The status of Solomon Islands coral reefs

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The coral reefs along the shores of the double archipelagic chain of steep, mountainous and commonly volcanic islands comprising Solomon Islands (5-12°S, 152-170°E; 28,370 km^2) are mainly narrow, fringing and intermittently distributed. Their collective biomass is, however, large because of the coastline length of the 1000 islands. Long barrier reefs and expansive intertidal reef flats are uncommon; and Ontong Java, a northern outlier, is the only large atoll (70 by 11-36 km). The largest coral reefs usually occur where large lagoons are protected by raised or semi-submerged barrier reefs or by raised limestone islands, e.g. Marovo and Roviana Lagoons and Marau Sound.

There is recent coral bleaching, coincident with higher than usual sea temperatures. There is also historic evidence of periodic tectonic uplift during earthquakes and of sediment from volcanic activity burying reefs. Apart from these, the biggest threat is the coincidence of rapid population growth, high unemployment and relatively new opportunities to generate cash such as selling reef fish for restaurants and fish and corals for aquaria. Without alternative opportunities for cash income, the more lucrative reef species will be exhausted, and such alternatives are scarce.

Prevalent widespread logging causing huge plumes of sediment to be discharged from the rivers draining the logged catchments is having a major impact on lagoons and coral reefs. A good example is southern Marovo Lagoon, an area also affected by a scheme to plant oil palms on logged over unstable hill country thereby creating more fluvial sedimentation. The effects of such sedimentation are not being monitored. Nor are the effects of other types of pollution near Honiara (readily visible from the air) and from other industrial developments such as oil palm extraction plants and fish canneries. Gold mining on Guadalcanal, and proposals to mine gold and nickel in New Georgia could also potentially degrade coral reefs.

There is little legislative protection for coral reefs in the Solomons. The only policy is embodied in the government's policy on fisheries that aims to secure optimum social and economic benefits for the people by exploiting fisheries resources within limits. In the absence of reef census research, reliable catch returns and monitoring programmes it is difficult to set appropriate limits. The Environment Act 1998 aims to prevent, control and monitor pollution in nearshore waters. The Wildlife and Protection Act 1998 regulates the export and import of plants and animals to comply with CITES; although the Solomon Islands are not signatories. Law enforcement is, however, generally weak. The only marine protected area (MPA), designated in 1975 to protect turtle nesting grounds, did not succeed because locals asserted their customary fishing rights and destroyed the turtle hatchery. The Solomon Islands Government and The Nature Conservancy have tried to revive this MPA, and it may yet prove to be the first with community support in the tropical South Pacific.

As yet, very little scientific work has been carried out on the coral reefs of the Solomon Islands. There is an urgent need to describe, quantify and catalogue the biota of the reefs, especially for base-line studies of potential impacts, and to undertake near-shore oceanographic research. Reliable statistics on the quantities of various reef species eaten and exported are also needed.

Introduction

There is a dearth of reliable information about coral reefs and coral reef ecology in the Solomon Islands. Although many coral reef species are being exploited, directly for sustenance and for cash, there is little information on their sustainability and on the ecological consequences of reef fisheries. There is little information on the long-term ecological effects that industries like logging and mining have on lagoons and coral reefs. Fundamental to measuring changes to the reefs is the need for reliable baseline studies. Few of such studies have been done in the Solomon Islands, and currently there is little in the way of expertise and material resources to undertake them.

This is in a country with a rapidly increasing population that is predominantly rural, coastal and where the annual per capita income is considerably less than $US1000. Coupled with new opportunities for converting reef resources to cash, and increased logging, mining and plantation development – activities that inevitably increase erosion and the turbidity of coastal waters – the situation in Solomon Islands does not bode well for the health and vigour of its coastal marine life.

In this report we describe coral reef fisheries, current and potential threats to reef ecology, and problems for conservation. We conclude that overfishing, continued logging and new land developments such as oil palm plantations are detrimental to coral reefs and lagoons. Of concern is the likelihood that most fisherfolk are probably oblivious to the likely ecological consequences of overfishing. Weak enforcement of fisheries regulations and the difficulties of creating marine protected areas are also problems.

Geography

The Solomon Islands are the northern group of a huge arc of islands delimiting the Coral Sea east of Queensland. The archipelago, orientated northwest to southeast, stretches about 1700 km between Bougainville at the eastern extremity of Papua New Guinea and the northern-most islands (The Banks Group) of Vanuatu. The six main islands are: Choiseul, Santa Isabel, New Georgia, Guadalcanal, Malaita and Makira. They are arranged roughly in a double chain with the two "strands" enclosing a relatively sheltered sea area comprising New Georgia Sound ("The Slot" of World War II), between Choiseul, Santa Isabel and New Georgia, and Indispensable Strait between Malaita and Guadalcanal (Figure 1).

In terms of land area (28 370 km^2), Solomon Islands is the third largest island nation in the South Pacific, after Papua New Guinea, and New Zealand. Its very much larger sea area of 1.34 million km^2, as delimited by its 200 mile EEZ, is twice that of neighbouring Vanuatu, slightly larger than that of Fiji, and a little smaller than the individual sea areas of Cook Islands, New Caledonia and the Northern Marianas Islands. The total area of internal waters and within the 12-mile zone, where most of the coral reefs occur, is 0.3 million km^2.

Geologically the archipelago was formed recently (about 25 million years ago) by tectonic plate movement, earthquake, and by considerable submergence and emergence (Maragos 1998). Thus coral

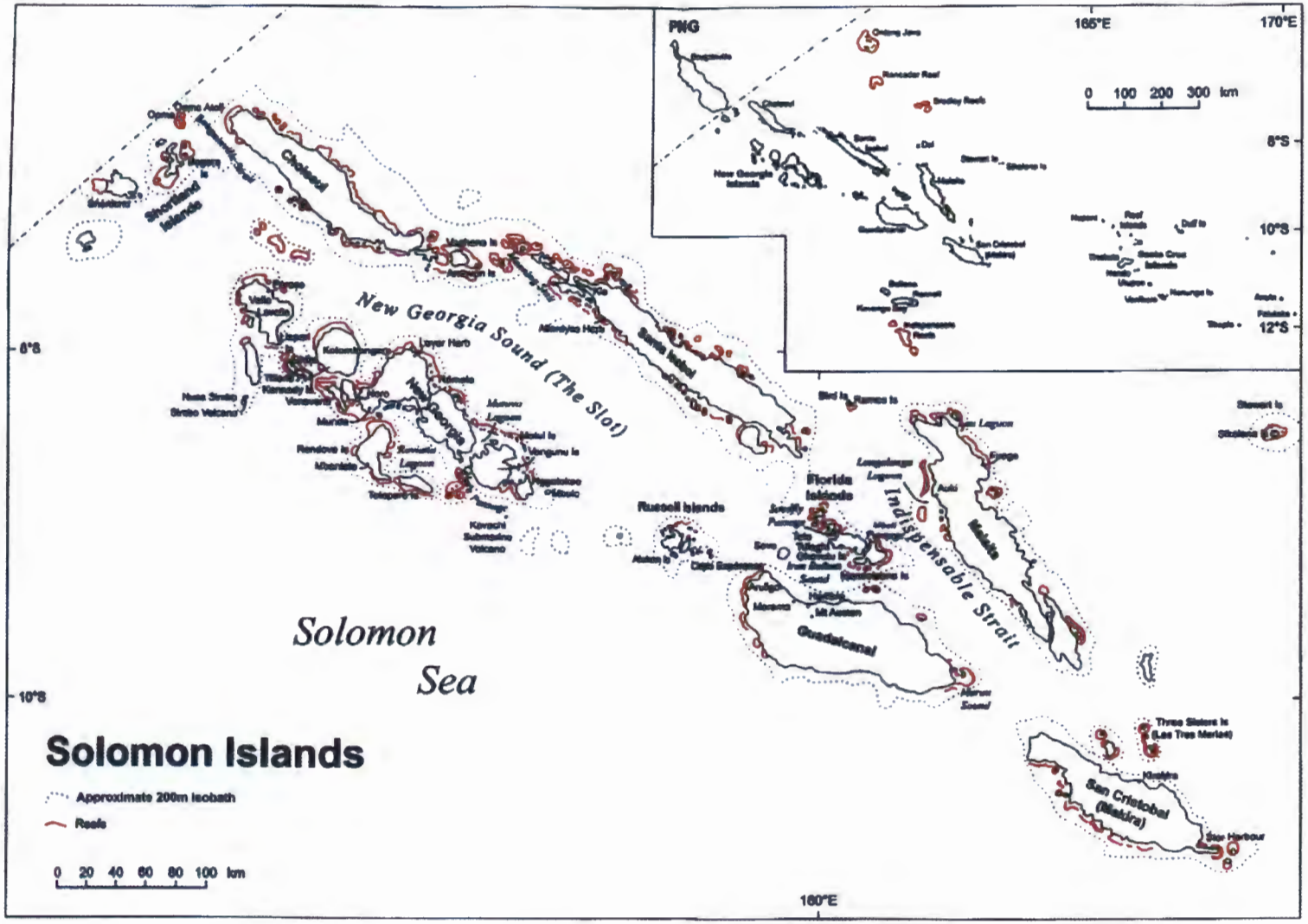

Figure 1
Map of Solomon Islands showing approximate coral reef regions (adapted and modified from Wells and Jenkins 1988).

is found high on the slopes of Mount Austen behind Honiara. Of a total of about 1000 islands (comprising small islands, atolls and islets), most are raised volcanic limestone islands with the reefs predominantly fringing on the steep slopes of the volcanic islands (Maragos 1998). The six largest islands, listed above, rise steeply from the sea and each has a central mountain spine with peaks up to 2450 m. Large coastal plains only occur on Guadalcanal, particularly in the northeast. Solomon Islands is situated within the 'Pacific Ring of Fire' belt and still has active and dormant volcanoes. The two active volcanoes are: the Kavachi submarine volcano south of Vangunu in eastern New Georgia, and the Tinakula volcano far to the east in the Santa Cruz Group. Dormant volcanoes, that still emit fumes, are Savo Island between Florida Islands and Guadalcanal, Simbo volcano on Nusa Simbo Island and Paraso volcano on Vella Lavella.

Two main climate systems affecting the Solomon Islands are the southeasterly trade winds (*Ara*) that blow from May through to October and the northwesterly monsoon winds, (*Koburu*) that blow from December until March. Fine, sunny, relatively calm weather normally occurs during the months of April and November. Being close to the equator, air temperature in the Solomon Islands does not vary considerably. Mean daily temperature throughout the year is on average 28°C ± 2°C. Minima as low as 23°C normally occur in the early morning hours during the Ara season. Daily maxima are normally 30°C. Rainfall ranges between 3-5 metres per year. There is generally more precipitation during the wet *Koburu* season than during the relatively dry *Ara* season.

