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Fisheries: UNDER-REPORTING FISH CATCHES A CONCERN

Resilience of Pacific coral reefs, conference told

Samisoni Pareti

Islands countries must change the way they report annual fish catches to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), an international conference on coral reefs has heard.

A group of scientists from Canada's University of British Columbia says current figures provided by islands nations, with the exception of Fiji, are not telling a critical part of the full story.

Catches from the important subsistence fisheries sector—that is those who fish for their own—are excluded from the figures currently supplied by islands governments.

"Between 1950 to 2004, total catch figures in 15 of the 20 Pacific Islands countries were at least two times higher than those reported to the FAO," Dr Dirk Zeller one of the scientists who did the study told journalists who covered the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium at the US city of Fort Lauderdale in July.

"We expect the figure to increase once we do a follow-up study in the Pacific."

The problem the Canadian scientist said is compounded by the current practice of having foreign affairs ministries or customs dispatching the figures to the UN agency, and not the fisheries ministry.

"In American Samoa for example, actual catches were 17 times higher than the reported data. In Guam, it was 4.5 times higher.

"In Hawaii, catches in recreational fishing (mainly related to its billion dollar tourism industry) were not reported until just recently.

"But recreational fishing catches as much as the commercial fisheries sector."

Zeller, a marine scientist, did the recent study with colleagues Dr Daniel Pauly and Jennifer Jacquet.

Jacquet not only looked at the annual catch figures in Fiji and Solomon Islands, she also surveyed East Africa fishery in Mozambique and Tanzania.

Zeller did add that Fiji, out of all the countries in the Pacific, was an exception as it includes coral reef fishery catches in the total catch figure it submits to FAO.

He said the island nation made the change as a result of at least two studies done in the early 1990s and in 2000. His colleague Pauly said subsistence fishing catches ought to be included in the annual catch figures since it supports millions of people.

"You have a situation where when planning policy, governments make the wrong decisions because they are not taking into account this very important sector," said Dr Pauly.

Governments, the scientists say, must also be aware of the implications of subsistence fishery to food security.

Higher prices of imported food will force more and more people to resort to coral reef fishing, thus the importance of including



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subsistence fishing catches in their planning.

Coral resilience

The resilience of coral reefs in the Pacific also intrigued scientists who attended the international symposium.

They noted for instance that while coral reef systems in the Pacific and the Caribbean had both suffered from coral bleaching, recovery had only been seen in the former.

"It's been good news all around," said Dr Ken Mackay, outgoing director of the University of the South Pacific's Institute of Marine Studies.

"Our monitors around the islands of the Pacific are all reporting recovery from the bleaching coral suffered in 2000 and 2002 to 2004."

The consensus seems to suggest that healthy corals recover much more quickly.

Signs of coral reef recovery, Mackay said in his report, had also been seen in Samoa, indicating that the system has also recovered from the effects of a cyclone it suffered three to four years ago.

"The impact of the tsunami on corals in the Solomon Islands is still to be known and we will need to continue monitoring there.

"For Tuvalu, monitoring for now is limited to the lagoons of Funafuti and figures are suggesting a somewhat reduced coral cover.

"This can be attributed we suspect to land degradation in the country's capital."

MacKay's report on the status of coral reefs in the Pacific came as colleagues warned that baby fish, a delicacy in many Pacific islands diets, will be threatened as an impact of global warming.

The warning came from Dr Philip Munday, a marine scientist with Australia's James Cook University in his presentation at the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium.

Studies done by his Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies suggest that with a rise in ocean temperature, the ability to survive by baby fish referred to by marine biologists as coral reef fish larvae will be affected.

"Warmer waters will affect how far fish larvae will disperse into the deep ocean after being released by their mother," Munday told journalists covering the symposium.

"Rise in water temperature will also affect their ability to return to a coral reef where then can feed and grow."

"We all must monitor the health of our coral reefs ensuring that their conditions don't deteriorate," said Munday.

"We must also promote marine protected areas (MPA) to reduce other stresses like overfishing."

Interesting data: Research is also raising interesting data about fish larvae.

A study by a group of scientists in Kimbe Bay in Papua New Guinea seem to suggest a link between larvae and rainforest leaves, which explains why fish larvae tend to return to natal reefs, or reefs where they were born.

Dr Bob Warner of the University of California, Santa Barbara said these coral reef fish larvae are prolific swimmers, with some estimated to swim for up to 30 kilometres.

In another presentation at the international conference, a promoter

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of New Caledonia's newly listed World Heritage site says the success of the site will depend on its management plan.

Dr Jean-Brice Herrenschmidt, a Noumea-based anthropologist, in his paper entitled 'Coral Reef Management in the Pacific Islands: Governance at Risk,' spoke of the work he and two of his colleagues had done in New Caledonia in the lead-up to the World Heritage listing.

Since the site—comprising six coral reef clusters—will have to be managed by locals with the coordination of their respective provincial administration, Herrenschmidt said preparing a management plan that will work has been the greatest challenge.

"We have to actually go down to the communities and sit with the chiefs and their people in order to secure consensus on a management structure," said Herrenschmidt.

"Since the Kanak governance community is complex and varied, it has been quite a challenge to work with them individually and it takes up a lot of time."

According to the French anthropologist who had also done similar work in Vanuatu, the Kanak's traditional governance system has been severely disrupted and weakened by the French colonisers.

Strong-handed tactics by the French army in the Loyalty Islands in the 1980s had also severed relations and the island, according to Herrenschmidt, still carries emotional trauma from the conflict.

"Also challenging is the French law which stipulates that the lagoon and 81.2 metres from the beach into the inland belongs to the state.

"When 16 paramount chiefs of Loyalty wrote to the French President in 2001 asking that they be given custody of resources in their coastal waters, they were told that favouring one ethnic community over another is forbidden in the French constitution."

All these obstacles have been overcome Herrenschmidt said, and today they have established a local committee in each of New Caledonia's three provinces of north, south and the Loyalty Islands.

He said with the territory's six marine clusters now in the World Heritage List, the French social scientist hopes to have a workable management plan by the end of 2009.

Documentation for the listing, he said was the result of collaboration between him and his two colleagues of Sven Menu, an environmental lawyer and Pascal Hebert, a marine biologist.

The three formed a company called GIE Oceancide to help with their work.

• *Samisoni Pareti won a Seaweb fellowship to cover the 11th International Coral Reefs Symposium held in Fort Lauderdale, Florida in July.*