



REPORT OF THE PACIFIC REGIONAL MARINE SPECIES PROGRAMME WEBINAR – 13 JULY 2023

A. AGENDA

- Global context
- About the species groups
- About the Programme
- The 2020 review
- Summary of action plans
- Current and future work by SPREP
- Implementation priorities and needs
- GEF-8 STAR funding
- Other items of interest

B. RECORDING AND SLIDES

A recording of the webinar and the associated slide deck is available on the SPREP website: <https://www.sprep.org/ioe/regional-marine-species-programme>.

C. ATTENDANCE

The webinar was hosted by Karen Baird (SPREP Threatened and Migratory Species Advisor), Hannah Hendriks (NZ DOC secondee, Migratory Marine Species Conservation Officer), and Unity Roebeck (Turtle Conservation Officer).

There were 18 attendees in total from 11 countries or territories: Wallis and Futuna (GOV), Fiji (NGO), Republic of the Marshall Islands (NGO), Samoa (NGO), United States (GOV & NGO), Cook Islands (GOV), Vanuatu (NGO), Papua New Guinea (NGO), Solomon Islands (GOV), New Caledonia (GOV), and Tonga (NGO).

D. POLLS

During the webinar we utilised polls to learn a bit about what the attendees thought are the biggest threats to our marine megafauna in their countries and territories, what activities are currently being undertaken (by both SPREP Members and Partners) to address threats and knowledge gaps, and to identify particular needs which SPREP can assist with to build on the work we are already doing.

We will summarise the results of these polls here.

Note that poll participation was voluntary and not all Pacific countries and territories were present so this is not completely representative or definitive and may not be the official view of the countries or organisations participating.

For each species group, we asked participants what they thought the biggest threat to this group was in their country out of a list of known threats (Figures 1a-e), as well as what they think is the biggest overall threat to all marine species in the Pacific island region (Figure 1f). A summary of each countries response to these questions, plus what they identified as their priority species groups, is provided in Table 1.

