



## Sustainability - a co-operative vision



By FANTASHA LOCKINGTON

**T**HIS week in Tourism Talanoa we continue our discussion on the importance of sustainability and responsible tourism in order that we might continue to benefit from the increasing numbers of visitors to our shores, while preserving and protecting the land and seascapes, and the life that depends upon them, including our own.

For sustainable tourism to work well, the hotel and tourism industry must continue to strengthen its partnerships with Government and the relevant Line Ministries, while deepening its relationships with local communities and helping to educate our younger generation, who we hope will continue to embrace sustainable strategies.

As stated in an earlier Tourism Talanoa, there are many tourism operators who are supporting programs in partnership with the ministries of Fisheries, Forests, Agriculture and Tourism.

Because of its very nature, tourism in Fiji touches every aspect of the economy, interacts with almost every Government ministry and agency and reaches furthest into isolated communities, rural and maritime areas.

Many of our FHTA members are actively involved in initiatives that are self-funded and often in close association with the communities they interact with because of the location of their resorts on islands, along the coastal regions and in isolated parts of Fiji.

There is an increasing trend for resorts to incorporate their conservation efforts on their websites as part of their marketing while simultaneously furthering the cause of conservation and sustainable, ethical tourism.

This greater utilisation of these endeavours as a marketing tool has seen an increase of resort websites featuring a sustainability section on their websites.

The Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort is among those that see the marketing and environmental value of showing their commitment to conservation on their website.

The resort proudly advertises having a resident marine biologist, who participates in an international program that monitors the health of reefs all around the world and who actively engages the guests in educational and immersive activities, some of which are part of the international reef assessment and reclamation program.

Marine biologists, marine ecologists, environmentalists and many other science graduates are joining tourism businesses to provide the industry with a deeper understanding of sustainable practices while applying their knowledge to the programs they support.

The added benefit of sharing these experiences with our visi-



Marica Vakacola with Project Abroad Volunteers. Picture: SUPPLIED

tors and interested communities ensures the knowledge benefits a wider community who will in turn practice and pass this on.

In existence since 2001, the Mamanuca Environment Society (MES) has promoted environmental education for all who “work, visit or stay in the Mamanucas”, with emphasis on the importance of conserving Fiji’s biodiversity.

MES not only educates guests, visitors and employees, but is also concerned with spreading the message wider afield.

Educational visits to nearby schools, especially those in the islands, involve students of all ages in activities to increase awareness of the importance of conservation for the future health of the environment and all the life it supports.

The dedicated Marine Environment School Program targets mainly Classes 6 to 8 of designated mainland and island primary schools.

International and local student groups from outside the Mamanuca are hosted by member resorts for lectures and field excursions to support their own research in Environment Management and Sustainable Tourism.

Discussion and the sharing of ideas with local villages and communities continues to play a vital part in the success of MES programs.

One of the less well publicised initiatives that bring resorts and communities together are Marine Conservation Agreements.

The World Wildlife Conservation Society 2018 study, “Contribution of Marine Conservation Agreements to Biodiversity Protection, Fisheries Management and Sustainable Financing in Fiji”, focuses on partnerships formed between the tourism industry and local communities with land-sea tenure rights.

The study included a survey of 81 tourism operators, of which

69 per cent either already were about to be, or had at some time, been involved with a Marine Conservation Agreement (MCA).

In all cases, these agreements centred on setting up permanent or temporary Marine Protection Areas (MPAs).

In many cases, these originated in the mid-1990s, with informal agreements often extending back even further, from the time when the resort was first established.

The report also recognised that Fiji is a “leader in community-based marine conservation”, and that “Fiji’s social and customary tenure systems provide a unique foundation for the establishment of MCAs between traditional leaders and their communities and the tourism sector”.

Respect for traditional protocol has long been demonstrated by many of our resort owners and operators, and has resulted in the protection of specific marine areas, vital for the wellbeing of marine life.

Most agreements between local communities and the resorts, both written and verbal, rely upon making use of traditional practices such as no-fishing zones, or *tabu* areas.

Win-win situations for all involved would be greatly enhanced if national guidelines could be established.

This would assist both the tourism industry and local communities, by bringing greater recognition to both for their ongoing work to protect and conserve the marine environment.

We cannot emphasise the importance of this strongly enough. As a younger, developing economy, tourism is the major source of our income and is the country’s highest foreign exchange earner.

Protecting the environment protects people’s livelihoods, today and into the future.

This supports our economic



Ilisapeci Narube works underwater. Picture: SUPPLIED

growth, which in turn enables the development of essential infrastructure and the provision of all-important social services such as health and education.

■ Sources: Fijian Tourism 2021, (MITT).

Contribution of Marine Conservation Agreements to Biodiversity Protection, Fisheries Management and Sustainable Financing

in Fiji, Wildlife Conservation Society 2018.

Next week - Sharks! Did you know that the presence of sharks in your waters mean your marine life is healthy?

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