



SAVING VANUATU'S REEFS

One Village at a Time

Words by Alex Bortoli.

Helti rif, helti fiuja. That's the message emblazoned on the t-shirts of dozens of marine champions scattered throughout the Vanuatu islands. For many it's their rallying call, their passion and their mission. But the big question is, where and how do you start?

If you are a marine champion in your village, there are lots of options and solutions to keep reefs

and fish communities healthy for the future.

In 2015, a coalition of local resource networks (Ngunu-Pele Marine and Land Protected Area Network, Tasi-Vanua Environmental Network) funded by the French government through the RESCCUE project in conjunction with the South Pacific Community (SPC) and Vanuatu Fisheries, launched an ambitious initiative to restore ecosystems and adapt to climate change in North Efate.

The project was a response to local chiefs and communities expressing concern about a decline in the health of their local reef systems and fisheries.

Communities had noticed everything from coral dying and becoming covered in algae, to loss of seagrass areas for dugongs and turtles, fewer and smaller reef fish being caught, COTs (Crown of Thorns starfish) invasions, marine litter, over-collection of shells and shellfish (lobsters, crabs) and



PREVIOUS PAGE Top Rock reef North Efate by Alex Bortoli.

TOP Charlie John, marine champion and owner of Top Rock on North Efate, by Johanna Johnson.

overharvesting of sea cucumber. They were not alone as the story was being repeated by Chiefs from other islands in the country. A surge in population and a transition from traditional spearing, line and canoe fishing to powered boats and nets, was putting huge pressure on inshore reefs. Add in climate change and the odd destructive cyclone and it was turning out to be a knock-out combination punch.

The RESCCUE marine team started working with 27 villages in North Efate as part of a pilot project. The marine team was led by C.O Pacific, a marine organisation run by Australian marine scientist Johanna Johnson and

fisheries biologist David Welch who, in response to the communities, developed a unique 'Marine Monitoring Toolkit'.

The toolkit needed to be low tech but powerful enough for communities to collect relevant scientific data to accurately assess the health of inshore reefs and fish. It also needed to provide a framework for guiding future management decisions and the effective management of marine resources. In other words, a multi-tool, a virtual Leatherman that would help solve the sprouting environmental problems. "I remember after we had the first community workshop in 2016, our science team brainstormed with the communi-

ties for an entire week, working 16-hour days. It was the craziest work week the five of us have ever had," explained Johanna Johnson, "but by the end of it, we managed to put together an outline of the toolkit which we named Version 1. We then had a few months to make improvements and do field tests to fine-tune all our ideas. I think now we are up to Version 10!"

Individuals were also trained to use the toolkit. "We came up with the idea of creating marine champions in each village who would know how to use the toolkit and teach others to monitor. These marine champions were nominated by

Marine champions leading invertebrate monitoring at Pele Island by David Welch.



their villages and are members of the existing Vanua-tai Environment Network, under Wan Smolbag," explained David Welch.

Monitors and scientists had to overcome many challenges while working on the project, such as attempting reef surveys with minimal dive gear and equipment. There was plenty of ingenuity however, to replace the lack of specialised gear. The teams for example used cut-off sections of palm fronds instead of

specialised underwater slates and recorded the data by scratching the information into the frond using a nail (a brilliant solution as well as being biodegradable, cheap and easy to replace!). They used snorkel gear instead of dive tanks and tested using hand lengths to measure fish when rulers weren't available.

"At some of our presentations in the remote villages the generator would run out of fuel so the lights would go out and our projectors would not work, so we had to resort to talking and drawing on

paper using flashlights. And that gave us the idea that we must use low-tech solutions, like printing posters for the marine champions and all the villages involved in the project," said Johanna.

The C₂O team of Johanna, David, Eryn Hooper, Jane Waterhouse and Glenn Edney eventually produced two different types of posters, a data reporting poster every marine champion received as part of their toolkit and used to communicate monitoring results to their village, and an awareness poster in Bislama highlighting

Port Resolution Bay by Alex Bortoli.





Top left Willie Kenneth, marine champion, leading monitoring training on Pele Island, North Efate.

Top right Reef monitors from 27 villages in North Efate gather with Dave Welch and Johanna Johnson from C20 to celebrate the completion of their training.

Middle left Meeting of marine champions at Port Resolution, Tanna. T-shirt proclaims 'Healthy Reef, Healthy Future'.

Middle right Alfred Reva, marine champion from Port Resolution, Tanna accepting a donation of science books from Dave Welch.

Bottom left Leisavi Joel (far left) marine champion for Sunae on Moso Island, with fellow women reef monitors. They are holding the palm fronds used in place of underwater slates.



PREVIOUS PAGE Top Rock snorkel trail launch point, North Efate.

the issues around reef health and how to design tabu areas to protect reefs for the future.

