

INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON CAPACITY BUILDING FOR SUSTAINABLE OCEANS

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SESSION ONE: FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Photo credit: Nick Hall

Northern Reef Fisheries Cooperative

Republic of Palau

1) What is the focus of this project?

The mission of the Northern Reef Fisheries Cooperative (NRFC) is to promote sustainable fisheries management that ensures economic and social benefits by engaging fishermen, markets and governments.

For centuries, the Northern Reefs' fishery resources were relatively untapped due to the area's remote location. However, improved access and better fishing technology has led to an increase in fishing in the Northern Reefs by fishermen from outside the region. Today, overfishing has led to a decline in fisheries resources that has been further exacerbated by a nationwide change from traditional subsistence fishing to commercial fishing, and changes from a historic "reef assignment" system to an open-access fishery.

Fishermen from the area approached The Nature Conservancy (TNC) 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. This was the motivation behind the creation of the NRFC.

2) Which organizations and other partners are involved?

In recent years, communities, traditional leaders, state governments and NGOs had been discussing what to do about declining fish stocks. In response, TNC launched a pilot project in the Northern Reefs in 2013 in collaboration with the States of Kayangel and Ngarchelong, Palau International Coral Reef Center (PICRC), Palau Conservation Society (PCS), Bureau of Marine Resources (BMR), and the Palau Protected Areas Network Office (PANO), to test an integrated fisheries management approach to reform fisheries management and rebuild depleted fish stocks in Palau.

Together with fishermen in the northernmost waters of the Republic of Palau, the NRFC was launched.

3) What activities or tools have proven successful in building capacity?

Working together, the communities, implementing partners and state governments identified that capacity building was a key component for the success of the project. Capacity was built through a combination of formal classroom trainings, community meetings, hands-on training and engaged discussions.

The capacity building and training for fishermen/members of the community and state rangers/conservation officers was focused on three key areas: stock analysis, enforcement, and regulation.

- **Stock Analysis:** TNC assisted fishermen to assess the condition of fish stocks and integrate their local knowledge into the analysis. Results from the assessments showed 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.
- **Enforcement:** From the onset, the fishermen realized that fishing restrictions would be useless without proper enforcement to prevent poaching. To address this issue, WildAID and TNC trained local rangers and helped expand their legal authority so that fisheries regulations are enforced and reefs are protected. The NRFC’s vision is to improve enforcement and local capacity to allow communities to eliminate illegal fishing and recover fish stocks.
- **Regulation:** The long-term sustainability of Palau’s fisheries depends on tough choices that affect fishermen’s livelihoods, families and community relationships. 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. The training of local fishermen to serve as rangers and increase surveillance to prevent illegal fishing was a key component of the regulation plan.

4) What challenges have been experienced, specifically related to maintaining a focus on capacity building and/or replicating the project in other areas?

The success of the capacity building was measured by: whether the training met the practical capacity needs of state rangers/conservation officers and members of the community; and the individual’s interest to learn and desire to improve on or learn new skills – community driven interest.

The challenges experienced were with fishermen not maintaining focus either on capacity building or on replicating the project in other places.

5) What are the next steps for the project?



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As NRFC and their respective governments continue to protect their fisheries, it is also serving as a model for co-management and fisheries reform that will truly benefit local fishermen and community members. Now TNC is taking the lessons learned in Palau and applying them to more regions, including supporting learning exchanges where fishermen from Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, and Manus, Papua New Guinea, traveled to Palau to see firsthand how fishermen are using the new stock assessment technique and how the results of the analyses are being used. These exchanges showed attendees how marine protected areas in Palau work and gave them the opportunity to share stories and challenges and learn from one another.