Sea surface temperatures in the Solomons are consistently in the high twenties with a small annual variation. At Honiara, situated at 9.5°S and about mid-latitude for the archipelago, the mean monthly sea surface temperatures measured over 65 months from July 1994 until November 1999, ranged from 27.4 to 30.1°C. The average of the 65 monthly means was 29.08°C. Minimum and maximum daily temperatures within this period were 26.5 and 31.6°C. The coolest temperatures commonly occur between August and October and the highest temperatures between January and March. Sometimes the mean monthly sea temperature is above 29.5°C for four or five consecutive months (data from Solomon Islands Meteorological Service).

Tides in the Solomon Island are diurnal; i.e. it takes almost 24 hours for the tide to rise and fall. The spring range is about 1.4 m and the neap range about 0.45 m. The tidal curve is asymmetric; the tide falls much faster than it rises (see Womersley and Bailey 1969 fig. 129). In the latter half of the year, the low tide tends to occur at about midday. But from about October, the time of low water shifts so that in the other half of the year the time of low tide moves to about midnight (Morton and Challis 1969; Womersley and Bailey 1969).

Human history

The Melanesians first discovered and settled in Solomon Islands 4000-6500 years before present, with the Polynesians settling in the outlying Islands and atolls at about 2000-3000 years before present. The indigenous people of the Solomon Islands are a diverse group. There are a total of about 87 languages and dialects. The common language among the different language speakers is Pidgin. English is the official language used in governments and business. The majority of the population is Melanesian (94.2%). Polynesians comprises 3.7%, Micronesians 1.4% and those of Chinese or Caucasian descent the remaining 0.7% of the population (Leary 1993). Kiribati people, who were resettled by the British Government in the 1960's, are included as Micronesians in the compilation above.

European 'discovery' of Solomon Islands, was at first a hit and miss affair. The Spanish, who came from Peru, hit upon Santa Isabel in 1568, and over a period of six months found the other large

islands. Returning in 1595 to start a colony, they missed the main islands, so tried unsuccessfully to colonise the much smaller, and highly malarial Santa Cruz Islands. A second colonisation attempt in 1606 found only the minuscule Duff Islands and went on to attempt to colonise Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu – again unsuccessfully.

Perhaps because mapmakers plotted the Solomons far to the east of their correct position, the islands were spared further European contact until 1767 when a British sea captain, Philip Cataret, stumbled on Santa Cruz and Malaita. A spate of British, French and American explorers followed. Then came traders, various missionaries and territorial claims in the north by Germany and in the south by Great Britain. During some international island "horse trading", Germany ceded her northern claims in 1897 to Great Britain in exchange for Britain relinquishing its claims to Western Samoa. Bougainville, naturally part of the Solomon archipelago was, perhaps unfortunately, left in German control, and so today is part of Papua New Guinea. The British administered the islands as a Protectorate; but were not overly generous on expending money on it. During World War II the fight for control over an airstrip near Honiara on Guadalcanal was a major turning point of the war. Thereafter the Japanese retreated as the Americans advanced; but not without exceptionally violent and bloody battles on land, sea and air.

After the war, Britain continued to administer the Protectorate until independence in 1978. Solomon Islands was one of the last British colonies to become independent. It is now a democratic state with a modified form of Westminster government and with the British Monarch as Head of State. The provisional population (1999 census) was 408,358.

Politically the nation is divided in to nine provinces: (1) Temotu (Santa Cruz Island, Reef Islands, Tikopia and other smaller eastern outer islands); (2) Makira & Ulawa; (3) Guadalcanal; (4) Central (Russell, Savo and Florida Islands); (5) Malaita (Malaita, Ontong Java and Sikaiana) (6) Isabel; (7) Western (New Georgia Group, Simbo and Vella Lavella); (8) Choiseul and (9) Rennell & Bellona; in addition to the Honiara Town Council.

Tenure and ownership

It is important that tenure and ownership be discussed in regard to coral reefs in Solomon Islands. Most coral reefs are owned under the customary marine tenure system that is recognised under the Solomon Islands Constitution. The owners are an integral part of the reef system and a holistic approach must always be taken when discussing coral reefs. The success or failure of conservation efforts on coral reefs largely depends on the attitudes of the communities owning them.

Coral reefs and adjacent coastal areas such as lagoons are owned under a kinship group based ownership. The clan or the tribe normally owns the reefs (fringing or barrier) under customary rights (Oreihaka and Ramohia 1994). The ownership details vary from area to area. Skewes (1990) described such a system as complex and dynamic and an important part of Solomon Islands culture. Documented examples are the Nggela system (Foale 1998), Lau in north Malaita (Akimichi 1991) and Marovo lagoon (Hviding 1988). The studies by Foale (1998) will be reviewed here to illustrate the nature of such an ownership system.

According to Foale (1998), the reefs in Nggela are regarded as an extension of the land, and boundaries of coastal properties are extended seaward to divide reefs or adjacent sea, resources that are contained within these areas are owned by the tribes (*Kema*). There are four *Kema*, subdivided in turn into 7 clans (Vike). The *Vike* are the primary owners of reefs or sea. In cases where small islands or islets are owned, the *Kema* or *Vike* also own the adjacent reefs. Primary rights to property and *Vike* affiliation are inherited matrilineally. Utilisation and management of resources within the coral reefs is done through the *Vike*.

Reefs or seas can be transferred across *Vike* through *Huihui*. During the *Huihui*, the 'owners to be' make a feast for and present money (traditional and modern) and gifts to the original owners. Food and gifts are also presented to the other elders (chiefs and village leaders) of the community who would witness such a transfer. The 'owners to be' must not eat any food that is prepared for the original owners. A *Huihui* normally occurs where ownership is transferred from the patrilineal side or when land is bought from another *Kema* or *Vike*. The important role played by the tribes or clans owning the reefs in utilisation and conservation of coral reefs will be discussed later, especially on matters pertaining to marine protected areas and conservation efforts.

The coral reefs of Solomon Islands

Solomon Islands Bibliography to 1980 by Sally Edridge is an exceptionally thorough compendium of information on the Solomon Islands including publications about: voyages, the earth and life sciences, oceanography and geography. It contains lists of studies pertaining to individual islands, and provides detailed author and subject indexes (Edridge 1985).

Distribution and description

The geomorphology of Solomon Islands coral reefs was described by Stoddart 1969a-c. Wells and Jenkins (1988) provided a summary of Solomon Islands reefs. The coral reefs are mainly fringing and intermittent around all of the islands (Figure 1), and although certain areas appear to be coral-free on the map, e.g. the northern and southern coasts of Guadalcanal, even those coastal tracts usually support a narrow fringing zone of corals on the steeply sloping seabed. The only areas devoid of corals are on sandy beaches and near major river mouths.

Some of the largest areas of coral reef occur where there are large lagoon complexes variously protected by volcanic islands, raised islands, sand cays or by barrier reefs. Significant areas are:-

- around the Shortland Islands near Bougainville

- inside barrier reefs along the northeastern shore of Choiseul

- on either side of Manning Strait between Choiseul and Santa Isabel Islands, and extending along the southwestern shore of Santa Isabel

- in the Ghizo – Vonavona –lagoonal area on New Georgia's southern shore

- encircling Vangunu in southeastern New Georgia and along the northeastern coast area past Ramata almost to Lever Harbour (Marovo Lagoon)

- in the north at Lau Lagoon and west at Langalanga Lagoon in Malaita

- in eastern Guadalcanal (Marau Sound).

Long submerged barrier reefs running for tens of kilometres, like the Great Sea Reef in Fiji, are rare in the Solomons; though there are smaller examples. These include:- reefs along the northeast coast of Choiseul; near Ghizo and near Munda in New Georgia; off Star Harbour in eastern Makira; northeast of the Russell Islands; across the entrance of Kangava Bay on the south coast of Rennell, and around Utupua Island in the easterly Santa Cruz Islands. In the Reef Islands, a line of four reefs stretches westwards for 21 km, while the Great Reef slightly further north is about 25 km long.

Atolls are relatively uncommon. The only large atoll is Ontong Java, a northern outlier. This atoll is about 70 km long and 11-36 km wide with a wide reef flat enclosing a lagoon of about 1400 km^2. Sikaiana Atoll (Stewart Islands), about 200 km northeast of Malaita, is a small triangular atoll about 10 km wide with a 45 m tall remnant of the original volcano. The surrounding reef drops steeply to great depths, so the band of coral is narrow. Far to the west in Bougainville Strait lies Oema Atoll. Rennell and Bellona are raised atolls with coastal cliffs and fringing reefs.

There are also several mid ocean reefs, infrequently visited, but covered with coral. These include Roncador and Bradley reefs lying south of Ontong Java, Indispensable Reefs south of Rennell, and several small shoals north of the Santa Cruz Islands.

Most of the 67 war ships and transports sunk during World War II lie in waters too deep for coral growth. The largest concentration of these wrecks is in Iron Bottom Sound between Guadalcanal and Savo Island. Some, transports, smaller vessels and aircraft that sank in lagoons and shallow waters are now important artificial reefs for corals. Many are in the western Solomon Islands near previous Japanese anchorages and harbours.

The importance of mangroves

Almost all the Islands in the Solomon Islands have mangroves. According to Oreihaka (1997), there are 26 species in 13 families, representing a total of 43% of the world's mangrove species. Mangroves occupy a total area of 52,500 ha (Solomon Islands National Forestry Inventory 1995). Besides growing in estuaries and protected shore, mangroves also grow on coral platforms, as seen for example in the Mboli or Siota Passage in Nggela (Florida Is.).

Mangroves probably play an important role in protecting coral reef biota, especially filter feeders like corals, by their ability to filter out and bind much of the sediment that comes down the rivers. This may be especially important in areas that have been logged. They are also an important component in the process of recycling nutrients within lagoons Although Milton *et al.* (1995) claimed very few coral reef fishes use mangroves as nursery areas, a few do, and some fish, including bait fish species, in search of food, migrate regularly between the two habitats.

Mangroves are very important to most Solomon Island communities as fishing grounds for crustaceans, molluscs and fish. Propagules of the mangrove *Bruiguiera gymnorhiza* are eaten as a vegetable in parts of Malaita and are sold routinely in the Honiara market.

Mangroves are an important habitat for bait-fish that normally migrate between lagoonal areas, especially coral heads within the lagoons, and mangroves. Although the bait-fish are not a major dietary component of coral reef fishes, they did comprise a quarter of the diet of nearly 30 predatory reef fishes whose stomach contents were examined by Blaber *et al.* (1990b).

Capturing bait-fish for the tuna pole and line industry provides employment for several Solomon Island villages. About 2000 tonnes of bait-fish were harvested in the Solomons in 1988 (Blaber and Copland 1990). So if the bait-fish stocks declined because of loss of mangrove habitat, then in addition to this loss of sustenance, there would be less opportunity for villagers to earn cash.

