

## Marshall Islands

By: Mr Maity Bungitak<sup>1</sup>

### **Status of Mangrove Wetlands**

There has not been any study conducted on mangrove wetlands in the Marshall Islands as far as our limited sources indicate. However, it is widely known that the majority of the islands and atolls in the Republic of the Marshall Islands have mangrove wetlands. The area of these wetlands is estimated to be in the range of five square meters to about 5 hectares. Most of the wetlands are inland and have small water passages leading from the lagoon to the wetland. Other wetlands are totally enclosed except for small holes at the bottom through which salt water flows during high and low tide.

These mangrove wetlands are home to three important crab species, several species of coastal fish, shrimps, mollusks and also sea birds. The crabs are a very important part of the islanders' diet and are very highly valued for their delicious meat. The most common of these crabs is the *Scylla* species and the brown pinkish crab. The *Scylla* crab spends most of its life under water crevices, while the other two usually dwell in dug holes near the mangrove area. The other species, the brown pinkish crab, is mostly hunted during high tide when they prefer to climb the mangrove trees and remain just above the water line.

The most common species of mangroves are the *Brugiera* species, the *Rhizophora* species, and the *Sonneratia* species. Kone and coconuts also grow in the mangrove wetlands but mostly on the very edge of the area.

### **Mangrove Wetland Legislation**

There is no existing legislation that directly deals with mangrove wetlands in the Marshall Islands. However, under regulations such as the historic preservation, earthmoving, and coastal management regulations, any activities within the wetlands would be controlled. Otherwise, there is no legal frameworks for the protection of the wetlands.

It is only recently that some people in the Marshall Islands are aware of the importance of mangrove wetlands to their socio-economic development as a result of awareness raising activities by the NGO groups in the Marshall Islands. For instance, the Jaluit Atoll Development Association (JADA) had worked with the senior community leaders on Jaluit Atoll to find ways to restore and to protect the mangrove wetlands on the atoll. They have held workshop meetings, community consultations, and awareness meetings. They have also helped in drafting some management guidelines for the protection and sustainable exploitation of the mangrove resources and on how to promote the mangrove areas for eco-tourism activities.

### **Tenure Ownership**

The traditional leaders of the *bwij* (tribe) own the mangrove wetlands. There are usually three title owners of the land; the *Iroij* (chief), the *Alap* (head of the tribe), and *Dri Jerbal* (the senior member of the tribe). Decision making with regards to the mangrove wetlands

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usually involves these three titled land owners. In most cases, usually the *alap* gives permission to cut down mangrove trees for building homes.

### **Describe the Community-based Management Structures in Place**

At present the *alaps* have established an organization to promote conservation of the mangrove wetlands and make it available for ongoing eco-tourism projects on their atoll. As a result, they have begun clearing walking trails around the mangrove forest for visitors. There is also a plan to reopen the two natural water channels that were closed about eighteen years ago when the road was built.

The *alaps* have also planned to establish entrance and license fees for those who want mangrove logs for home construction. Such fees would be used for the conservation and sustainable use of their mangrove areas.

There is a need for capacity building among the members in order to strengthen their organizational structure and their capability to exercise their authority in protecting the mangrove lands.

### **Monitoring System**

Due to lack of awareness of the importance of mangrove areas, there is no monitoring system established in the communities. Only recently was the *alap* organization established. One of the reasons I am at this workshop is to learn what is necessary so that upon returning home I will start a monitoring program of the mangrove wetlands in my island.

### **Involvement of Other Sectors**

Because the project is new, the only NGO that is presently involved is the Jaluit Atoll Development Association (JADA). The Jaluit Atoll Conservation project under the SPREP/EPA is also involved to some extent. Last month, two Japanese from Friends of the Earth visited the mangrove wetlands and showed interest to assist in its conservation and sustainable development for the eco-tourism project.

### **Current Situation**

The mangrove forest is still in good condition. However, since the natural channels were blocked some eighteen years ago, there was an immediate decline in the population of mangrove crabs. Reef fish also declined. The sea birds that usually make nests on the mangrove trees are now very few and may soon disregard the area because of previous heavy logging. Now that the people in the community want to make changes to preserve the mangrove areas, there is hope that the trend may reverse. Also if public awareness is conducted in the communities, people will be more aware of the great need to preserve their mangrove areas.

### **Status of Adoption of Multi-lateral Conventions**

RMI has ratified the Biodiversity Convention and the Kyoto Protocol.