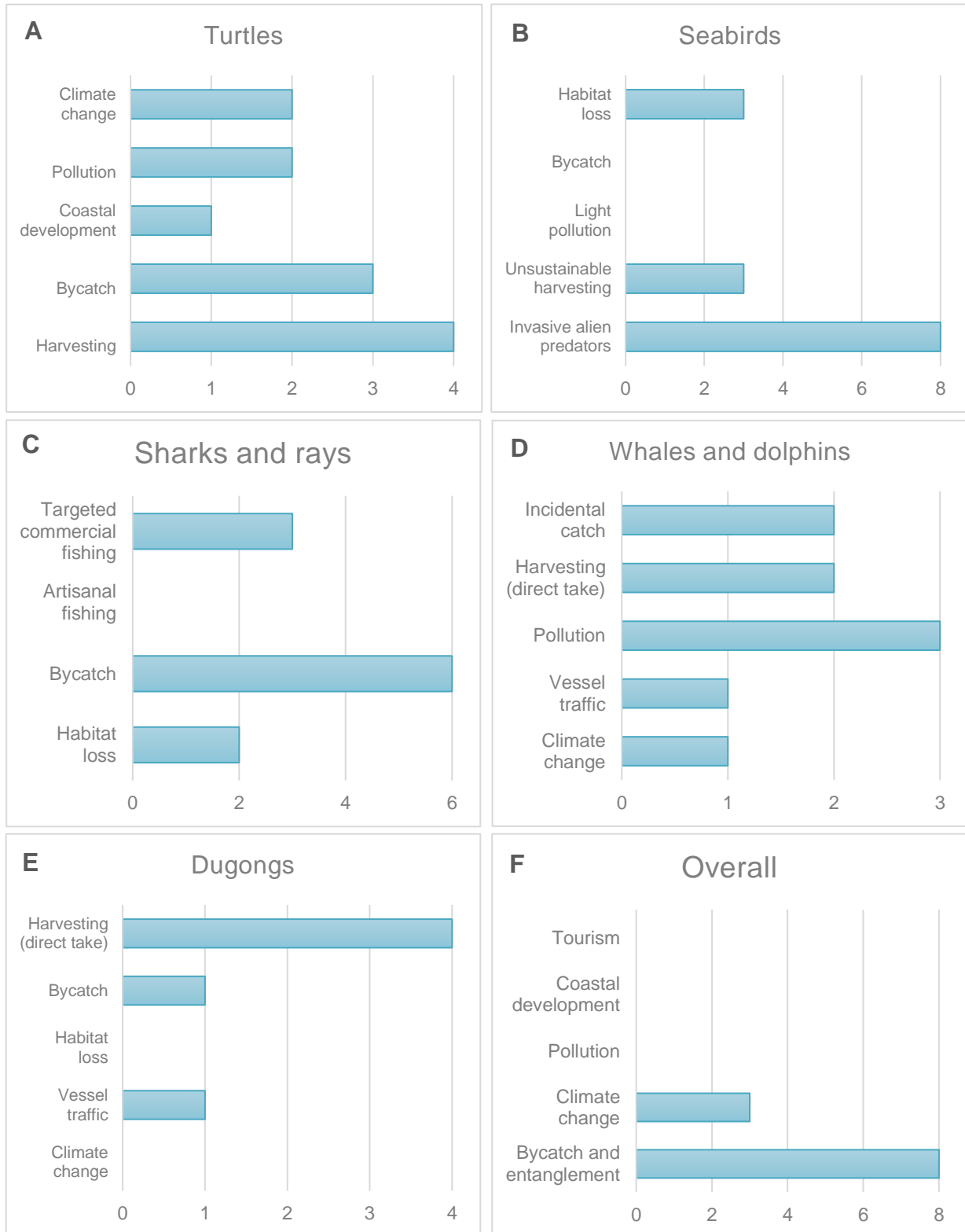


Figure 1: Number of participants who thought each threat was the most important to each species group in their country (a-e); and what they think is the biggest overall threat to all marine species in the Pacific island region (f).

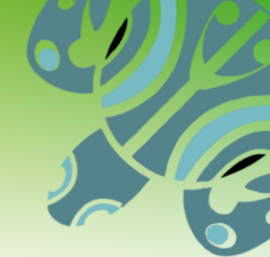
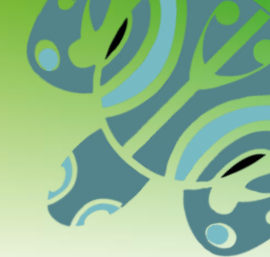


Table 1: Summary of countries' identified key threats to each species groups, overall threat to all species groups, and priority species groups.

| | Turtles | Seabirds | Sharks and rays | Whales and dolphins | Dugongs | Overall | Priority species groups |
|-----|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|
| TG | Harvesting (direct take) | Invasive alien predators | Bycatch | Vessel traffic | N/A | Bycatch and entanglement | - |
| WS | Coastal development; Pollution | Invasive alien predators (x2) | Targeted commercial fishing | Pollution | N/A | Bycatch and entanglement | - |
| NC | Climate change | Invasive alien predators | Bycatch; Targeted commercial fishing | Climate change | Harvesting (direct take) (x2) | Climate change; Bycatch and entanglement | Turtles; dugongs |
| MH | Harvesting (direct take) | Unsustainable harvesting | Habitat loss | Pollution | N/A | Climate change | Turtles; Seabirds |
| VU | Bycatch (x2) | Unsustainable harvesting (x2) | Targeted commercial fishing; Bycatch | Pollution; Bycatch and entanglement | Bycatch; Vessel traffic | Bycatch and entanglement; Climate change | Dugongs, turtles |
| PNG | Bycatch | Habitat loss | - | Bycatch and entanglement | Harvesting (direct take) | - | - |
| FJ | Harvesting (direct take) | Habitat loss | - | - | - | Bycatch and entanglement | - |
| CI | Pollution | Invasive alien predators (x2) | Bycatch | Pollution | N/A | - | Turtles; Seabirds; Sharks and rays; Whales and dolphins |
| WF | - | Invasive alien predators | Habitat loss | Harvesting (direct take) | N/A | Bycatch and entanglement | Turtles; Seabirds |
| US | Climate change | Invasive alien predators | Bycatch | Pollution | - | Bycatch and entanglement | Turtles; Sharks and rays; Whales and dolphins |
| SB | Harvesting (direct take) | Habitat loss | Bycatch | Harvesting (direct take) | Harvesting (direct take) | Bycatch and entanglement | Sharks and rays; Turtles |



During the species summary polls, we also asked participants what actions they are aware of that are being taken to address the key threat identified, and what other actions would help address the threats to the species groups in their country (Table 2).

Table 2. Each country identified what they thought was the key threat to each species group in their country, what actions are being taken to address this threat, and what other actions would help address the threats to each species group.

| Poll 1 - Turtles | | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|--|--|
| | Threats | Current actions | Other needs |
| TG | Harvesting (direct take) | Community harvesting assessment; fisheries catch limit; protection of females; nesting beach monitoring; monitoring of harvesting (for male vs female) | Nationwide awareness campaign, legislation cards for outer island communities, community monitoring training |
| WS | Pollution | Styrofoam ban | - |
| MH | Harvesting (direct take) | Headstart programmes* | - |
| VU | Bycatch | Fisheries legislation review; National Plan of Action (NPOA); awareness raising; permits | More enforcement; awareness around threat from nets; turtle specific actions in community conservation area management plans; strengthen regulations; capacity building on data collection; citizen science programmes; ban on captivity |
| PNG | Bycatch | Assessing unregulated fisheries; management plan | Awareness to drive community action |
| FJ | Harvesting (direct take) | Awareness raising in local communities | Training and capacity building for local lead conservation projects |
| CK | Pollution | Plastics treaty; funding to change waste management policies and practices | Tourism interaction controls; coastal development controls and standards |
| SB | Harvesting (direct take) | Fisheries Management Regulations (2017); community conservation of nesting beaches; awareness programmes utilising radio, community visits etc | Regulations review (e.g. set quotas); population status assessment; inter-country collaboration |
| US | Climate change | Nest relocation; research on response to degraded/lost habitat and on sex ratio and nest temp; planting of native plants for shoreline stabilisation | Restoration of beaches |



*note that SPREPs technical advice is that although well meaning, headstarting is highly likely to have a negative impact on the young turtles preventing them from developing their natural instincts to survive in the wild and therefore we do not recommend it.

Poll 2 – Seabirds

| | Threats | Current actions | Other needs |
|-----|--------------------------|---|--|
| TG | Invasive alien predators | Eradications and rat management on uninhabited islands; national invasive species action plan | Protected areas in key seabird nesting and habitats; cross-governance; review and update of legislation; better implementation and enforcement of EIAs |
| WS | Invasive alien predators | Rat control and eradication | - |
| MH | Unsustainable harvesting | Bikirin Conservation Area to reestablish threatened populations | Addressing invasive species |
| VU | Unsustainable harvesting | Community conservation areas and management plans; research on species, populations and threats | Research into nesting areas; monitoring; protected areas; citizen science programmes (sightings); awareness for NPOA |
| PNG | Habitat loss | - | Enforcement; enact recommendations from previous reports |
| FJ | Habitat loss | Annual habitat monitoring | Education and awareness |
| CK | Invasive alien predators | Rat eradication on some islands; biosecurity strengthening | Habitat restoration; reducing various forms of pollution; awareness on responsible harvesting |
| NC | Invasive alien predators | Predator eradication on some islets | Legislation enforcement |
| WF | Invasive alien predators | Rat and wild pig eradication on Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) islands | Biosecurity improvement |
| SB | Habitat loss | Fisheries Management Regulations 2017 | Baseline information |

Poll 3 – Sharks and rays

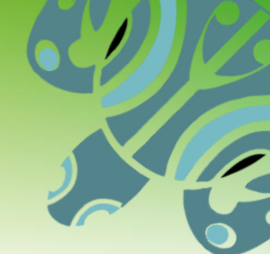
| | Threats | Current actions | Other needs |
|--|---------|-----------------|-------------|
|--|---------|-----------------|-------------|