The project was a huge success and as a result it has now been rolled out in villages on Pele, Moso, Nguna and Lelepa islands in north Efate, Ifira island in Port Vila, and in seven villages surrounding Port Resolution on Tanna thanks to additional funding from regional agencies like SPC and SPREP. The C₂O team are continuing to expand the initiative as funding becomes available.

"The wonderful thing about this marine monitoring toolkit is that it empowers communities to make their own decisions about how to best manage their reefs for the future. It also has the capacity to be transferrable, not just to other communities in Vanuatu but to other islands across the Pacific," says Welch.

In other words, if these communities and their nominated marine champions get this right, they could very well show the rest of Vanuatu and perhaps the wider South Pacific community how a grass roots movement with minimal funding can save inshore fisheries and reefs, one village at a time.

Alfred Reva – Marine Champion, Port Resolution, Tanna Island

Alfred is the epitome of everything a marine champion should be; dedicated, inspired and passionate. He is also a youth leader in his community, vice chairman of the Port Resolution Environment Network, and a fisherman who has seen firsthand the deterioration of his own local marine environment over the last five to ten years.

"In our traditional system we have a way of management we call *tubunas*, we have someone like a priest who has a special place to pray for our reefs and resources. We also get together in our *nakamals* and discuss with our elders and chiefs how to manage things. It's the same throughout Tanna," says Reva. "But as a fisherman I began to notice big changes in our fishes and reefs, having studied science at school, I decided maybe I could link the two systems together to give us the knowledge we need to be able to manage our marine livelihood ourselves."

Alfred has since been collaborating with C₂O and SPREP (Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme) to create, among other things, a

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ABOVE Tatu fish catch surveys observed by local marine champion in green shirt, by David Welch.

turtle conservation area around Cooks Rock, a local resource centre focused on conservation in Port Resolution, a management plan for the entire coastline around his area of Tanna and education awareness days for members of his surrounding community.

"I think my efforts in conservation are part of my calling. My elders believe I am here to protect our future. One of the big challenges I face however is to convince others that we need to take action. But now thanks to Dave and C₂O we have many local champions. I plan to recruit other people in other tribes all over Tanna so we can fight for what we think is best for us before devel-

opment or other issues overtake us."

Charlie John – Marine Champion, Saama Village, Efate Island

Charlie is a big man with an even bigger smile. He is also the owner of Top Rock, a popular ecotourism attraction in North Efate, centred around the stunning reef on his doorstep.

Charlie realised some years ago that if he didn't protect his reef area from overfishing the community would not only run out of fish to eat but also lose potential future income from tourism.

So when he heard about the project he quickly jumped on board. Charlie trained in how to use the monitoring toolkit in 2017 and went on to become a trainer himself. He presented his knowledge at the Pacific Climate Change conference in Wellington New Zealand the same year.

Thanks to the help of Dave Welch and C₂O, Charlie now actively promotes conservation and awareness to tourists and within his community. Together they have also developed the first ni-Vanuatuan snorkel trail in Vanuatu.

"The toolkit has been a big help to us. It has provided our communities with fish catch survey results, as well as information on the

types of fish and the gear we use. The main thing we have learnt is that we cannot continue to catch undersize fish," says John.

"We want to know about our reef health, and we are thinking about what we can do every day to manage this, like reef clean-up and controlling reef walking and putting in place size limits for fish."

Leisavi Joel – Marine Champion, Sunae Village, Moso Island

Leisavi breaks all the rules when it comes to being a marine champion. She is a woman not afraid to take on a leading role in her community, she is an outspoken advocate of conservation and her local environment and a keen snorkeler willing to do reef surveys despite her fear of sharks.

Like Charlie from Top Rock, she

trained in the monitoring toolkit in 2017 and now trains others in her community. Since her involvement in the project, she has led village community awareness days with primary school students on marine sustainability followed by reef and invertebrate monitoring with the children.

"One of my goals has been to set up a conservation monitoring team and our theme is *"Lukoa-tem tedei blong yu gat tumoro"* as protecting our resources for the future is important."

"We have included the Chief, village environment committee and school students in the awareness and monitoring. Everyone in the community is helping to carry out monitoring."

On the back of her work as a marine champion, Leisavi has

moved ahead in leaps and bounds. She is now part of the village environment committee, has secured funding to conduct marine awareness in Sunae (e.g. signage, tabu marker buoys), leads the local women's cooperative and is currently the elected Chairperson of the Tasi-Vanua northwestern region.

She is a great example of how one person in a small grass roots movement can be responsible for creating big changes in her local community.

It's a story worth telling over and over again. 🌺

To find out more about the toolkit and read more marine champion stories, go to www.c2ofisheries.net.au/projects or contact the C₂O Pacific team.




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