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IMPROVING FISHERIES MANAGEMENT IN PALAU'S NORTHERN REEFS

Working with fishermen in the northernmost waters of the Republic of Palau, The Nature Conservancy helped launch the Northern Reef Fisheries Cooperative (NRFC). The cooperative's mission is to promote sustainable fisheries management that ensures economic and social benefits by engaging fishermen, markets and governments.

SMALLER, FEWER FISH

For Palauans, fishing is in their blood — it is part of their culture and defines who they are. Older fishermen remember the time when a fisherman could catch enough fish to feed his family, quickly and with simple fishing gear. Today, it takes more time and effort to feed one's family. More and more people are fishing, and larger quantities of fish are being caught. Foreign vessels plunder Palauan waters, often fishing illegally. As a result, fish populations are declining, putting Palau's traditional way of life at risk.

The northern states of Ngarchelong and Kayangel have the second largest reefs in Palau and a long fishing tradition. The fishermen from these states approached the Conservancy with their worries: fish were getting smaller and each trip landed fewer and fewer fish. They didn't understand why this was happening or what to do about it.

FISHER ENGAGEMENT AND SCIENCE PROVIDE ANSWERS

To address fishermen's concerns, the Conservancy worked with fishermen to assess the condition of fish stocks and integrate their local knowledge into the analysis. Results from the assessments show that fish populations are indeed declining; two-thirds of the fish being caught are small juvenile fish that have not yet reproduced and therefore are not able to contribute to maintaining the fish population.

This was the evidence the fishermen needed. It was clear that their current fishing practices were unsustainable, and they wanted to do something about it. The seriousness of the problem brought the two states together to form the Northern Reef Fisheries Cooperative (NRFC), which aims to recover fish stocks and manage fisheries sustainably to benefit local communities and protect marine resources and biodiversity.

ENFORCEMENT

From the onset, the fishermen realized that fishing restrictions would be useless without proper enforcement to prevent poaching. However, they felt daunted at the thought of trying to police large expanses of ocean and control foreign vessels equipped with large motors that allow them to easily flee enforcement.

To address this issue, the Conservancy partnered with WildAID, a non-governmental organization specializing in enforcement. Together they installed high-powered video cameras, trained local rangers and helped expand their legal authority so that fisheries regulations are enforced and reefs are protected. The Conservancy's and the NRFC's shared vision is to improve enforcement and local capacity to allow communities to eliminate illegal fishing and recover fish stocks.



TOUGH CHOICES LEAD TO SOUND REGULATIONS

The long-term sustainability of Palau's fisheries depends on tough choices that affect fishermen's livelihoods, families and community relationships. NRFC recognizes that it needs to demonstrate the economic benefits from improved fisheries management and also help fishermen find alternative sources of income. The Conservancy is helping in this process by working with fishermen so they have more control over the price of their catch and the markets they can access, with the ultimate goal of allowing them to fish less while still earning a living from fishing.

Through discussion, negotiation and compromise, NRFC worked with fishers, community leaders and policy makers to implement a strict set of regulations with far-reaching implications.

It agreed to:

- close the fishing grounds to non-community members;
- require that all fishers operate with a license and set daily catch limits;
- ban for three years the fishing of five species of grouper to allow stocks to recover and explore the possibility of harvesting other underexploited fish species;
- explore the economic viability of alternate income sources;
- establish mechanisms and processes to allow fishermen more control of markets and pricing for their catch; and
- train local fishermen to serve as rangers and increase surveillance to prevent illegal fishing.

WHAT'S NEXT

As NRFC and its respective governments continue to protect their fisheries, it is also serving as a model of co-management and fisheries reform that will truly benefit local fishermen and community members. The Conservancy is taking the lessons learned in Palau and applying them in other countries around the world. As part of this effort, the Conservancy is supporting learning exchanges where fishermen from the Federated States of Micronesia and Papua New Guinea exchange experiences with Palauan fishermen to see firsthand how fishermen are using low-cost stock assessment techniques and how the results of the stock assessments can guide management regulations. These exchanges are invaluable to understand how different fisheries management tools can integrate local knowledge and how fishermen can be advocates for sustainability.

ASIA PACIFIC FISHERIES

The Conservancy recognizes that protecting fisheries is one of the most important conservation issues of the 21st century. The fisheries of Asia and the Pacific are an integral part of the region's economies, food security, livelihoods and cultures, but today, many fisheries in the region are in decline. The collapse of these fisheries would have devastating ecological, economic and social implications for the region – and for the world.

By 2030, for example, an estimated additional 10,000 metric tons of fish will be required to meet Micronesia's domestic needs for food. To help meet this demand in a sustainable manner, the Conservancy is helping communities, companies and countries work together to make the region's fisheries more sustainable.

The Conservancy, through the *Our World: Asia Pacific* campaign, is addressing the region's greatest conservation challenges. By demonstrating that new fisheries management models can be profitable and sustainable in both small and large-scale fisheries, we hope to make sustainability a way of doing business in Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands.