



Divided islands, shared fate?

Uncertainty about climate and about communities' ability to manage their impacts clouds the future of the beautiful Solomon Islands

Story by **Ken Kassem** Photography by **Eric Madeja**



TINGO LEVE WAITS SEVERAL HOURS in a waterside warehouse for the fish to arrive. Outside the rainy season is in full flow. A former professional dive master, Leve (shown left) has been a marine conservation officer with WWF for the last 10 years. He will spend his morning sorting, measuring and recording a fisherman's entire catch, data that will help him understand trends in reef fish populations around Gizo, capital of the Solomon Islands' Western Province. On other days, Leve counts fish underwater in a network of protected areas established by local communities with help from WWF. What he has learnt leaves him concerned about the future.

The Solomon Islands can seem like a tropical island paradise to outsiders. Its almost 1,000 islands offer blindingly white beaches, many backed by primary rainforest and facing reef-lined lagoons. The country's riches are such that it forms the eastern tip of the Coral Triangle – an expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans that has the world's highest marine biodiversity.

Among the habitats are several real jewels. The Marovo Lagoon is the world's longest tropical lagoon and boasts a double barrier reef where divers can drop in on manta ray cleaning sites and go swimming with sharks just metres from their hotel jetty. Nearby Tetepare is the largest uninhabited island in the Pacific Ocean and boasts untouched rainforest cover.

But the Solomon Islands is struggling to develop. One key question is how to ensure that there will be enough fish to feed everybody in coming decades. Fishing and gardening – almost everyone keeps a small vegetable plot – are the main livelihoods of the islands, with 84% of the population living in rural areas and 90% of men fishing to feed their families. Community and clan groups – the people are a mix of Melanesian and Polynesian ethnic groups speaking at least 70 languages – own the vast majority of the country's coral reefs, along with their associated fisheries, so the power of the central government is limited. It has therefore adopted community-based resource



IN THE BALANCE

Tourism remains relatively undeveloped, meanwhile a growing trend for nighttime spearfishing threatens to impact the islands' rich and biodiverse reefs.

management (CBRM) largely because it has to.

That leaves 5,000 coastal communities to set their own regulations: declaring protected areas, restricting access to certain areas, prohibiting certain fishing methods. This builds on traditional management systems where local chiefs set aside 'taboo' areas to rebuild fish and shellfish populations, usually in anticipation of a feast.

Leve is worried that tradition is eroding and the old systems may not work as well anymore. He is seeing cases where hungry people travel farther away from their home islands and fish wherever they want. Fishermen go spearfishing at night and target places where high-value fish – groupers – aggregate to reproduce, an approach that can easily wipe out an entire population.

In a country where communities are fiercely independent, local rules can be enforced within but when someone from outside breaks the rules, the community needs the intervention of courts and the rule of law. In terms of fisheries, that law was only passed in 2010, and until protected areas complete the rigorous registration process, they cannot be legally enforced.

Ms Agnetha Vave-Karai, Chief Conservation Officer at the Ministry of Environment, Climate Change, Disaster Management and Meteorology

says "it is true that traditional leadership is eroding in many areas" but points out examples in several provinces where communities are taking a bigger role in resource management.

It's not just respect for the old ways that is changing. People are noticing a change in weather patterns. Zelda Hilly of the World Fish Centre says that gardens in Gizo are not as productive as they were a few years ago and suspects that climate change is altering rainfall patterns. Warmer sea temperatures may result in epidemics of coral bleaching. And if the currents that bring the schools of tuna shift then a major source of national income and protein will be lost.

Compounding the challenges imposed by the growing population and climate change, the country is still recovering from the collapse of its government in the early 2000s. An outbreak of violence pitted people from neighboring islands against each other. Many were killed and most people fled back to their home provinces to live off the land and sea.

Some attribute the violence to resource shortages on the most densely populated island of Malaita. As Malaitans migrated to the capital Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal to look for scarce jobs, conflicts arose over access to land around the city. The present government lacks the money and human resources to offer each province assistance and the violence scared away many investors and tourists.

Among the Solomons' nine provinces, Western Province is the most open to the outside world. Much of the country's tourism industry is situated there, around Gizo, Morovo Lagoon and Tetepare. But only 23,000 tourists visited the entire country in 2011 and even Western Province has

only one tourism officer for the whole region.

"Tourism must be part of the equation to protect Gizo's reefs," says the owner of Dive Gizo, Danny Kennedy. According to him, the government's tourism development budget was slashed from US\$6.5 million to just US\$0.4 million last year, making the prospect of a future increase in income from tourism far less likely.

One bright spot is that Gizo's marine environment seems to have taken the impact of the massive 8.1 magnitude earthquake in 2007 in its stride. The shock waves annihilated reefs, toppling massive boulders and coral formations. There were fears of a complete ecological collapse but the corals are showing signs of recovery and many dive sites are teeming with fish.

According to Ms Vave-Karai, the government would like to have more fisheries and tourism officers in every province but lacks the budget. The current solution is to rely on partners including environmental groups such as WWF.

The Gizo Environment and Livelihoods Community Association currently oversee nine marine areas. A management committee is establishing a micro-lending facility to help member communities build infrastructure and start cottage industries while protecting their environment. A plan is being submitted for registration and legal enforcement soon. The chairman of the management committee, Mr Tastre Ataria, says "If we want to keep eating fish, we must manage better."

It has taken more than 10 years to get Gizo's protected area network working even to this level. But Leve says he is prepared to go on waiting, counting fish day and night, doing his bit to help Gizo manage better. **AA**

PRACTICALITIES

When to go

The only period to avoid is the cyclone and rainy season from January to May.

How to get there

Solomon Airlines and Virgin Australia fly to Honiara from Brisbane, Australia. Air Niugini has flights from Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea.

Contacts

Dive Gizo: www.divegizo.com

Rekona Lodge, Gizo: www.rekonalodge.com; www.solomonislands-hotels.travel

Further info

WWF-South Pacific: www.wwfpacific.org.fj

WorldFish Centre: www.worldfishcenter.org/countries/solomon-islands