Simply put, if large areas of mangroves are destroyed for timber and firewood, as has occurred in Asia, then the ecological and economic ramifications will be detrimental to coral reefs. There will be increased sedimentation on the reefs and more pressure on harvesting reef-dwelling species to replace the declining mangrove fisheries.

Coral reef biota

Wells and Jenkins (1988) who provided a preliminary treatment of selected islands of the Solomon Islands along with coral reef types, and reviewed the coral reefs of these islands, concluded that very little scientific work has been done on the coral reefs of Solomon Islands. In her bibliography, Edridge (1985) listed just 14 publications on coral reefs and atolls – mainly geomorphological; but there are various taxonomic reports on reef biota.

The current status of coral reefs in the Solomon Islands is relatively unknown (Oreihaka 1997). According to the Solomon Island Fisheries Division, a complete inventory of coral reefs in the Solomon Islands is still to be made. This should include coral cover and a detailed study of taxonomy, ecology and the biology of both soft and hard corals and other non fisheries resources such as sponges.

Currently there are no published ecological descriptions of the subtidal zone of Solomon Islands reefs. Nor are there any popular photographic publications similar, for example, to Underwater Guide to New Caledonia (Laboute and Magnier 1979). Some general accounts of coral reef ecology in the Indo-Pacific are very useful however, because they describe different types of coral reef formation and list many of the species found in Solomon Islands. An excellent reference is the Indo-Pacifc Coral Reef Guide by Allen and Steene, published in 1994 and currently in its fifth edition (1999).

In addition to the collections made by early explorers, the Californian Academy of Sciences expedition to western Polynesia and Melanesia in 1933 led by led by Charles Templeton Crocker, resulted in short reports on seaweeds (Setchell 1935); fishes (Seale 1935); and reptiles and amphibians including a new sea snake (Slevin 1934).

Some information on the marine flora and fauna resulted from the voyage of the Danish oceanographic research vessel *Galathea* from 1950-52, when a group of scientists led by Torben Wolff, spent a month on Rennell Island in 1951 (Wolff 1952). Shortly afterwards, in 1953, Rennell and Bellona were explored by scientists from the British Museum of Natural History. Then in August-September 1962 another scientific party, again directed by Wolff, re-visited Rennell Island during the Danish *Noona Dan* expedition 1961- 62 (Wolff 1963). Most of the results of these three expeditions were edited by Wolff, and published by the Danish Science Press in seven volumes (Wolff 1958-1976).

Much of what we know about the coral reefs of the Solomon Islands resulted from a British Royal Society expedition in 1965 organised and led by E.J.H. Corner. This expedition, including scientists from Britain, Australia and New Zealand, aimed at examining the biogeographical relationships between the Solomon Islands and other island systems in the western tropical Pacific (Womersley and Bailey 1969, p.433). Professor John Morton lead the marine group of the Expedition which studied coral coasts of the southern Solomon Islands in the period June to December 1965.

The group's main study areas (listed northwest to southeast) were: Ghizo and Rendova Islands in western New Georgia; the entire Marovo Lagoon from Nggatokae in the south to Lever Harbour at the northeastern end; the Russell Islands; the eastern part of the Florida Islands; northwestern Guadalcanal from Honiara to Lambi beyond Cape Espérance; the Marau Sound area of southeastern Guadalcanal and the Kirakira area on the northern shore of San Cristobal Island, or Makira as it is now commonly called. For a list and map showing the main study areas of Morton's marine party see Stoddart (1969a Fig. 48 and p. 357).

A discussion of the geological and biological observations, some of them preliminary, filled most of Volume 255 (pages 187-548) of the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London B. The papers comprising the marine biology section were about: coral reefs and sand cays (Stoddart, 1969a-c); marine algae (Womersley and Bailey, 1969, 1970); polychaetes (Gibbs, 1969); opithisthobranch molluscs (Challis,1969a and Miller 1969); the interstitial fauna of a sandy beach (Challis 1969b) and the biomorphology and zonation of Solomon Island shores (Morton and Challis, 1969).

Morton and Challis (ibid) described the appearance and composition or "biomorphology" of Solomon Islands coral reefs, at least in the intertidal zone, which they compared with W.A. Stevenson's "universal scheme" of intertidal zonation (Morton 1974, 1990 and Morton and Challis 1969).

Stoddart and Morton and Challis remarked that the coral reefs of the Solomons were less spectacular than reefs they had seen elsewhere. "Those experienced in coral reef ecology by common consent remark that the Solomon Islands reefs lack the luxuriance of those in other parts of the Pacific, in particular the rich Great Barrier Reef and the widespread atoll and small island formations" (Morton and Challis 1969:483). Stoddart (1969a) concluded that the poverty of modern coral growth was attributable to the fact that most of the coastlines are recently elevated with steep and often vertical gradients that few corals are able to colonise. Leary (1993) remarked that this conclusion probably reflected the sites that the Royal Society Expedition visited, and did not necessarily reflect the whole of Solomon Islands.

Weber was of a similar view and stated ..."The paucity of reef development and the widespread mortality of corals in shallow water environments should not, however, be misconstrued to indicate either the absence of a thriving coral reef fauna or an attenuation of reef coral diversity. The coral collections reported on here demonstrate that virtually all the Indo-Pacific hermatypic scleractinians are present in the area, and the Solomon Islands region ranks near the top in terms of worldwide reef coral generic diversity" (Weber 1973: 397).

Although some observations using scuba were made on the Royal Society's expedition (see Stoddart 1969b: Section 5.2, p.397 "Observations of submerged levels at Matiu Island"), scuba was apparently little used as a survey tool for marine biologists on the expedition. Since then, however, routine use of scuba for biological surveys has revealed the coral reefs of the Solomon Islands to be some of the richest in terms of species (Maragos 1998). Solomon Islands coral reefs are included with some of the world's best dive sites.

During the Royal Society Expedition, corals along the sublittoral fringe (at and just below the low tide mark) at several localities, e.g. near Honiara and Tete Island in the Sandfly Passage of the Florida Group, were found to be recently dead. Morton and Challis (p. 483) described the prevailing colours of the corals as grey or dull khaki brown and how at some places, during midday low spring tides, there was a slight pervasive odour of dead or moribund corals. They speculated that the combined effects of high illumination and air temperatures during unusually low tides or high rainfall might have caused the corals to die.

Their description of the dead and dying corals is, however, very similar to the phenomenon now called coral bleaching (described below under "natural threats") that coincides with higher than usual sea surface temperatures (29-32oC). Because the highest seasurface temperatures in the Solomon Islands typically occur in the last and first quarters of the year, the corals that Morton and Challis described may well have become bleached several months before the Expedition arrived in June 1965. By that time the corals would have been coated with an epiphytic brown algal scum, and they would have probably been decomposing.

Taxonomic studies

Flora

Algae play some very important role in coral reefs, especially as primary producers, in cementing coral reefs and as shade for coral benthos during sunny weather (Wilkinson and Buddemeier 1994). This important role by the algae is often overlooked by many coral reef scientists. Descriptions of

littoral (rockpool) diatoms were provided by Foged (1957). Setchell (1935) listed nine seaweeds from Malaita, and several taxa from Sikiana Island and from Bellona. Levring (1960) identified algae collected from Rennell Island. Womersley and Baily (1970) recorded a total of 233 species of algae from Solomon Islands comprising: 14 Cyanophyta, 121 Rhodophyta, 27 Phaeophyta and 71 Chlorophyta. They described the Solomon Islands flora as not very diverse with a low seaweed diversity compared to other places. There has not, however, been any comprehensive collection of marine algae from the Solomon Islands using scuba; in particular crustose coralline species are yet to be investigated.

Seagrass beds, that are typically inshore of coral reefs, play an important role in binding sediments and reducing surface erosion. They are also a source of food for reef-dwelling animals including turtles and dugongs (Oreihaka 1997, Leary 1993). Womersly and Bailey (1970) reported 7 species of seagrass for Solomon Islands including *Cymdocea sp., Halodule sp., Halophila sp., Syringodium sp.* and *Enhalus sp.* which are common. No detailed survey of sea grasses in the Solomon Islands has been undertaken, so additional genera and species are to be expected.

Fauna

Fishes

The Templeton Crocker Expedition collected 36 marine fishes on Rennell, 20 on Bellona and three on both islands. The Danish expedition to Rennell added another 19 that were described in some detail by Rofen (1958). Wolff (1969) noted that Rennell Islanders recognised about 200 species from pictures in T.C. Marshall's Fishes of the Great Barrier Reef (1964). Numerous expeditions to the Solomon Islands that collected fish are listed by Munro (1967) in Fishes of New Guinea, and by Wolff (1969). ICLARM FishBase'97 also have the list of currently known fish species in the Solomon Islands, which also includes the reef fish species of the Solomon Islands.

A joint survey of the fish of Santa Cruz in Temotu Province was undertaken by: The Australian Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Field Museum of Natural History, Milwaukee Public Museum and Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division in 1998. The survey recorded 725 species, many being from coral reefs. A preliminary examination of the collection turned up ten new species, and the likelihood of several other new species (McGrouther 1999).

Currently a comprehensive checklist (not illustrated) of fishes from Solomon Islands and Bouganville by Johnson Seeto nears completion. A 1998 draft by Seeto (johnson.seeto@usp.ac.fj) lists over two thousand species of marine and freshwater species.

Many fishes of Solomon Islands reefs are cosmopolitan within the Indo-Pacific region and thus appear in regional descriptive accounts. In most cases, however, the distributions are too general or vague to isolate those species found in the Solomon Islands. One exception, that maps species distributions, is Guide to Angelfishes and Butterflyfishes by Allen *et al.* (1998).

For the non-specialist to identify Solomon Island reef fishes it is therefore necessary to accumulate and carry a small library including publications such as: Allen 1975; Coleman 1981; Amesbury and Myers 1982; Fautin and Allen 1992; Lieske and Myers 1994; Randall, Allen and Steene 1997; Randall 1998 and Myers 1999.

Invertebrates

Many common invertebrates were named and illustrated in the publications by Morton listed above and in Morton and Challis (1969). Otherwise there are very few publications that deal specifically with invertebrate taxa from the Solomon Islands. Abbott (1957) listed 118 molluscs collected on the

Danish and British visits to Rennell. There are the papers on polychaetes and opithsobranch molluscs resulting from the 1965 Royal Society expedition mentioned above. Bergquist *et al.* (1971) provided a description of 31 sponges collected on the Expedition and described major sponge habitats; Weber (1973) a description of the genetic diversity of scleractinian reef corals. McElroy (1973) identified 15 species of holothurian (sea cucumber) in the shallow waters of Ontong Java lagoon in the northern Solomon Islands. Holland (1994) reported 18 species, that are commercially harvested in the Solomon Islands.

Guille *et al.* (1986) describing the sea urchins and related echinoderms of New Caledonia lagoon and Lévi (1998) on New Caledonian sponges are useful references for identifying these phyla in Solomon Islands waters.

