



GRANT REPORT

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY



SCALING UP MPAs IN MELANESIA

January 2019 – August 2022



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PROJECT DETAILS	
Lead organisation	Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)
Consortium partners	N/A
Call for Proposals	Small Island Developing States (2017)
Project duration	January 2019 – August 2022
Country/ies	Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands
Total project costs	€ 3,617,358
Blue Action grant	€ 2,712,903 (75%)
Match funding	€ 904,455 (25%)

Over the duration of this project, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) worked to increase the marine areas under effective management in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG). These three countries are impacted by population growth and modernisation, leading to increased demands for their natural resources, which in turn threatens marine species and ecosystems. Melanesian cultures have a history of environmental protection and the dedicated preservation of ocean health. WCS built on this tradition by working with impacted communities to establish effective spatial management systems, including networks of marine protected areas (MPAs) and Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), and by promoting the sustainable use of marine resources. WCS empowered those communities through capacity building and offering sustainable income opportunities to enhance livelihoods. Though the project didn't fully realise its targets for newly created MPAs, it made significant progress in enhancing MPA management and supporting local, ocean-dependent communities.

Context

Melanesia is one of the most biologically and culturally diverse regions in the world. The unique Vatu-i-Ra (Fiji), Kavachi (Solomon Islands), and Bismarck (PNG) seascapes have pristine ecosystems supporting exceptionally high coral reef fish biomass, numerous important seabird colonies (e.g. black noddies), and other significant marine and coastal biodiversity. The seascapes are vital for the fishing and tourist incomes of local communities. In PNG's New Ireland Province alone, about 90% of people live in rural villages, relying heavily on inshore fisheries for their livelihoods. Resource commercialisation, loss of traditional knowledge, weak centralised governance structures, and the effects of climate change, pose unprecedented challenges to Melanesian livelihoods and biodiversity. The project was set up to combat these combined impacts in order to conserve marine biodiversity while boosting local economies.

Objectives and approach

The key objective of this project was to significantly scale up the network of marine areas under effective management to directly benefit 7,670 people in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. In doing so, it aimed to create four MPAs totalling 26,312 km² and manage 50 km² of MPAs more effectively through the development and/or strengthening of 21 LMMA management plans. Within the context of Melanesia's complex, traditional marine tenure systems, this project addressed unsustainable fishing and biodiversity decline by establishing marine management rules and livelihood ventures within LMMAs, so that holders of local fishing rights can choose and enforce the most effective management measures.





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This project has established 5,814 km² of new MPAs and contributed to improving the governance of 162 km² of marine area under community management, thus supporting the protection of endangered species and enhancing coastal livelihoods.

Key achievements and impact

Impacts from the project, spread over three countries and numerous sites, include the following.

- Improvement of resource management and the protection of marine species by creating 5,814 km² of new MPAs. While the objective was more ambitious, this achievement has still made a meaningful difference.
- More effective management of 162 km² of MPAs. This included the expansion and improvement of networks of LMMAs in Melanesia, where marine resources are sustainably used and conserved.
- A standard was set for the processes involved in the creation of new MPAs and procedures established to achieve consensus decision-making. This allows future MPAs to be replicated and scaled up faster.
- Conservation successes achieved due to improved monitoring and patrolling. E.g. data collected over 700 nights resulted in the protection of 670-plus nesting critically endangered leatherback turtles in Solomon Islands.
- Training of more than 2,300 community members provided them with the skills to manage their resources and sustain their livelihoods. This ensures that project interventions continue beyond the project's lifetime.
- The provision of long-term investment in value-added marine biodiversity utilisation to fisheries-dependent communities. Examples include: building the first community-run pearl-meat oyster farm in Fiji; enabling the trial of mud crab fattening in Fiji and PNG; piloting seaweed farming in PNG; promoting ecotourism in Solomon Islands.

Key target		Objective	Achieved	Achieved (%)
MPAs	Newly created	26,312 km ²	5,814 km ²	22
	More effectively managed	50 km ²	162 km ²	324
Beneficiaries		7,670	29,090	379

Outlook

WCS sought to ensure the long-term viability of its project outcome, predominantly through capacity building and investment in alternative incomes. For this reason, government and community managers were provided with the necessary skills, resources and knowledge to carry out effective management to ensure project interventions continued beyond the project's lifetime. The response of local communities and their participation in training sessions and other interventions has been very positive, demonstrating their commitment to marine conservation. One of the most significant long-term impacts on communities will come from the creation of

sustainable sources of income through livelihood initiatives in areas such as sustainable aquaculture and tourism. Communities in Solomon Islands, for example, could support the promotion of ecotourism services that not only allow tourists to observe wildlife but also use visitor revenue to fund the conservation of critically endangered species. Following the completion of this project, a number of outcomes are still anticipated, including the development of a national offshore MPA network in Fiji that will safeguard 30% of the nation's waters. The project's established procedures will allow future MPA investments to be replicated and scaled up more swiftly, enabling the expansion of MPA and LMMA networks in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, as well as providing the foundation for food and livelihood security for their coastal communities.

Key lessons learned by grantee

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the region, with consequences for project implementation and financial losses in the tourism sector. In the face of this disruption, and others, such as from natural disasters, all stakeholders in this project have learned how to be flexible and adaptive. During those times, the focus shifted from field work to capacity building of local staff and there was time to focus on key outputs and publications in Fiji and Papua New Guinea. As a result, insights were gained on which characteristics contribute to community resilience, e.g. food sharing through social networks and strong local governance, which have provided lessons for designing future projects. Establishing a community-run pearl-meat farm in Fiji proved to be challenging. Instead of committing to numerous sites at once, one lesson learned was to focus on one site at a time and build a replicable model, which allows for more thorough consultations with the community and specialists, ensuring all parts of the project are aligned before they begin. There is a strong storytelling tradition throughout Melanesia and written versions of agreements are uncommon. As a result, it is important to note that community acceptance for the project is not always communicated through signed documents, but expressed as part of stakeholder engagement in the villages, and this engagement may change as work progresses.

Key lessons learned by Blue Action

Livelihood strategies need to be planned well in advance and require thorough assessments of local conditions, including potential obstacles as well as market analysis and a detailed appraisal of opportunities. Having a high number of sites means a lot of coordination is needed to keep track of all activities, targets and progress made. Different types of protected areas require separate approaches to MPA establishment or improved management, which adds to the workload; focusing on one type of MPA and only a few sites can lead to more-focused work and increase the likelihood of achieving the objectives. Building strong relationships with relevant government institutions is essential for the establishment of new MPAs. Government decisions can take much longer than originally planned, so staying engaged with relevant government institutions is important to moving certain processes forward.

