Weaving a Tapestry of Protection and Sustainability

By virtue of its geographical location the Fiji Islands Marine Ecoregion (FIME) is considered the "crossroads" of the Pacific. Located within the Western Pacific, Fiji is an archipelago of more than 300 islands, its Exclusive Economic Zone covering an estimated ocean area of 1.29 million sq.km.

Fiji’s waters contain a diversity of marine habitats, including coral reefs, lagoons, mangrove forests, macroalgal (seaweed) communities, seagrass beds, sand, mudflats and estuaries.

I. In Active Pursuit of Conservation and Sustainability

In recognition of the global significance of the Fiji Island marine ecosystem, and the growing threat to its health and resilience, WWF Fiji Country Programme has embarked upon an accelerated and focused programme of action (a Big Win).

The Big Win will deliver "a joint declaration of commitment by the Great Council of Chiefs and the Fiji Government to a comprehensive system of networks or permanent tabu (Sacred/restricted) areas across FIME by 2005. The first of these networks will be launched by the ten chiefs of Bua and Macuata on the Great Sea Reef in September 2005."

Progress Marker 1: Partners Accept Vision

In April 2004 the Big Win idea was developed by WWF Fiji. By January 1, 2005 partners in the Big Win effort include government (Ministry of Fisheries), i Qoliqoli (fishing grounds) owners in Macuata, conservation NGOs (Wildlife Conservation Society, Wetlands International, Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas (FLMMA)) and education and research institutions, such as the University of the South Pacific.

Progress Marker 2: PM accepts to make an announcement in Mauritius on the development of a network of MPAs

In April 2004 the Fiji Government had no MPA announcements planned. In January 2005 the Fiji government announced a significant commitment to the development of MPAs during the Small Islands Development States (SIDS) meeting in Mauritius. The Minister for Foreign Affairs and External Trade, and Head of the Fiji delegation to Mauritius, made the following announcement contained in the box to the right.

Further, by 2020, at least 30% of Fiji’s inshore & offshore marine areas, (i qoliqoli’s) will have come under a "comprehensive, ecologically, representative networks of MPAs, which are effectively managed and financed." This will contribute to the South Pacific regional system and to the global target of 10% of world seas being managed under MPA, by 2020."

II. An Eight month record of Partnership and Achievement

Having set out an ambitious and accelerated Big Win programme of work in April, 2004 WWF Fiji has made great progress towards achievement of the 2005 goal.

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Progress Marker 3: Great Sea Reef communities appreciate and support this vision and plan

The 3rd longest barrier reef system in the world, known locally as Cakaulevu (literally the ‘Big Reef’) or the Great Sea Reef is the priority area of focus for WWF in FIME. Located along the northern shores of the second largest island in Fiji, Vanua Levu, and running parallel to the coastline of the provinces of Macuata and Bua, the reef was identified as a globally significant area by a variety of stakeholders at the FIME vision workshop in December 2003. Since initiation of the Big Win in April 2004, the provincial council of the Macuata Province has given its full support to the setting up of an MPA network. In November 2004 selected members and owners of fishing rights to the largest traditional fishing ground on Vanua Levu, from the vanua Nabekavu, Macuata, Sasa, Dreketi and Mali, developed a community management plan, as the basis for future partnership activities.

Part of this management plan is the complete protection of eight (8) sites of mangrove islands, sea grass fields and coral reefs between the coastline and the barrier reef totalling approximately 59.4 km².

The Fiji Islands Marine Ecoregion - A model of ambition, commitment and achievement
Progress Marker 4: General Surveys to establish baselines completed and recommendations made

At the FIME Vision workshop it was clear that limited scientific data was available on identified priority Fiji areas. In December 2004, thanks to support from the Vodafone Fiji Foundation, a biological expedition, the first of its kind on the Great Sea Reef, was carried out in the Great Sea Reef. Preliminary results showed that there were 1) unique mangrove island habitats supporting an amazing abundance of juveniles of various species, confirming once again the underpinning role of mangroves in the life cycle of fish and of the absolute need to protect them; 2) some coral and fish species that are known to science from other places but found for the first time in Fiji, and 3) possibly some new species have been discovered.

III. Next Steps Towards the Big Win Outcome

Having achieved so much in eight months, the FIME team is now concentrated on the fulfillment and celebration of the Big Win goal by December 2005. The progress markers to be achieved over the next 12 months are:

Already the activities and events of the next 12 months are beginning to take shape. Building on the growing support of key stakeholders, the announced commitment of the Fiji Government to marine conservation, and the anticipated momentum and interest generated by achievement of the progress markers, WWF Fiji is planning to:

a) promote and integrate Big Win and ER (Ecoregion) targets and standards within the NBSAP (National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan) process (as members of the NBSAP advisory group).

b) work with the 30 communities of the Great Reef to confirm the extent of eight specific sites and the possible addition of sites on the barrier reef for tabu sanctuaries.

c) champion the marine conservation commitments and achievements of Fiji to key international audiences (CBD Donors Group, ACP Cotonou meeting, Pacific Forum).

d) celebrate the establishment of the tabu areas with the Great Council of Chiefs and the WWF President (September 2005).