Many conspicuous Solomon Islands invertebrates can be identified using Gosliner *et al.* (1996) who provided a well illustrated account of coral and coral reef animals of the Indo-Pacific region. The Solomon Islands is listed as a locality for about 280 species. Veron (1986:630) also provides distribution maps of various coral species in Australia and the Indo-Pacific. According to Veron (1986) there are about 60 genera of hermatypic (reef-forming) corals in the Solomon Islands.

There is scant information on Solomon Islands mollusca. The Solomon Islands Museum Association published a first volume booklet on marine shells of the Solomons, but only on cowries (Kenworthy 1972). It is, however, possible to identify almost all Solomon Islands seashells from publications illustrating shells from around the world. A useful general reference is Abbott and Dance (1990). Cone shells may be identified from Röckel *et al.* (1995); cowries and cone shells from Lorenz and Hubert (1993) and nudibranchs and sea snails from Debelius (1996).

Although there are numerous crustaceans in Solomon Islands, little research or assessment has been done on this group.

Coral reef fisheries

Size of the fishery

The export of inshore fisheries resources harvested from reefs and lagoons, excluding any tuna, has earned the Solomon Islands between ten and twelve million Solomon Dollars each year for the last three years (ca $US 2-2.4 million pa at Jan 1999 exchange rate). The quantities and values of the main species harvested are listed in Table 1. In 1998 the total exports (FOB) from the Solomon Islands were estimated to be $US 141 million (World Bank website source), so the value of the inshore fishery (i.e. excluding the lucrative tuna industry) is in the order of 1-2%.

The annual domestic consumption of coral reef and lagoon species is variously estimated at 10-14,000 tonnes. It is difficult to put a dollar value on this domestic consumption, some of which is traded and sold in local markets and much of which is eaten directly by the fisherfolk and their families. But if we value the domestic catch in terms of the same volume of tinned tuna that might be consumed locally in the absence of fresh fish, then the domestic market is probably worth at least as much as the export earnings.

About half ($SBD 5.8 million) of the inshore fishery export earnings are derived from the sale of Trochus and trochus-like gastropods. The export of sea cucumbers processed as bêche-de-mer earns $SBD1.9 million, sharkfins $SBD 1.6 million, live reef fish $SBD 1.3 million and spiny lobsters $SBD 0.63 million. Currently very little reef fish are exported chilled or as fillets.

Products		1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Green snail	Kg	22,345	5,090	4,927	7,441	4,476	3,903	3,138	3,620	3,332	1,971	614	942	0	0	0	0	2
	SI$	49,952	12,335	20,177	27,869	38,528	80,336	124,088	122,685	185,951	110,990	35,955	73,372	0	0	0	0	50
Trochus shell	Kg	405,020	468,700	499,903	662,346	445,216	460,065	371,693	306,569	87,475	50,890	24,090	66,516	0	5,490	113,287	31,922	181,200
	SI$	323,442	533,967	768,232	1008,911	2,045,169	3,814,538	4,541,445	5,466,707	1,444,601	751,829	347,996	1,165,862	0	385,640	2,027,850	919,360	3,144,525
Blanks for buttons	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	54,075	74,535	137,494	80,405	36,338	42,520	22,981	59,490
(Trochus niloticus)	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,291,625	3,547,458	3,886,364	2,290,000	2,484,488	3,767,008	2,562,702	2,681,766
Black lip oyster	Kg	15,156	42,376	14,903	31,157	28,301	23,502	31,226	31,432	43,666	27,948.0	26,007	300	0	0	0	0	0
(Pinctada margaritifera)	SI$	10,629	67,950	26,322	63,479	186,472	251,233	416,264	546,536	629,914	424,737	456,288	3,332	0	0	0	0	0
Brown lip oyster	Kg	2,270	3,570	2,400	6,520	4,887	6,103	11,537	1,922	11,479	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,000	0
(Pteria. Penguin)	SI$	1,617	3,523	4,032	10,965	13,042	27,480	68,461	13,239	93,134	0	0	0	0	0	0	9,671	0
Gold lip oyster	Kg	3,373	3,879	0	0	5,974	9,300	21,826	25,662	13,871	4,800	1,196	0	0	0	0	0	0
(Pinctada. Maxima)	SI$	2,226	11,993	0	0	54,714	88,262	234,672	273,318	250,124	54,491	19,856	0	0	0	0	0	0
Clam shell	Kg	10,244	0	0	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	SI$	68,826	0	0	80	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Tabu shell	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3,412	3,286	0	12,100	0	0	0
(Nassarius sp.)	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	40,391	39,769	0	283,332	0	0	0
Shell ornaments	Kg		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15,493	117
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	55,742	0
Other molluscs	Kg	9,351	54,421	4,996	21,485	10,566	10,031	10,997	2,785	18,302	6,745	0	0	219,997	99,082	264,976	34	65 plus 2,760 pices
	SI$	73,572	66,871	56,803	106,348	142,429	147,304	116,161	34,523	112,746	134,717	0	0	2,405,639	1,840,612	2,111,342	150	5,787
Turtle shell	Kg	0	1,318	0	1,841	2,432	1,975	3,099	2,854	1,528	1,263	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	SI$	0	24,561	0	44,198	168,104	232,273	508,802	719,250	542,250	491,170	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Crayfish	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	22,894	2,902	0	18,213	13,312
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	643,491	215,301	0	134,147	638,943
Prawns (farmed)	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5,330	404	0	0	0	37,887	16,251
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	45,726	15,648	0	0	0	1,031,436	420,660
Other crustaceans	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	18,128	11,376	0	20
	SI$		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	429,043	274,795	0	0

Bêche-de-mer	Kg	9,259	44,291	13,616	134,184	146,376	146,958	87,095	118,896	622,385	715,414	316,388	284,630	219,339	113,090	202,860	227,020	106,753
	SI$	51,755	251,872	74,880	733,793	939,533	1,469,117	721,236	1,880,957	7,631,952	10,227,486	3,161,069	2,577,134	1,732,575	1,260,332	2,413,086	4,034,809	1,897,501
Shark fin	Kg	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	4,456	2,073	4,931	1,923	3,073	6,678	3,972	2,283	201,738	0	0	19,630	14,001
	SI$	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	134,842	102,799	144,865	84,319	265,596	1,121,931	629,592	252,068	1,068,746	0	0	1,469,796	1,595,487
Shark meat	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	203,086	26,855
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	215,694	13,878
Crocodile skin	Kg	0	N/A	0	N/A	6,445	820	7,452	844	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	0	0	0
	SI$	0	14,516	0	10,873	32,093	99,852	187,438	17,246	0	0	0	0	0	563,160	0	0	0
Reef fish1	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	143,000	85,573	0	0	260
	SI$	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	481,013	0	0	N/A
Live fish	Kg	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	31,830	43,518	54,463	129,810
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	318,300	435,180	544,630	1,298,100
Aquarium fish	Pcs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	84,935	3,606	58188	80,039
	SI$	0		0	0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	221,001	10,818	174,098	239,721
Coral	Pcs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	175,203	2,467	84,755	58,181
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	587,584	289,970	203,628	211,785
Aquarium invertebrates[2]	Pcs	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	37,826	5,396	13,944	15,211
	SI$	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	176,917	13,2500	126,852	98,041
TOTAL	SI$	582,019	987,588	950,446	2006,516	3,754,926	6,313,194	7,063,432	9,158,780	11,069,712	11,069,712	8,284,331	8,013,549	8,024,812	9,811,750	11,343,299	11,482,715	12,246,244

Source: Statistics Office and Fisheries Division, Solomon Island Government. The weights of live fish exported for 1996-1999 are from Johannes (1999).

Table 1
Marine exports from the Solomon Islands, 1983-1999 (excluding tuna)

Notes for Table 1
N/A means 'not available'.
[1] There is no reliable value for exports of reef fish in 1995 and 1999.
[2] Includes hatchery produced clams exported through the aquarium trade; mainly molluscs Tabu shell is exported to Papua New Guinea where it is used as shell money. Aquarium fish, corals and assorted invertebrates are exported in number of pieces and not kilograms. Assorted invertebrates were exported for aquaria; they were mainly molluscs. Exchange rate: Solomon Island dollar (SI$) per US$1: 4.9334 (Jan. 1999); 4.8156 (1998); 3.5664 (1997). 3.4059 (1995) and 3.2914 (1994).

Setting the sharkfin industry aside, because that is mainly a bycatch of purse-seining for tuna, the two biggest earners are trochus and sea cucumbers – both showing clear signs of overfishing. When these fisheries falter, as they most certainly will at the current rate of extraction and without any effective harvest controls, then if export earnings are to be maintained, the emphasis will inevitably shift to reef-dwelling fin fish. Already some of the more popular finfish species, e.g. the cods and groupers, are overfished in some areas.

If the Solomon Islands is looking for new opportunities for generating export earnings, then inshore fishery resources are unlikely to fill that bill. The existing fishery is mainly based on species already being overfished, while a rapidly growing rural population is likely to make increasing demands on the resources of reefs and lagoons for domestic consumption.

Echinoderms

Sea cucumber for bêche-de-mer

From the earliest days, the traders encouraged Solomon Islanders to hunt various reef dwelling species such as turtles, pearl oysters (for their shell) and sea cucumbers (for bêche-de-mer). As early as 1845 the Sikaiana People were curing tons of bêche-de-mer to offer the trader Andrew Cheyne. During the late 1870's and early 1880's, up to 90 ton of Solomon Island bêche-de-mer was landed in Sydney per year (Bennett 1987). Bêche-de-mer is a Chinese delicacy, not quite a luxury food but sought after for flavouring soups and for its homeopathic, medicinal and aphrodisiac properties (Adams *et al., in* 1992).

Today, sea cucumber, is one of the most important commercial commodities in Solomon Islands. The sea cucumber catch peaked in 1992 with 715 Mt but averaged around 200 Mt since then (see table 1). The catch trend over the last decade indicates a declining resource. For a summary of sea cucumber biology and the South Pacific bêche-de-mer fishery, see Preston (1993). Adams *et al.* (1992) and Skewes (1990) provide summaries of the Solomon Island fishery.

During the 1960's and 1970's the main species exported from the Solomon Islands were the black teatfish (*Holothuria nobilis*), white teatfish (*H. fuscogilva*), and blackfish (*Actinopyga miliaris*). In the 1990's, during something of a boom in the bêche-de-mer industry, the Solomon Islands along with other Melanesian countries started fishing a much wider range of species, the prices of which ranged from $SBD 1.60 - 40.00 per kg.

