

PRESS RELEASE

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Workshop refreshes environmental knowledge in traditional Yasawa communities

Amidst the tourist complexes and backpacker resorts of the Yasawa islands lie a group of villages whose lifestyles couldn't be more different from those of their glamorous neighbours. However, many such communities have become economically dependant on the tourism sector, and in the process have lost traditional knowledge of their natural resources. In June, local NGO Partners in Community Development (PCDF) and representatives from the Fisheries Department held a Marine and Fisheries Awareness workshop to 36 participants on Waya island, to revive this knowledge and encourage sustainable income-generating practices in the communities.

As Fiji's prime tourist destination, the Yasawas attract thousands of visitors every year. Many resorts have established a mutually beneficial relationship with their neighbouring communities, however, these relationships have also introduced Western lifestyles and consumer values into traditional Fijian societies.

As indigenous communities have become increasingly reliant on the tourism sector as a primary source of income, traditional knowledge of the environment and resources has been eroded. This knowledge is in critical need of revival if it is to ensure the protection of the land and its natural resources, and encourage sustainable sources of income for local communities.

Government and Civil Society are working closely together to address the pressing need to redistribute traditional knowledge amongst the people, and in particular, to encourage its development amongst younger generations.

At the workshop on Waya Island, the thirty-six village representatives, selected by their respective villages, listened attentively to the different speakers from PCDF and the Fisheries Department and held open and lively discussions about different aspects of resource management. The group, a good mix of men, women and youth, threw themselves into group activities designed to examine the potential of land resources, before presenting their findings to the other attendees; sharing experience and knowledge.

Participants drew posters of their village environment to reaffirm the location and potential of specific resources, and reinforce the knowledge of their natural surroundings.

The presence of experienced persons representing the Fisheries sector was also vital to the success of the workshop, and a practical demonstration taught participants about fish handling and processing. The Fisheries facilitators showed participants the optimal temperature of fish before and after storage and illustrated the importance of storing the fish in brine solution, to preserve its freshness for the market.

Workshop participant Amelia Tuicakau reflected, "this workshop was very helpful and very good. We are from the island-villages so we don't know many of these things – and it's difficult to learn more about it." "What we have learnt during the workshop will be of great help, especially to the youth – the knowledge has to be passed on to later generations in the village, so we can better use our natural resources and generate income."

A representative from the Fisheries Department commented "we are teaching knowledge that should be within the people, naturally. But changes in lifestyle and the introduction of western mentality have altered this." "These communities are so far away from the mainland that they are easily forgotten – it is important that we come out here and work with the villages to revive their knowledge, to help them for the future."

PCDF successfully runs its *Natural Resource Management* (NRM) programme in 26 communities across Fiji. Emphasising the importance of NRM, Programme Manager Matilita Kedrayate asserts, "Fiji's ecosystems are very rich and natural resources play a key role in supporting its economic development. Our programme works with communities to protect their resources while at the same time providing training and guidance on how to generate income from our natural surroundings. This is a big step in helping Fiji's communities become self-reliant in the long-term."

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