IV. Looking Beyond the Big Win to the National, Regional and Global Agenda

In addition to delivering a significant conservation achievement over the short-term, and setting the stage for fulfilling the FIME vision over coming years, the FIME Big Win will contribute directly to implementation of Fiji’s obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity. As a signatory to the CBD, Fiji has already honoured one of its obligations through the compilation of the Fiji National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). In order to address priority actions highlighted in the NBSAP the Government will now need to:

1. Establish the institutional and legal framework for a core protected areas system in both the terrestrial and marine environments.

2. Secure the priority/core sites through appropriate arrangements with landowners or Traditional Fishing Rights Owners.

3. Encourage and assist traditional fishing rights communities to actively manage their i qoliqoli and to establish or reinforce protected areas through appropriate traditional conservation areas.

4. Undertake a comprehensive marine biodiversity resource inventory.

5. Implement appropriate partnerships with communities to attain sustainable community level resource management.

6. Enact regulations to provide for consultation and majority agreement of traditional fishing rights communities.

7. Develop legislation for the preservation and maintenance of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices.

8. Provide alternative income generating activities for local communities.

The FIME Big Win, and over the longer-term, the FIME Ecoregion Action Programme within which it is nested, will provide the Fiji Government and the NBSAP process with a pathway to the establishment of the comprehensive network of MPAs that they are now committed to. In addition the FIME Big Win - through its promotion of a framework of collaboration and sustainability - will support the Government of Fiji’s commitments and obligations to a number of additional Conventions related to Marine Conservation:

- Convention for the Protection of Natural Resources and Environment in the South Pacific Region and Related Protocols (SPREP Convention);
- Convention on the Conservation of Nature (Apia Convention);
- Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES Convention); and
V. A Coalition of Key Actors

The ambition and accelerated pace of a Big Win, and beyond that an ambitious ecoregion action programme, demands the full commitment and participation of key actors - and particularly, those with the power to influence and implement key actions. Since April 2004 the FIME Big Win has inspired the interest and participation of the following actors:

**Macuata Province:** The paramount chief of the Province, a national advocate for protection of the Great Sea Reef and influential amongst the chiefs in Fiji, especially in his role as the Deputy Chairman of the Tourism Resource Owners Association (a national body whose members are resource owners engaged in tourism by virtue of their land being tied up in tourism and or are engaged in tourism activities themselves).

**Ministry of Fisheries:** Responsible for management of the Fisheries Sector and generation of inventory data for the development of management plans for the 410 traditional fishing grounds (qoliqolis) in Fiji. Their mandate also includes policy and legislation development and enforcement.

**Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS):** A key partner in developing an ecosystem based management and reserve network development in the priority areas in Fiji. WCS is taking the lead on providing the science behind reserve network establishment in the Great Sea Reef and in the Bligh waters as part of an ecosystem based management joint initiative by a number of partners, including WWF Fiji Country Programme.

**Wetlands International:** Committed to integrating watershed management within marine conservation policies and programmes to minimize harmful discharges to the marine environment, particularly into the MPA sites in the Great Sea Reef area.

**University of the South Pacific:** Research and capacity building for students who are also local resource owners, particularly students from the provinces whose resources are being looked at (e.g. with the Great Sea Reef, students from the provinces of Macuata and Bua get the first priority on scholarships for a masters study program that will focus on a topic of socio economic relevance to the communities and a topic of biological or ecological importance to the Great Sea Reef). 

**Fiji Locally Managed Marine Areas Network:** Committed to the establishment of community MPAs, training of local community members (qoliqoli owners) and a learning framework for community monitoring of successes of locally managed marine areas.

VI. A Framework for the Future

A Big Win aims to set the stage for the implementation of an Ecoregional Action Plan. Building on the successes of the past 8 months, and most specifically the announcement by the Government of a commitment to 30% protection of Fiji marine resources, WWF Fiji Country Programme and its partners are set to embark on an equally ambitious plan of action that will see the effective and sustainable implementation of the marine conservation commitments made in 2005 by government, community leaders and their communities.

At legislative level this commitment to action will be confirmed and actioned through the NBSAP process, WWF will work with the major stakeholders to set national targets in support of the 30% goal.
community level, WWF and partners will work to build awareness and understanding of the government's commitment and its benefits to all sectors of Fiji. The Great Sea Reef designations by chiefs (in September 2005) will be promoted as a pathway for both integrated conservation and sustainable development efforts across the ecoregion, and multi-agency / multi-stakeholder collaboration to meet national and community conservation goals.

Threads of opportunities will be woven into the Big Win and its planned achievements, to integrate and mainstream into Fiji government policies and spending relevant parts of regional and global initiatives such as the CBD Programme of Work, the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation in the Pacific Islands Region, 2003 to 2007 ("Mainstreaming Conservation"), The Programme of Work for Island Biodiversity (a new thematic area developed under the Convention of Biodiversity) that commits Pacific Island Country signatories to the CBD; The Pacific Islands Regional Ocean Framework for Integrated Strategic Action (PIROF-ISA), which guides ocean governance in Pacific Islands; and Cotonou developments.