In 1991 in Temotu Province, for example, the four main species in terms of quantity were: tiger fish, *Bohadschia argus* (27%) @ $SBD 5.00 per kg; brown sandfish, *Bohadschia marmorata vitiensis* (18%) @ $SBD 3.30 per kg; lollyfish, *Holothuria atra* (18%)@ $SBD 1.60 per kg, and greenfish, *Sticopus chloronotus* (9%) @ $SBD 10.00 per kg. In 1992 a Western Province buyer bought 23 species of sea cucumber in which tigerfish, lolly fish and white teatfish, in approximately equal amounts, comprised 30% of the quantitiy and the most valuable species were white teatfish (29% of total value) and black teatfish (9%) (Adams *et al.* 1992)

Adams *et al.* (1992) made some pertinent comments on the economics of the bêche-de-mer fishery that are worth repeating.

1. It is often not appreciated that the exported item is dried to about 10% of its original wet weight. The exported tonnages should therefore be multiplied by ten to provide a live weight. Thus the 715 Mt exported in 1992 equates to over 7,000 Mt of live sea cucumbers which is a very significant fishery.

2. The bêche-de-mer fishery had increased dramatically in value, and in 1992 was second only to tuna in terms of overseas earnings. But whereas the tuna catch was sustainable at the 1992 catch rate, the bêche-de-mer catch wasn't – prophetic words given the decline in the bêche-de-mer exports since 1992.

3. The whole process of bêche-de-mer preparation from capture to grading and packaging is quite within the range of the local people and needs no injection of foreign capital.

4. The extremely diffuse, village level nature of the bêche-de-mer fishery means that the financial benefits are widely distributed amongst coastal villages with immediate and direct financial benefit.

A problem in managing the bêche-de-mer fishery is the multispecific nature of the fishery. The catch data are usually lumped; yet each species has its own habitat and ecological preferences. Lokani *et al.* (1996) reported that a common problem among all bêche-de-mer fisheries was the lack of management and overfishing particularly using scuba and hookah equipment. It is suspected that there could be local depletion of the resource in some parts of the country. In Ontong Java for example, the stock has dropped dramatically and as result, local communities enforce closed seasons (every 2 years). They later amended this ban to allow harvest of both sea cucumber and trochus (*Trochus niloticus*) for just one month every year. Probably the simplest and most effective regulation to conserve the species would be to enforce a ban on the use of scuba and hookah equipment as is the case in Fiji. This was strongly recommended by Adams *et al.* In 1992, and although there is technically now a ban in the Solomon Islands, the regulations have yet to pass into law.

The Solomon Islands Fisheries Division is currently supporting the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM), the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and overseas consultants in a research project to assess the potential for restocking and stock enhancement to manage tropical sea cucumber fisheries. Studies are underway into the reproduction of three important species; sandfish (*Holothuria scabra*), surf redfish (*Actinopyga mauritiana*) and white teatfish (*H. fuscogilva*). Studies show that it is possible to spawn and rear these species in the laboratory before reseeding the reefs (Ramofafia 2000).

As well as sea cucumbers, many people throughout Solomon Islands eat sea urchin species. *Tripneuster gratilla* is perhaps the most commonly eaten species.

Molluscs

Giant clams

The six giant clam species, *Tridacna gigas, T.derasa, T. squamosa, T. crocea, T. maxima and Hippopus hippopus*, found in the Solomon Islands have been exploited mainly for food at a subsistence level. Commercial harvesting of this resource, mainly for its meaty adductor muscle, developed in the 1970's and 1980's, however, because of the high value and demand for the product. The fishery reached its peak in 1983 when 10.2 tonnes of adductor meat were exported.

When harvested for their adductor muscles, the rest of the animal is usually wasted. In the case of the larger animals, divers cut out the adductor on the seabed to avoid bringing the heavy shells to the surface. There are reports of the mantles and viscera simply being cast into the sea. Considering that the adductor muscle barely comprises 10% of the wet flesh weight of the clam, and individual adductors typically weigh just a few hundred grams, any export of several tonnes represent harvesting tens of thousands of giant clams.

Giant clam exports dropped to just 60 kg in 1986; perhaps indicative of the heavy exploitation of the stocks. Asian fishing vessels poaching clams in isolated locations were a problem. In the 1980's, the Solomon Islands Government apprehended a Taiwanese vessel that had been poaching clams on the isolated Indispensable Reefs. The vessel had ten tonnes of frozen adductors on board (information from Fisheries Division). In 1996 a Honiara-based company, Hai Way International, had a cargo of

giant clam adductors confiscated at Henderson Airport when customs officers became suspicious that cartons labelled "bêche-de-mer" actually contained frozen adductors. The cargo amounting to about one tonne was incinerated.

Export of clams or clam products is now prohibited under fisheries regulation except clams that come from registered farms or a hatchery. Because of their relatively small size, hatchery-reared clams are popular with the aquarium trade. For about ten years clams have been bred and raised in hatcheries at the former ICLARM Coastal Aquaculture Centre at Aruligo near Honiara; the objective being to supply farmers with small clams that can be on-grown for the aquarium trade and to restock depleted reefs. A locally owned clam hatchery and nursery (Paruru Aquaculture), also designed to supply local farmers with juvenile clams, is under construction in Marau Sound.

Unfortunately both the ICLARM operation at Aruligo and the initiative at Marau have been compromised by the current violence on Guadalcanal, though there are proposals to enlarge ICLARM's smaller field station on the island of Nusatupe near Ghizo. The Marau Sound facility is not operating at present.

Pearl oysters

Pearl oyster shells were one of the earliest important export commodities of Solomon Islands. We don't know the export tonnages in the early days; but given that up to 40 tons of Solomon Islands pearl oyster shell was landed per year in Sydney during the 1880's (Bennett 1987), the quantities must have been very high. The shells were, and still are mainly used to manufacture buttons and jewellery.

In recent times the Solomon Islands pearl oyster fishery peaked in 1991 with an export of 69 Mt earning the country about $SBD 1 million. Blacklip (*Pinctada margaritifera*), goldlip (*P. maxima*) and brownlip (*Pteria penguin*) and are the most commercially important species in the Solomon Islands. The blacklip oyster made up almost 70% of the 1991 export. Blacklip and gold lip oysters, the largest species in the genus, have thick , nacreous, mother-of-pearl, shells much used for manufacturing buttons.

In 1993 Sims noted that annual pearl shell production from the South Pacific was worth $US1million, and that the value of pearl shell had greatly increased in the previous decade. Skewes (1990) described how the value of black-lip shell from Solomon Islands increased from $US 741 per tonne in 1981 to $US 5,531 per tonne in 1989.

According to Philipson (1989), expanded production of button blanks within the South Pacific region could double the value of shell exports as most shell was (then) exported unprocessed. There is some potential for exporting dried pearl oyster meat for the Asian market (Sims 1993).

Stock assessment surveys have been carried out in Kia and Waghena areas in Isabel and Choiseul Provinces, and in the Florida Islands (Batty and Kile 1990). An average of 28 goldlip shells per hectare was found in the Kia area although in places the density was as high as 600 shells per hectare. It was concluded, however, that the quantity available would not support even a small pearl culture operation. Stocks were over-exploited in the Waghena area. As a management initiative to conserve pearl oysters, an indefinite ban on exporting pearl oysters was established in 1992. Farmed oysters are excluded from the ban.

A joint Solomon Island Fisheries Division and ICLARM project has shown pearl oyster farming to produce pearls and using wild spat is viable. A demonstration farm, producing black pearls from the blacklip oyster, has been established at Nusatupe, near Ghizo. Pearls were first harvested from this farm in May 1999, and the shells have been re-implanted to produce a second crop of pearls.

Greensnails

The main species of turban shells (fam. Turbinidae) harvested in the South Pacific are the green snail (*Turbo marmoratus*); the rough turban (*T. setosus*) and the silver-mouth turban (*T. argyrostomus*). The last two are mainly targeted for food and their shells usually discarded. *Turbo marmoratus*, the largest species with shells up to 20 cm in diameter and weighing 2 kg, has a nacreous shell highly prized for inlay work, lacquerware, jewellery and for buttons. The green snail is not an abundant resource in the South Pacific. Despite its scarcity, the demand for the pearl shell is such that the animal continues to command a premium price, making searching for this species worthwhile for fisherfolk (Yamaguchi 1993).

The export tonnages of green snail shell exported from the Solomon Islands and the unit value for the period 1970 to 1989 was graphed by Yamaguchi (1993, fig.2). The graphs are the inverse of one another. Exports declined from a peak of nearly 60 tonnes in the early 70's to less than 5 tonnes in 1989. In 1993 less than one tonne was exported. The unit value increased from less than one US dollar per kg in 1981 to about $US40 per kg in 1989. This is a clear example of a boom-and-bust fishery of a reef-dwelling species that takes three to four years to attain sexual maturity, at which stage it is probably close to the minimum size likely to be harvested for its shell (15 cm diameter).

In order to protect green snail resources, the Solomon Islands and other South Pacific nations, urgently need to assess current fishing (and it is difficult to estimate the weight of shell being harvested from increasing exports of cut shell) and legislation to protect remaining stocks. Minimum and maximum size limits and establishing marine reserves might protect remaining brood stock (Yamaguchi 1993).

Although no quantitative assessment has been done to determine the status of the Solomon Islands greensnail population, based on anecdotal reports and fisheries export data they are clearly much depleted throughout the Solomon Islands. The Overseas Fishery Co-operation Foundation (OFCF) of Japan in collaboration with Fisheries Division set up the "Atoll Project" at the Aruligo Coastal Aquaculture Centre to breed this important species with an aim of restocking depleted reefs. Efforts to collect brood stock from areas where greensnail used to be abundant were not as successful as anticipated partly because of difficulties in finding enough snails, and because of difficulties in getting the animals to spawn. This project is currently in limbo because of the closure of the research station at Aruligo and funding uncertainties. The brood stock at Aruligo was purportedly eaten.

Currently there are no specific regulations on taking greensnail for food or for export. Although there are no export restrictions, there are no records of any exports since 1995. In support of the OFCF/Fisheries Division Atoll Project to rejuvenate the resource, the Solomon Islands Fisheries Division has recommended that a total ban should be imposed on harvesting this resource. That recommendation has yet to be considered by government.

Trochus

Of the few *Trochus* and trochus-like species present in the Solomon Islands, collectively called "trochus" in this report, *Trochus niloticus* is the most important. Harvested since time immemorial as a subsistence food, commercial harvests, mainly for manufacturing buttons, began in the early 20th Century. Shortly after commercial harvesting commenced, it became apparent that trochus was all too easily overfished. The Pacific trochus fishery declined in the 1950's when garment manufacturers shifted from shell to plastic buttons; but the fishery revived in the 1970's when shell buttons became fashionable on high quality shirts (Nash 1993).

In the 1980's and early 1990's this species was the most important non-finfish resource in Solomon Islands in terms of export earning. Since the peak export of 660 tonnes in 1986, catches have declined. Trochus are harvested mostly by subsistence fishermen for food, and only the shells are exported. A

feasibility survey carried out in 1988 recommended establishing button manufacturing processing plants. Two button blank processing factories established by the early 1990's produced 137 tonnes of button blanks in 1994. Currently one button blank processing factory is operational. As Adams *et al.* (1992) pointed out, if there is substantial fixed investment in button blank machines and factories, then it is vital that the stocks of trochus be managed to ensure a continuous supply.

