishery authorities, SPC’s sustainable fishing specialists then helped them deepen the technical and scientific content of their broadcasts.

The result: rich and unique audio accounts that are also profoundly human. That’s because the fishers they interviewed are uncles, brothers, friends, family members and close friends. As children, some of the students used to go out on fishing trips with their elders.

Vhalik isn’t just a university assignment, it is also an authentic and appealing radio project. Speaking into the microphone, these young people finally recount a piece of their history.

Reaching a wide audience

Broadcast over the radio – a very popular medium in New Caledonia – the series also seeks to involve younger generations in building and disseminating a tool that can create awareness of sustainable fishing practices. The episodes are heard during primetime weekday hours and re-broadcast on summer weekends in 2022–2023. Each one includes a reminder about local regulations or a conclusion about sustainable fishing. Available as a podcast, this series can also be used for teaching and can help create awareness among young audiences about the sustainable management of marine resources.



Students refine their topics and look for contacts as they write their stories about fishing on foot for mangrove oysters and crabs, or fishing from a boat for groupers or snappers. Image: ©Céline Muron, SPC

¹ Division of Fisheries, Aquaculture and Marine Ecosystems, in collaboration with the Pacific Territories Regional Project for Sustainable Ecosystem Management (PROTEGE)

² *Vhalik* means “speech” in Fwâi and Pije, two Kanak languages that are spoken primarily in Hychen and nearby areas of New Caledonia.

Extracts

Trochus snail



©B. Preuss

“Better to be good than beautiful.” I know one creature that doesn’t have to choose between the two. It’s the trochus snail, with its beautiful mother of pearl shell. The trochus is popular with New Caledonians for its delicious flavour, whether in salads, pickled, or sauteed. Today, in the Southern Province, they can be only harvested if they are between 9 cm and 12 cm.

... If they’re caught when they’re too small, they won’t be able to reproduce. And if they’re caught when they’re too big, they won’t be able to reproduce when they’re in peak form. So think twice about that the next time you go fishing!

 Solène Prigent

Parrotfish



©M. Juncker

Put your cellphone and tablet down. I’m going to take you fishing for parrotfish. It’s an herbivorous fish that spends most of its time scraping the surface of the coral to feed off the algae that hides there. This restricts the growth of the algae that keeps our coral reefs from growing well. ... Now that you’re an expert, I’ll let you take your spear and catch some of this delicious fish. But make sure to leave enough of them in the water for future generations so that they can fill their plates, too. And we want to make sure that we can continue to enjoy our beautiful fine sand beaches. Parrotfish excrete ground-up coral and an adult can create approximately 80 kg of sand/year.

 Elepe Jiane



Divided into groups, the students worked with mentors who are experts in sustainable fishing (left-hand photo, centre) Bernard Fao (Southern Province); right-hand photo (r.) Thomas Wayaridri (Pacific Community). Images: ©Céline Muron, SPC



Today, I'm going to take you atule fishing on Futuna, where I live. Over there, on the ocean-going canoe, do you see them? Yes, they're women. Sit down and I'll explain what they're doing. ... Only women from the village practise this fishing technique. It's called "fai atule" and they've been doing it for generations. ... It's a seasonal fishery and there are several restrictions. You and I can't participate unless we're from the village because that could cause the fish to flee.

 *Velania Savea*



From generation to generation, our elders have taught us the right way to fish for them. Take only the adults and only what is absolutely necessary so that the sea can adjust on its own ... My grandmother used to fish for octopus with my mother and I used to fish for octopus with my mother. Will I be able to do the same with my own children?

 *Mirella Abdelkader*



Today, I'm taking you to one of New Caledonia's beautiful mangroves to gather a shellfish that I adore: the mangrove oyster... Did you know that the oyster does us a huge favour? Throughout its life, it filters the water from the mangrove and cleans out the tiny bits of organic waste. Whether you eat them as oyster tartare or on a seafood plate, they're a real treat. But don't eat too many - if they're over-fished, they could disappear from the mangroves ... and from our plates!

 *Marcellina Rory*

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the mentors who worked with the students on this project and helped them draft their scripts: Bernard Fao (Southern Province), Laura Domerque (Northern Province), Ludivine Deyzieux (Southern Province Coastal Fishers Federation), Luën Lopue (New Caledonia Chamber of Agriculture and Fisheries), Thomas Wayaridri (Pacific Community), Matthieu Juncker (Pacific Community, PROTEGE project), and Aymeric Desurmont (Pacific Community).

For more information:

Stéphanie Geneix-Rabault
Université de la Nouvelle-Calédonie
Département Lettres, Langues et Sciences Humaines
stephanie.rabault@unc.nc

Céline Muron
Coastal & Community Fisheries Information and
Outreach Officer, SPC
celinem@spc.int

Solène Devez
Legal Research Assistant, SPC
solened@spc.int