

COMMUNITY BASED TURTLE MONITORING IN FIJI



Five marine turtle species occur in Fiji as nesters, foragers or migrants. These are the Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and Olive Ridley turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*). Satellite telemetry work in the Pacific (Ref. Figures 1, 2, 3) underlines the important role Fiji can play in the conservation of marine turtles as it has been referred to as a 'hot spot' for these migratory animals. Of particular importance is the **Great Sea Reef (GSR)** – known to be the third longest barrier reef in the Southern Hemisphere.

The conservation of marine turtles in Fiji is a sensitive issue as the species is considered a 'cultural icon' – one which is usually presented to add prestige to traditional ceremonies. Once a resource reserved for those of noble rank, and to be caught only by traditional fishermen, the advent of modern fishing technology, *inter alia*, has hastened the decline of this species in local waters. Fiji continues to be committed to the conservation of these animals, through acts such as the 10 year Moratorium (2009 – 2018) that protects turtles nationally and being a signatory to international conventions such as the CBD.

Fiji's 'Dau ni Vonu' network

Enforcing management measures has always been a challenge to effective conservation. In attempting to address this, WWF SPPO in partnership with SPREP and Vanuatu's Wan SmolBag, with financial support from the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund, facilitated the establishment of the 'Dau ni Vonu' network in early 2010. The network is primarily an association of community based turtle monitors, operating along the northern coast of Vanua Levu and the GSR to support the recovery of marine turtles through specific actions taken within their community.

The functions of the 'Dau ni Vonu' network

The 'Dau ni Vonu' network is currently comprised of 30 young men and women who now have the skills to effectively support the implementation of aspects of Fiji's Sea Turtle Recovery Plan, which includes:

- monitoring of turtles that nest or forage within their traditional fishing grounds;
- raising awareness on the plight of marine turtles with other members of their community or neighbouring ones;
- enforcing the regulations of the 10 year Moratorium should they encounter incidences where these are breached.

Challenges faced by the 'Dau ni Vonu'

- **Illegal harvesting of sea turtles at communities outside of their mandate:** the implications of these are that their efforts are wasted if the turtles they are protecting, are captured by neighboring communities;
- **Accessibility to other coastal communities for outreach:** given the widespread geography of the archipelago, it becomes an expensive exercise when intending to conduct outreach with other communities;
- **Protection of a highly ranked cultural icon:** their significant cultural value requires sensitive negotiations with communities who are accustomed to turtles being a feature at traditional functions.

Future of the 'Dau ni Vonu' network

To grow the network through peer lessons learning and sharing to encompass other areas of the Fiji archipelago where marine turtles are known to nest and feed.

Fig 1

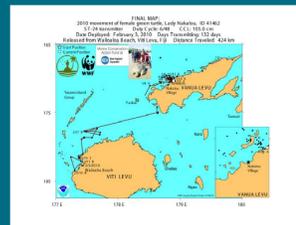


Fig 2

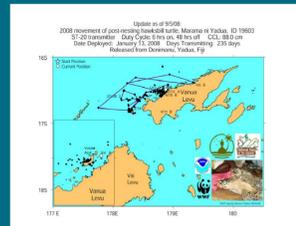
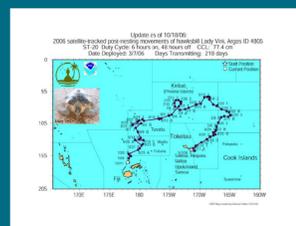


Fig 3



'Dau ni Vonu', members after their induction as legal turtle monitors in Vanua Levu, Fiji



'Lady Nakalou' being released



Community members and school children of Denimanu village releasing satellite tagged Loggerhead turtles