Despite clear signs of overfishing there is no assessment of trochus stocks, no measure of fishing effort and scant information on catch (Skewes 1990). Some enhancement of the over-exploited reefs in the country is intended under the OFCF/Fisheries Division Atoll project. A reseeding trial at Alokan, Russell Islands, by Toru Komatsu of OFCF was successful and promising.

The only management measure to conserve trochus is a regulation that prohibits taking trochus smaller than 8 cm and larger than 12 cm when measured across the basal diameter. Growth rate studies of *T. niloticus* suggests that the snails live 10-5 years and possibly longer (Smith 1987 cited in Nash 1993). As with the bêche-de-mer fishery, probably the best regulation to conserve stocks would be to strongly enforce a ban all commercial harvesting using scuba or hookah equipment. On should be added between the words ban and all.

Other molluscs

Several other molluscs are important for food or culturally. Langalanga people produce shell money and shell money necklaces from four species of shells – romu (*Chama pacifica*), ke'e (*Beguina semiorbiculata*), kakandu (*Anadara granosa*) and kurila (*Atrina vexillum*). Some are becoming scarce as a result of this practice.

Subsistence fishers harvest gastropods like turban shell (*Turbo chrysostomus*), polished nerite (*Nerita polita*), false trochus (*Tectus pyramis*), cowry (*Cypraea tigis*); bivalves such as mangrove oyster (*Crassostrea mordax*), venus shell (*Gafrarium tumidum*) and mangrove mussel (*Modiolus agripetus*); chitons (*Acanthozostera gemmcita*) and cephalopods for food (squid and octopus) and shell (*Nautilus*).

There is a small souvenir shell trade where tourists buy a wide variety of shells in some retail outlets in Honiara and at the market. In general, tourist resorts, particularly those encouraging scuba diving, discourage such trade on their premises. Some of the rarest species such as the golden cowrie (*Cyprae aurentium*) command several hundred dollars each. In Honiara vendors travel door to door selling golden cowrie shells to collectors and entrepreneurs. If the tourist trade was larger, and if cruise ships were still making regular visits, then this shell souvenir industry in Solomon Islands would be much larger.

Crustaceans

Locally various crabs and shrimps and the slipper lobster (*Parribacus caledonicus*) are an important protein source.

Crayfish/lobster

Panulirus pencillatus is the most commonly caught rock lobster of the several *Panulirid* lobster species found on the coral reefs Solomon Islands. Other lesser frequently caught species are *P. versicolor*, *P. femoristriga* and *P. ornatus*.

Before 1973, some short-lived lobster fishing operations had failed because of variable catches and mechanical problems. In 1990 Skewes reported there to be good numbers of lobster on the weather

coasts of Makira and Guadalcanal, and in the Russell Islands and Western Province. Several larger operations established in 1995 failed within about a year for the same reasons as the earlier ventures. Almost 23 tonnes of spiny lobsters were exported in 1995. Since this was more than 10 times the sustainable annual catch estimated by Skewes, the crayfish stocks were probably being over-fished (Skewes 1990). Small-scale operators continue to buy and export lobsters despite a rapidly declining resource.

Fisheries regulations prohibit catching, trading or exporting crayfish of the genus *Panulirus* with eggs, whose eggs have been "scrubbed" or whose carapace length is less than 8 cm.

Other marine invertebrates

Corals

Corals are exported from the Solomon Islands for the aquarium trade. This is a relatively new industry in which two companies (Aquarium Arts and SI Marine Exports) are involved. Between 1996 and 1999, nearly 210 thousand "pieces" of marine life were exported. Many of these were live corals, representing 1% of the global trade in coral (Green and Shirley 1999). Eighty six percent (86%) were from Nggela, in the Florida Islands, 13% from east Guadalcanal and 2-3% come from the Western Province (Aquarium arts pers.comm).

Villagers in Nggela complain that the extraction of corals and coral organisms (including the juveniles of important fish species), especially the Sand Fly region, are depleting the reefs (Solomon Star 10 November 1999, p. 8-9). Almost all of the corals around the bird sanctuary island of Mandoleana (SE Florida Is.) have been damaged by harvesting of corals, fish or other species mainly for the aquarium trade (Tavasi pers.comm.). Considering that Solomon Islands contributes 1% of the global trade in corals and 86% of this were from Nggela, the pressure on the coral reefs of Nggela is that of concern.

It is possible to culture coral fragments in the sea until they attain the desired size and shape. In this regard, ICLARM has been conducting trials in the Marau Sound area.

Other invertebrates

The palolo worm, caught during its spawning season usually in October, is an important seasonal food especially in Nggela.

Various Solomon Islands invertebrates probably contain biologically active compounds of great interest to international pharmaceutical industries. Although there is interest in "bioprospecting" Solomon Islands reefs to take samples of a wide range of organisms to see which species may be likely contenders, the only bioprospecting to date was undertaken by Professor Phil Crews and his team from Santa Cruz University, USA in 1992. They were mainly interested in sponges.

The status of these other invertebrate resources are poorly known as no research or resource assessment survey has been done on any of them.

Finfish

Reef fish are harvested both for subsistence and for export. In terms of tonnage, the exploitation of finfish from coral reefs and lagoons is relatively small compared with the huge deep sea fishery based mainly on tuna. Export data for these species is, however, poorly differentiated in national fisheries statistics.

Fishing methods

The export industry is divided into the export of chilled or frozen fish and the export of live fish for food and for the aquarium trade. There is also a small bait-fishing industry (mentioned above) to supply bait for the tuna fishery.

According to Oreihaka and Ramohia (2000), who conducted a questionnaire on fishing methods in seven provinces, reef fishes are mainly caught by hook and line. Other fishing methods include gill nets, explosives and poison. From vast quantities of ammunition which were left behind in Solomon Islands after World War II, villagers cut open artillery and other shells to obtain powder to build explosive devices for stunning fish. Although this practice has waned in recent years, recent reliable information confirms that fishing with explosives still occurs in parts of the Western Province in the Marovo Lagoon and possibly elsewhere. Species of the plant *Derris* (one of the well known coastal species is *Derris eliptica*), that contain the chemical rotenone, and also the fruit of the *Barringtonia* tree, are used to poison reef fish.

Fisheries studies on coral reef finfish fisheries in the Solomon Islands include Oreihaka and Ramohia (2000), Blaber *et al.* (1990a, b) and the ACIAR funded study by Department of Primary Industries, Queensland (DPIQ) (1995). The DPIQ study, that aimed to develop a robust visual reef fish stock assessment method, found that the most abundant fish families were *Acanthuridae, Scaridae* and *Lutjanidae.*

In response to the concerns of local fisherfolk, Blaber *et al.* (1990a,b) and Leqata *et al.* (1990) conducted studies on the effects that bait-fishing (as chum for tuna) was likely to have on inshore subsistence fisheries. By catching fish in various ways and examining their stomach contents, they concluded that bait-fish were a relatively minor food source for the types of reef fish that the fisherfolk normally caught by fishing the bottom with weighted hand lines. Bait-fish comprised less than a quarter of the diet of 28 species of commonly caught reef fish; but were a much higher component in the diets of surface or mid-water fishes caught by trolling in the lagoons and outside the reefs. They concluded that the bait-fish industry would only impact on local food supply if the fisherfolk shifted emphasis to mainly eating fish that they caught by trolling. However Hamilton (1999) has shown that Blaber *et al.* (1990a,b) and Leqata *et al.* (1990) erred in this regard, grossly underestimating the importance of baitfish predators in the subsistence of Roviana lagoon area. Hamilton (1999) showed that barracuda was a major component of local catches. According to Hamilton (1999) the major discrepancies in the methods used by Blaber *et al.* (1990 a, b) were that they failed to investigate local knowledge with respect to temporal and spatial fishing patterns. Specifically, they did not consider the seasonal nature of fishing for baitfish predators which is normally from late August to December when most male fishing effort is directed towards catching barracuda. Since the surveys of Blaber *et al.* (1990a, b) were in July 1987 and January and early August 1988 they missed reporting this seasonal fishery. Hamilton (1999) also argued that the nocturnal nature of barracuda fishing was not considered as Blaber *et al.* (1990 a, b) conducted fishing during the daylight. Finally the lunar periodicity of fishing for the baitfish predators was not considered, yet Carangid species are known to concentrate in dense numbers within Roviana lagoon during the new and full moons (Hamilton 1999).

Domestic consumption

Although coral reef finfish contribute a significant portion of the protein diet of Solomon Islanders, relatively little is known about size of this fishery. Oreihaka (1997) reported that 83% of households in Solomon Islands engage in some fishing activities. Although a significant amount of reef fish are

traded or distributed through urban markets such as Honiara, Ghizo and Auki, there appears to have been no attempt to estimate the quantities sold, by a daily census for instance. Skewes (1990) described site-to-site variation in the composition of catches, and reported that fish from the families *Lethrinidae, Scombridae, Carangidae, Lutjanidae and Serranidae* dominated domestic catches.

It is difficult to estimate the quantities of reef fish consumed by Solomon Islanders. Some statistics are only for finfish, and ignore crustaceans and other marine life. Others include nearshore species and offshore species like tuna.

Skewes (1990) suggested an annual subsistence harvest of 10,000 tonnes, based on an estimate of per capita consumption. This equates to about 25 kg per person per year and is close to a mean value for Melanesia of 23 kg per person per year (range 7-40 kg) claimed by Dalzell *et al.* (1996). An estimate by Oreihaka (1997) of 34.4 kg per person p.a. was higher and comprised 20 kg of finfish and the rest made up of shellfish and other species.

According to Coull (1993), the average per capita consumption of fish by Solomon Islanders in 1986-8 was 52 kg (about 25 times higher than the per capita consumption of groundfish in North America, and twice that suggested by Skewes). If the estimates of "subsistence" consumption by Skewes and of total" consumption by Coull are correct, then about half the fish consumed by Solomon Islanders are from the nearshore region and the rest is presumably pelagic– especially as tinned and fresh tuna. Dalzell *et al.* (1996) also estimated that about half of the total annual commercial catch for the South Pacific was from reefs.

Unless the consumption shifts to alternative protein sources, then solely based on population growth, the domestic consumption of reef fish could double to about 25-30 thousand tonnes by the year 2025.

The export trade

National fisheries statistics showed that 228.6 tonnes of reef fish and reef fish products were exported between 1996 and 1999 (see Table 1).

Until 1999, and for about a decade before, there was an industry exporting whole reef fish chilled in iced brine and individually packaged in waxed cartons. Much was air-freighted to Australia where the fish commanded a high price in restaurants. There has also been a small business in exporting fish fillets. For example, a company "Indian Pacific Seafood" exported chilled fish and some blast frozen fillets and fish from Ghizo via Honiara to Australia.