| | | | |
|-----------|-----------------------------|---|---|
| TG | Bycatch | CITES Appendix II Non-Detriment Findings (NDF) work | Community awareness of ecosystem role; community driven solutions; add sharks to coastal fisheries management plans (size limits); EIAs for coastal development |
| VU | Targeted commercial fishing | NDF for CITES species; proposal for shark sanctuary | Understanding artisanal catch; improving commercial data collection and observer coverage; improved compliance; trend analysis for problem vessels |
| VU | Bycatch | NPOA; permits; CITES; fisheries observers | Creation of shark sanctuary; research on populations and threats; enforcement on shark finning ban; awareness raising on ecosystem role and gillnets |
| CK | Bycatch | Shark sanctuary legislation; training; awareness | Increased awareness of protected areas; better data collection to understand migration patterns |
| WF | Habitat loss | Limiting pollution input into lagoon; improve rainwater drainage | MPAs for KBAs |
| SB | Bycatch | Fisheries Management Regulations 2017; Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs); CITES; drafting NPOA | Regulating coastal artisanal fishing; conduct further research; improve regulations enforcement |
| US | Bycatch | Shark mitigation measures in fisheries (e.g. no wire leaders) | - |

Poll 4 – Whales and dolphins

| | Threats | Current actions | Other needs |
|------------|--|--|--|
| TG | Vessel traffic | Assigned rest area for whales from tourism; hunting ban | Updated whale population surveys; monitoring rest areas; finalise Endangered Species Act; training for on-water compliance |
| VU | Pollution* | Work on Abandoned, Lost, and Discarded Fishing Gear (ALDFG) and non-entangling Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) | Research to understand species presence and habitat use; improving awareness; citizen science (sightings); recording of commercial and artisanal fishing sightings and interactions; awareness on gillnets and boat strike |
| | Incidental catch and fishing gear interactions | Fisheries observers; sightings reported to Fisheries Officers | |
| PNG | Incidental catch and fishing gear interactions | Bycatch assessment; pinger trial as mitigation | Government action and presence in communities; awareness |



| | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|--|---|
| CK | Pollution* | Plastic treaty negotiations | Whale protection sanctuaries; more effective MPAs |
| NC | Climate change | - | Legislation for protection to make species more resilient to climate change |
| SB | Harvesting (direct take) | Export ban (Fisheries Management Regulations 2017) | Population status assessment/research; quota for traditional harvest |

* Including noise, plastics, abandoned lost and discarded fishing gear, chemicals.

Poll 5 – Dugongs

| | Threats | Current actions | Other needs |
|------------|--------------------------|---|---|
| VU | Bycatch | Awareness raising; enforcement on opportunistic killings of live by-caught animals | Gillnet best practice and awareness; gillnet bans in Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) management plans; protection of seagrass habitat; seagrass awareness; national seagrass assessment; aerial surveys; research on climate change impact on seagrass; mapping of seagrass |
| | Vessel traffic | Guidelines and code of conduct; daisy the dugong animation; boat speed limits in main harbour; targeted awareness raising | |
| PNG | Harvesting (direct take) | Community-led education and awareness; local trade regulations | More support to local community organisations for local education and action. |
| NC | Harvesting (direct take) | Education and communication; strict legislation with some enforcement; local interviews about cultural connections and harvesting | Assign ambassadors in customary districts; communication to stop harvesting; awareness on legislation (ban on eating <i>and</i> hunting) |
| SB | Harvesting (direct take) | Ban on harvesting; awareness programme through CBRM; national dugong and seagrass management and conservation programme; promotion of protecting seagrass | Further awareness against harvesting; improve regulations enforcement; population status assessment/research |



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We are interested in how countries and territories are implementing the Programme, and how SPREP and other Partners can support these efforts. The following poll questions were aimed at understanding implementation priorities and needs.

For partners, what support are you already providing, or could you offer Member countries?

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: NOAA can provide capacity building, training, and funding in some cases.

Vava'u Environment Protection Association (VEPA): VEPA support the national species plans and priority actions that the government has outlined, they do this through: providing training and support to Ministry staff; on ground monitoring (turtles, seabirds and whales); and drafting policy and program documents (NDFs). VEPA can also support conservation work by interacting and engaging with communities; supporting community driven initiatives for biodiversity conservation; and monitoring and awareness programs. They have also started an environmental ambassador program which has 7 female youth environment ambassadors working in their communities to engage further on pollution, waste management and biodiversity conservation. Finally, VEPA provides feedback to national policies and implementation.

Marshall Islands Conservation Society: Essentially survey data and operational tours.