VII. The Promise of Sustainability: From Vision to Reality

Well on the way to achieving an ambitious short-term goal for marine conservation in Fiji, WWF and its partners are committed to ensuring that the promise of the Big Win goal is sustained for many generations to come. In developing an action plan that will promote adoption and implementation of conservation targets at the national scale - through national instruments, and by national stakeholders - WWF and its partners will work to ensure that the vision for the conservation of the marine resources of Fiji is one that is integral to the planning and action of government, communities and the private sector. Over the next three years such ambition will require an investment of just over $USD 1 million, and will concentrate on achievement of the following goals:

VIII. A Team Effort

Beyond funding, the FIME Big Win and ecoregion conservation efforts are supported by the WWF Fiji Ecoregion Programme and a virtual "team" of technical advisors and advocates. Formed in April 2004 at the Big Win Changemakers workshop, the virtual team is made up of staff from WWF International (Asia Pacific and Global Support Unit) and the Global Marine Programme. Facilitated by the Asia Pacific Ecoregion Action Programme (APEAP) Support Initiative, the team is committed - through regular conference calls, progress monitoring and events - to providing FIME with the advice, technical support, and (where possible) resources to achieve their progress markers and access regional and international "points of leverage" (e.g. CBD, SIDs, and Pacific fora and processes) that will support and extend the Big Win goal.

Annex 1.

FIME Ecoregion: Background

Encompassed within this vibrant ecological framework are over 390 known species of coral housing over 1200 variety of fish and a multitude of invertebrates. The ecoregion is also home to some unique marine life, like an endemic seabird, the Fiji petrel. There are seven known endemic species of fish in the Fijian waters and it's also a spawning ground for the endangered hump head wrasse and the worlds largest parrot fish, the bump head parrot fish. Of the seven species of sea turtle found in the world, five have been observed in Fijian waters; the green (Chelonia mydas), hawksbill (Eretmochelys imbricata), loggerhead (Caretta caretta), olive ridley (Lepidochelys olivacea), and leatherback (Dermochelys criacea) turtle. Green and hawksbill turtles most commonly nest in Fiji, where the sea grass meadows are a critical foraging area for the green sea turtles. Critically endangered turtles like the leatherbacks also use these waters as feeding and migratory paths. Fiji's EEZ waters are a declared whale sanctuary, an initiative by the local government to protect the 12 species of whales and dolphins sighted in its waters.

Fiji's marine resources are important to its people from both a cultural perspective, and as a major source of food, minerals, pharmaceuticals, construction material and a vast range of useful products, as well as livelihoods and a source of cash income. Significantly, traditional patterns of community marine tenure, as well as indigenous ecological knowledge, can be incorporated into sustainably managing marine resources. Good local management with full community involvement is a strength of FIME conservation efforts and will ultimately contribute to
both the sustainable livelihoods and empowerment of the communities involved. The islands economy depends heavily on its foreign exchange earnings from Fisheries and Tourism and there are high hopes that within the next few years these industries would be earning the tiny islands over a billion dollars.

Threats
Today Fiji’s marine biodiversity faces growing threats. These have not been well documented and as a result, are not well recognised outside of the Pacific. Threats include: climate change; coral bleaching; tourism; increased coastal settlement; destructive fishing practices such as explosives, night spear fishing and modern and traditional poisons for fishing; over-harvesting of key species; artisanal (subsistence) and commercial fishing pressures; inappropriate economic development activities; introduction of invasive alien species; point-source pollution (e.g. sewage, mining, industrial discharges, litter refuse disposal sites); non-point source pollution (fertilisers, herbicides, urban run-off); silting of waterways and coastal areas from agricultural practices; logging and clearing of riparian vegetation leading to the degradation and loss of important coastal habitats in the marine environment. The cumulative effects of these impacts, coupled with the dependence of Fiji’s coastal communities on the marine environment mean that it is imperative to manage these waters sustainably.

Annex 2:
A funding foundation on which to build: Current FIME project funding

$50,000 USD - Vodafone Fiji (for WWF to complete Great Sea Reef Survey) Completed

$50,000 USD - Packard (for WWF and partners) to develop an Ecosystem Based Management (EBM) proposal Completed

$500,000USD (confirmed at this stage) - Packard (WWF and Partners for (EBM) marine conservation)

$750,000 USD (almost confirmed at this stage) - Moore Foundation (WWF and Partners for (EBM) marine conservation)

$50,000 USD - VASS, NZAID (for sustainable livelihoods on Kabara Island, identified as a globally significant priority area at the FIME vision workshop)

$179,250 USD - Packard (a % of the regional funding for WWF)

$59,400 USD - Centre for Technical Assistance (for WWF and FLMMA Partners) community 3 dimensional model mapping of marine and terrestrial resources.