The chilled fish trade has been based mainly on the following types: snappers (e.g. short tail and long tail red snappers); fusiliers (e.g. Kusaka fusilier); breams (big eye), coral trouts, Napoleon wrasse and jobfish (e.g. rosy jobfish and green job fish).

Live reef fish trade

Although the live reef fish trade is new to the Solomons, the concept of accumulating fish in natural or man-made ponds or enclosures and then transporting the live fish in ships equipped with large tanks filled with circulating seawater is very old. "Wet wells," watertight ship holds with holes for circulating seawater, were used as early as the Sixteenth Century in Holland. In the Seventeenth Century British shipbuilders started including wet wells because the British preferred fresh to salted fish. New Englanders built "well smacks" for carrying live fish such as cod from the fishing banks to Boston and New York. They found, however, that mortality was high in the crowded, oxygen-deprived wells, and that the swim bladders (sounds) of many deep water fish over-inflated so that the fishermen had to puncture the sounds to stop the fish rising to the surface (Kurlansky 1999, p.133).

Fishing for the live reef fish food trade began in 1994/95 with one company operating in Solomon Islands. The company wound up operations in 1997 and then recommenced operations on the distant reefs on Ontong Java under a different company name. The Solomon Island live fish trade was described by Johannes and Riepen (1995) and by Johannes (1999). Since both reports are unpublished reports to The Nature Conservancy, a summary of their findings is provided here.

The live fish trade centres on Hong Kong where the aim of the industry is to deliver live fish to restaurateurs in Hong Kong and in other coastal Chinese cities such as Guangzhou. Village-based fisherfolk in the Indo-Pacific are encouraged to capture reef fish by hook and line or by using cyanide. Special hooks are supplied to minimise deep hooking. Canoes with special seawater pens aboard are provided by the fishing companies. Fishermen are taught how to use hypodermic needles to release the air pressure in the swim bladders of fish caught in waters deeper than about 18 m – otherwise the fish drift helplessly at the surface. Rusty nails have however, sufficed for that purpose. Groupers and rock cods (subfamily Ephinephelinae) are favoured, and the fishers are encouraged to target spawning aggregations.

In the Solomon Islands, the live fish trade is concentrated mainly in the Roviana and Marovo lagoons in Western Province. The targeted species are flowery grouper (cod), *Epinephelus fuscoguttatus*, the squaretail coral trout, *Plectropomus areolatus* and the camouflage grouper or rockcod, *E. polyphekadion*. The returns to fishers were generally lower than what was paid to fishers in Philippines and Indonesia. The fishing company attributed this to relatively high transport costs, and to fish mortality en route.

From 1996 to 1998, about 130 tonnes of mainly groupers were exported from three Solomon Islands lagoon systems. According to purchase records of Ika Holdings Ltd, who bought most of the live fish captured in Solomon Islands, the amounts in 1996, 1997 and 1998 were respectively 31.8, 43.6 and 54.5 tonnes. These may be underestimates given that the amounts imported to Hong Kong as recorded by the Hong Kong Department of Agriculture in 1997 were slightly higher (44.4 Mt cf 43.6 Mt).

Live fish operations in Marovo lagoon lasted one to four years and in the Roviana lagoon one to two years. At sites where fish had been captured for the live fish trade for three to four years, the villagers reported a decrease in fish numbers and a decrease in fish size. At sites that had been fished for just one year there was no obvious depletion of stocks, but as Johannes (1999) commented, at the time of the survey it may have been too soon to judge.

After the fish are captured they are transferred to floating holding pens often owned by the fishing company. There they await collection by a larger vessel which, in the case of the Solomon Islands, transports the fish to more holding pens at Liapari, Vella La Vella, where the fish are fed bonito rejected by the tuna cannery at nearby Noro. Johannes questioned the usefulness of such food since coral trout are known to reject tuna outright. When the quantity of fish at Liapari amounts to about 15 tonnes, a large life fish transport vessel from Hong Kong is ordered.

Many fish die throughout this process for a variety of reasons including poor handling practices and siting of holding pens in places without adequate water circulation. In one 15 tonne shipment from Liapari, two thirds of the fish died before the fish transporter arrived in Hong Kong. There is also considerable wastage of non-targeted species caught adventitiously.

According to Johannes (1999), Solomon Islands fishers receive little more for live than for dead fish. He commented that if we take into consideration the fish wasted by the industry, then the live fish trade rather than being a "value added" industry is more likely a "value subtracted" industry.

In the Solomon Islands, primary reef owners were reported to be concerned about the depletion of reef fish and were planning closing of their areas to the live reef fish trade. Unlike the situation in

Philippines and Indonesia, no hard evidence of cyanide use was reported in the Solomon Islands, although some suspicious practices using hookah apparatus for divers have been reported. Johannes (1999) reported that villagers were aware of the consequences of using cyanide, and were unlikely to use it because they own their traditional fishing grounds and thus have vested interest in their protection. Poachers, however, may be less discerning.

On 6 February 1999 a moratorium was placed on the on live reef fish trade in Solomon Islands pending preparation of a management plan. There are signs that this is being lifted in May 2000 with the Minister of Fisheries being able to exercise discretionary powers on issuing new licenses. While the moratorium has been in place, stocks of reef fish have been gathered and held in various places in the Solomons. Currently (May 2000) two tonnes of coral trout and groupers have been held for more than 5 months in Roviana Lagoon. Previously two tonnes of trout and groupers in Roviana, held in the hold of a ship, were lost when the ship sank on 18 February 2000. One tonne of (mainly) coral trout is being held in pens on the atoll of Ontong Java.

Fish for the aquarium trade

In 1975 Dr Walter Starck, American marine biologist and icthyologist, suggested that selling fish for the American aquarium trade would contribute materially to the national income of the Solomons. He commented that small reef fish, which reproduce swiftly and grow quickly, fetch the same prices as food fish 50 to 100 times their size (Boutilier 1975).

Some 224 coral reef species are exported from Solomon Islands for the aquarium trade. Of these 79% are fish and 17% corals. The remainder are juveniles of giant clams, sea horses, and starfish. Unlike the live fish food trade, the items exported for the aquarium trade are typically despatched by air.

The fish are captured mainly by being frightened into nets. Commonly areas of intertidal reef are broken apart with crowbars at low tide in order to capture the fish. Scuba divers also capture fishes in nets. According to several dive resort owners in the Solomons, e.g. at Uepi Island in Morovo, and in Vanuatu, one of the varieties of fish quickly depleted because of the aquarium trade are anemone fish, mainly species of *Amphiprion*.

In the Philippines, the use of sodium cyanide for collecting aquarium fish began in 1962. Using the poison to capture fish is illegal, but because enforcement is lax, some 80-90% of aquarium fish exported in the late 1980's was captured using cyanide. The persistent use of the poison is because many of the collectors are so poor that they cannot afford boats, nets and other equipment, and for convenience. The collectors also claim some of the higher priced species are difficult to catch in nets, and that net-caught fish are often devalued by the scratches and cuts in the process (Hingco and Rivera 1991).

According to Pyle (1993) – who provides a comprehensive description of the industry – when the fish are collected by methods other than sodium cyanide, the levels of post-collection mortality are generally low, in the order of 1-2%. Mortality during transit is higher, averaging at about 5-10% for shipments from the Pacific Region.

The procedure for transporting the fish in the Solomons is to place the fish individually inside perforated containers like plastic drink bottles. This is to prevent the fish fighting. The containers are transported in large buckets of seawater by boat to Honiara, with the fishermen replenishing the water en route. In Honiara the fish are graded, the fishermen paid, and the fish are held in special tanks where they are fed until three days before being sent overseas (to prevent faeces accumulation). They are air-freighted in plastic bags of oxygenated seawater packed in styrofoam boxes.

Growing worldwide demands for high quality ornamental aquarium fish " captured in an environmentally sustainable way" is leading to an industry certification programme being run by the

South Pacific Forum Secretariat and the international Marine Aquarium Council (MAC). This is to be funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Canada-South Pacific Ocean Development (C-SPOD) Program. A two-year pilot certification program starting in 2001 will involve Solomon Islands, Cook Islands and an, as yet, unidentified third Forum country member (Press release, Forum News 3 May 2000).

Much depends on what is meant by, and how one interprets, the nebulous term "environmentally sustainable". The news release on the ornamentals certification programme emphasised the need to avoid destructive catching methods like poisons that damage corals. If, in this case, that is what "environmentally sustainable" is mainly about, then it is important not to be lulled into a sense of false security. The reefs can all too easily be denuded of fish by using benign methods like nets and traps. The key to sustainability is to promote projects like that of the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) which is to culture and grow ornamental aquarium fish from larvae netted at sea and on the reefs – larvae that would otherwise have a huge mortality.

Sharks

Sharks are an important part of fish fauna regulating the populations of various coral reef species. In some areas, they are an important subsistence food source. Oreihaka (1997) reported that sharks are normally caught as by-catch by tuna fishing vessels; their fins are removed and the bodies, often still live, are thrown away. Skewes (1990) observed that Carcharhinid sharks made up a large portion of the shark catches. Shark fin and shark meat export statistics since 1987 are given in Table 1. The steep increase from about 2 Mt in 1994 to 201 Mt in 1995 reflects the increase in bycatch caught by purse seine vessels fishing for tuna.

Other than catch data kept with Fisheries Division (and probably fishing companies), little is known about the status of the shark resource in the Solomon Islands. Although Skewes (1990) considered the stock to be under no major pressures, the steep increase in shark fin and meat export, even as a bye-catch, is a cause for concern. As with the coral reef finfish fishery, no regulation or management measure for conserving stocks are currently in place.

Reptiles

Historically the two most commercially important reptiles have been turtles and saltwater crocodiles. Turtles are commonly found within coral reef areas, especially on seagrass beds. Although crocodiles are occasionally sighted in lagoons and inshore areas of Solomon Islands, they are not considered an important part of the coral reefs, and will not be discussed in this report.

Marine turtles

Solomon Islanders have used marine turtles for centuries as food and made ornaments from their shells. With the arrival of Europeans, turtles became a trade item and cash earner. By the 1890's in New Georgia, a scarcity of turtles necessitated extending turtle hunting (and head hunting) as far afield as the Russell Islands and Choiseul and Santa Isabel (Bennett 1987).

Five species of turtle occur in Solomon Islands: the hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), the green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriaces*), the olive or Pacific Ridley turtle (Lepidochelys olivacea), and the loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*). The first three are

common and nest in the country in low densities (McKeown 1977; Vaughan, 1981). The other two species (loggerhead and olive or Pacific Ridley) are rare. There are no records of loggerheads nesting in the Solomon Islands and only two reports of successful hatchings of Pacific Ridley turtles on Makira and the Shortland Islands. In many places, the loggerhead is believed to be a 'devil turtle' and considered poisonous.