Vanuatu Environmental Science Society: VESS has implemented projects that address the threats and gather information on these species - particularly dugongs. And we are currently working on NPOAs and turtle tourism guidelines. Being one of the only science-based and animal focused NGOs in Vanuatu we have the capability to continue to conduct research, involve Ni-Vanuatu scientists and raise awareness about these species, if funding and resources are available. We would like to continue the work on assessing dugongs and would like to expand that to turtles. Particularly to assist the government when considering conditions for permits issued for traditional take of turtles to ensure it is sustainable. We would like to continue to support the government to increase knowledge, monitor and protecting these species. As well as to increase awareness in the general population.

The rest of the questions were aimed at members.

What are your priority species groups (Figure 2) and why? What are the priority issues or actions for these groups? Do you have management plans for these groups?

Wallis and Futuna (gov): Turtles and Seabirds

- The 16 islets of Wallis constitute important refuges for many species and are thus classified as Key Biodiversity Zones as part of the Territory's biodiversity strategy. However, this biodiversity is threatened by the presence of invasive species, identified during the Island Conservation mission in 2019, particularly rats and wild pigs. As part of the PROTEGE program, actions to eradicate these invasive species from the islets of Wallis have been undertaken since 2021 with the support of SPREP in particular in the implementation.

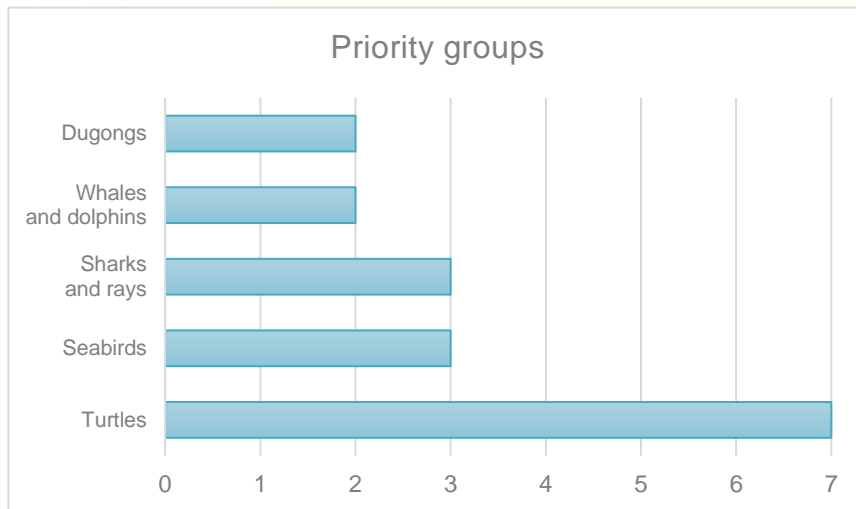


Figure 2. Priority species groups for participating countries and territories.

Marshall Islands (NGO): Turtles and seabirds

- I chose these two in terms of culture, demand, and effects on our local ecosystems. For seabirds, there is a project around managing and cultivating a marine protected site.

New Caledonia (gov): Turtles and dugongs

- The Agency for Biodiversity of New Caledonia (ANCB - ex- CEN), is hosting the dugong action plan and will host at the end of the year the turtle action plan. For both dugong and turtle action plan the priorities will be:
 - evaluate the last action plan
 - creating a new action plan (the regional framework will be useful for this)
 - creating a communication strategy
 - implementing the communication strategy.

Cook Islands (gov): Turtles, seabirds, sharks and rays, and whales and dolphins.

- For turtles we are looking to develop a management plan for tourism interaction in Rarotonga.
- We are looking at protected species gazetting or regulations for all of the species listed.
- We need to establish whale sanctuary regulations.
- We are reviewing the CMS Sharks MOU and whether we join this.
- We have rat eradication programmes to address seabird conservation and human livelihoods.
- We have a national park that provides habitat to a significant population of seabirds.
- No management plans for these species.

Solomon Islands (gov): Sharks and rays and turtles

- We are in the process of developing NPOA for sharks and rays, they are also important for livelihoods, and several species are under CITES.
- The priority issue for both sharks and rays and turtles is compliance.
- No management plans for these species.

Vanuatu (NGO):

- These species are the most commonly seen by the coastal communities and are at risk from the increased use of gillnets and increasing coastal development, as well as inappropriate tourism.
- We have a management plan for turtles under consultation but we need one for dugongs.

What support do you need from SPREP and are there any key projects that need funding or other resources?

Wallis and Futuna (gov):

- We hope that beyond the PROTEGE program, SPREP will continue to support us in our actions in the fight against invasive species, the main threat to biodiversity (expertise and financial support).
- Following these eradication actions, we wish to be able to improve our skills in monitoring species, we already have qualitative results such as several feedbacks from the population on turtle eggs and in particular several observations of hawksbill eggs.
- We have started bird monitoring training with an association.

New Caledonia (gov):

- Maybe help in the creation of the new dugong and turtle action plan, also the communication strategy.
- We will have very junior person in charge of creating the new action plan. If we could have funding to have support from someone experienced, it would be helpful.
- We will have funds to create the dugong strategy communication plan (to hire a communication consultant), but we do not have funds to do the same for turtles.

Cook Islands (gov):

- Technical assistance
- Capacity development
- Direct funding.

Solomon Islands (gov):

- For sharks, we need technical and financial support.
- For turtles, we need compliance and financial support.
- Specifically, we need support with development of NDF for marine species that are listed in CITES.

Vanuatu (NGO):

- Funding
- Collaboration on scientific work to understand what species we have and where the critical habitat is for them, the threats they face.
- Collaboration on awareness raising. Awareness raising is needed for government officers (fisheries, environment, tourism, VFIPA (investment authority)), Project Management Unit and any others involved in promoting development. Also, for humanitarian NGOs and communities.
- Population assessments for dugongs and turtles to be able to assess status. This will also assist the Dept. of Fisheries when issuing permits for turtles for traditional take.
- Write an action plan for dugongs and cetaceans.

- Strandings programme or at least a plan for how to react to strandings of whales, dugongs and turtles. Proper training and PPE. Training on reporting to global/regional databases.
- Tourism guidelines for shark interactions and seabird viewing.
- Field guides for Vanuatu's marine megafauna.
- Citizen science programmes to assist with data gathering and monitoring.
- Workshop for publishing data in scientific journals (we have a lot of data in the grey literature).
- Also see draft NPOA seabirds, sharks, and turtles for project ideas.

What are some key challenges or road-blocks that the attendees face when implementing the Programme?

Wallis and Futuna (gov):

- Our means are very limited, but we are gradually strengthening our teams.
- We are also faced with a multitude of strategies (national biodiversity strategy, national strategy for marine protected areas, the Pacific regional programme), the biodiversity project manager must navigate the multitude of strategies and interface with several interlocutors.

Marshall Islands (NGO):

- Just the human resources and finances to run an operation.

New Caledonia (gov):

- Mainly, lack of human resources. But by chance, we will have one person full time that will be hired for one year for the turtle action plan and 2 years for the dugong action plan, so it will be easier to make the connections with the regional programme.

Cook Islands (gov):

- Understanding of the programme and how we can effectively engage with it.

Vanuatu (NGO):

- Funding, human resources.
- Lack of baseline scientific data to base conservation actions on, but funders don't want to fund baseline studies, only conservation actions.
- Funding for biodiversity from a number of funders is required to be linked with climate change mitigation or resilience, *and* livelihoods but when there are no studies to link some species conservation efforts with climate change mitigation or livelihoods (particularly when most of the communities are outside the formal economy), we haven't got the evidence to prove our methodologies that will help our target species will *also* mitigate climate change *and* improve livelihoods, therefore they won't fund the projects.

Solomon Islands (gov):

- Lack of resources (e.g. funding)

Do you have an implementation plan for the Programme or would like to develop one? Are you interested in a 1 on 1 session to discuss and refine your priorities and work towards an implementation plan?



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New Caledonia would like to create implementation plans for turtles and dugongs and it would be good to have a discussion in October when maybe people hired for the dugong and turtle action plan will be started.

Cook Islands would like to develop an implementation plan and would be interested in having a discussion about it.

The *Solomon Islands* would like to develop an implementation plan and are interested to talk more about this in October.

Vanuatu have an action plan for seabirds, sharks and turtles, the development of which was influenced by the Programme. We do not have a plan for implementation for the remaining species (dugongs and cetaceans). I can't speak for the government but I am sure they would be grateful for assistance. We are also trying to organise a final validation workshop for the NPOA in the next couple of weeks with the Department of Fisheries, Environment and Tourism which SPREP could attend and assist with.