The annual export of turtle shell from Solomon Islands peaked at three tonnes in 1989. Thereafter annual exports declined, perhaps because of overfishing. From 1983 to 1990, Leary (1991) and the Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division (unpublished statistics) recorded a total export of 18.7 tonnes of hawksbill turtle shells. Solomon Islands was the second largest exporter of turtle shell to Japan in 1990.

Export data can be used to estimate the number of hawksbill turtles killed in recent years. Assuming the average weight of exported hawksbill turtle shells to be 0.92 kg (75cm curved carapace length) the number of turtles killed between 1983 and 1990 was about twenty thousand; about three thousand per year on average. Groombridge and Luxmoore (1989), using Vaughan's (1981) data, estimated the annual nesting population of hawksbill turtles in Solomon Islands to be between 500 and 1000 females. Clearly a harvest of 3,000 turtles per year was unsustainable.

Therefore a total ban on exporting turtle shells and a closed harvesting season for all turtle species and turtle eggs from June to August and from November to January during the nesting seasons has been in place since 1993. Although subsistence use of turtle continues, there has been no commercial export of turtle shells since these fisheries regulations came into effect.

An extensive turtle research study undertaken throughout Solomon Islands by the Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division between 1973 and 1982 identified the Arnavon group (including the Vaghena area) as the most important hawksbill rookery in the country, supporting more than 600 nests per year (Vaughan, 1981). Only the Seychelles in the Indian Ocean has been reported to support more nests (Marquez, 1990). Vaughan, (1981) also identified Allardyce Harbour (Isabel), Hele Pass and Vangunu (Marovo), Bagora (Shortlands), Okaboi (Santa Cruz), Nanunga I. (Vanikoro) and Tetepare and Mbaniata (Rendova) as collectively supporting between 100 and 200 nests of hawksbill, green and leatherback turtles each year.

Because of the importance of the Arnavon Islands for the nesting of hawksbill and green turtles, the Government declared the area a wildlife sanctuary in 1980. But because locals were inadequately consulted and involved, they continued to hunt the turtles so that by 1989 the number of nests had dramatically declined from about 600 to 120-200. A new monitoring programme involving local people, and with assistance from the South Pacific Regional Environment (SPREP), has been going since 1991. This has resulted in an increase in the number of nesting hawksbill turtles in the area.

Despite partially protecting turtles by legislation and prohibiting all exports of shell, threats still exist. These include over exploitation for subsistence during the "open" season and poaching at other times.

Dugongs

Dugongs live in lagoons, coral reefs and seagrass beds. They are eaten in Nggela, parts of Malaita and Isabel. There is very little information on the number killed each year and on the productivity of the species. Anecdotal evidence indicates that dugong numbers have steeply declined particularly in the Kia area of Isabel Province presumably as the result of over-harvesting. In North Malaita where populations are still high, there are sometimes large numbers of dugongs in the Lau lagoon.

Human threats to coral reefs

The coral reefs of Solomon Islands are reported to be the least disturbed reefs in the Pacific (Maragos 1998). No recent studies have, however, been done to assess the state of these coral reefs and the validity of such a statement is under question. It should be noted that in some places, there has been a significant degradation of coral reefs. Listed below are current and potential threats to coral reefs.

Overfishing

Overfishing occurs when the population growth rate of villages and the fish catch for local consumption or sale, overtakes the natural productivity of the reefs,

If most of the large, reproductively mature organisms of a particular species are removed, then regeneration of that species on the reefs may be very slow. They may be replaced by more fecund, though possibly less desirable species thereby causing long-term changes to the food web of the reef. Selective removal of important herbivores or predators may cause significant ecological changes. Gathering large tritons to be sold to shell collectors, for example, probably causes the crown of thorns starfish to increase in numbers. A burgeoning crown of thorns starfish population may then physically destroy the corals to the detriment of many other species.

Subsistence fishing

The Solomon Islands has one of the fastest growing populations in the world (3.6%). Two thirds of the current population are teenagers or younger and 86% of the population is rural. Several factors conspire to keep ever-increasing numbers of Solomon Islanders at a subsistence level in a rural setting where inevitably they will place enormous pressures on edible fish and invertebrates just for sustenance. Already some areas are so overfished for local consumption that the reefs are almost devoid of the preferred edible species. The Lau Lagoon in north Malaita is a good example (Ramohia *et al.*, 1999).

With so many more mouths to feed, what are the alternatives to eating increasing quantities of reef animals? In many island societies the pressure on local fish resources is lessened by population control (often by emigration), by developing agriculture, and by other forms of industrial endeavour such as the development of light and heavy manufacturing and service industries.

A low incidence of birth control presumably because of religious and cultural beliefs, a tradition of having large families, improved infant survival and perhaps difficulties in obtaining birth control devices, ensures that the birth rate remains exceptionally high in the Solomon Islands. Emigration from the Solomon Islands is, however, small, and mainly internal, e.g. from northern Malaita to Guadalcanal. While alleviating the pressure in the more populated parts, and perhaps conserving reef resources at those localities, such internal movements inevitably create ethnic problems that indirectly impact upon coral reefs elsewhere and in other ways. Therefore, emigration is no pressure release valve.

There are of course alternative protein sources to fish and shellfish on the Solomon Islands. Some parts of the Solomon Islands, e.g. Guadalcanal, are exceptionally fertile and offer many opportunities for raising poultry, pork and beef. Neighbouring Vanuatu has a world famous beef trade. Equally good beef can be grown in parts of the Solomons, and there are some small herds, and yet the nation imports

almost all of its red meat including beef from Vanuatu. Chickens for meat and eggs are raised locally and on a commercial scale, and until recently pork was raised commercially.

So why don't these alternative sources of protein relieve pressure on reef resources? One attraction of the reef is that the food is free and, until recently, can be caught with little difficulty. Animal husbandry like chicken farming requires financial outlay, organisation and continued investment for feed and facilities. And if you don't raise your own poultry or beef then you may have to buy such meat from the people that do. Although fishing may be easier, this has not deterred various Solomon Islanders from farming livestock. A major set back, however, is the current ethnic violence on Guadalcanal that has caused the closure of prawn, poultry, pig and cattle farms mainly because of land disputes.

Another reason is that there are few employment opportunities for Solomon Islanders who are therefore more-or-less forced to remain at the village subsistence level. Where there are opportunities in light industry, mining, plantation work and tourism, then people will migrate from their coastal villages to those places of employment where the cash that they earn is spent on alternative foods. Here again island politics hamper such development and are a disincentive to investors. Investors are conscious of the fact that if they require labour, some of which comes from other islands, then often there are ethnic problems. These can erupt causing destruction of vehicles and industrial plant while a panicky exodus of labour back to "home" islands means that operations must be down-scaled or closed. Honiara and other parts of Guadalcanal abound with examples of this phenomenon.

A dearth of ecological knowledge is one deficiency in indigenous management systems. For example, many fishers do not understand that a certain minimum population level is necessary to restock a coral reef population. They don't comprehend that prolonged fishing usually results in a significant decline in the populations and ultimately a complete exhaustion, of trochus stocks for example. As a result the fringing reefs of some villages in Mboli on Big Nggela are bereft of trochus and bêche-de-mer.

Some traditional fishing practices degrade coral reefs. These include walking and standing on corals when spear fishing or gleaning, breaking corals when retrieving fishing nets, anchoring, and fishing spawning aggregations.

One of the most damaging fishing methods is the use of several species of the coastal plant *Derris* spp, mentioned above. This unselective fishing method kills many species other than those targeted including even branching corals, the skeletons of which are reported to crack (Foale 1998).

Bêche-de-mer fishing also poses some threats to the coral reefs, because usually the intestines from gutted sea cucumbers are thrown into the sea. The intestines contain toxins and have been reported to kill coral reef fishes and corals when they sink.

Fishing for cash income

Probably the most serious and immediate human threat to coral reefs and lagoons of the Solomon Islands is over fishing as a result of trying to generate cash income. The money economy has become an integral part of life in even the most isolated of Solomon Islands rural communities, and it is here to stay. There is, however, an acute shortage of cash in the Solomon Islands, especially in rural areas.

In 1993, gross per capita income was A$947 - half that of Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Tonga. Only Tokelau and Kiribati had lower annual rates of income in the South Pacific. In reality the income of most Solomon Islanders is much lower. Some 86% of the population still lives in small rural villages more than half of which are directly situated on the coast. Income distribution is, however, skewed highly in favour of a small percentage of urban-based high income earners. In the early 1990's over one half of total income was received by 10% of households, mainly in Honiara.

So the temptation to over-fish resources for cash is great. Almost all of the large molluscs, crustaceans, and echinoderms of commercial importance have been depleted to an extent where the Government has had to ban further commercial catches. The Islands abound with anecdotes such as how twenty to thirty years ago giant clams in Isabel Province were common place but are now rare. The decline of green snails is another oft-quoted example, as is the demise of the turtles. Kile (2000) discussed the overexploitation of six commercially important species.

Any increase in destructive fishing practices, such as the use of explosives or poisons, also constitute a major threat to the reefs and the lure of cash may cause these practices to increase.

Of particular concern is the live fish trade, an industry with a poor track record in Indonesia and the Philippines (Pet-Soede and Erdmann 1998, Erdmann and Pet 1999). What happened there can just as easily occur in the Solomon Islands, particularly when Indonesian and Philippine companies target Solomon Islands reefs for species already depleted on their own reefs. In the near future a cash-strapped Solomon Islands Government may permit such activity to generate revenue from issuing licenses and to encourage employment. If licenses are refused, the Solomon Islands State may still be hard pressed to prevent live fish traders from running a clandestine industry with villages in the remoter parts of the archipelago. The fishing companies tend to target remote reefs far from prying eyes. Erdmann and Pet (*ibid*) reported how the remotest reefs of Indonesia are the most destroyed. The instance where Taiwanese fishing boats plundered the giant clam stocks of Indispensable Reef may soon have parallels in the live fish trade.

The developing aquarium trade is also of concern, particularly the mass extraction of corals and the selective removal of juveniles of important or keystone coral reef fishes.

Currently the aquarium trade is posing great dangers to the coral reefs on Nggela – one of the major suppliers to the aquarium trade. An inspection at Aquarium Arts revealed that a lot of the species obtained were also juveniles of species commonly eaten or sold. This is an additional pressure on species that are already over-harvested. The coral reef fishery on Nggela may be heading blindly towards collapse.

It is difficult to see how rural Solomon Islanders will not be tempted to convert their various reef species into cash when opportunities for doing so arise, even if they know the ecological implications of doing so. This is easier as village society changes and local authority power and traditions for conserving marine resources are eroding. While it is easy for salaried workers writing reports such as this to advocate strong conservation measures; it is quite another matter for rural folk earning just a few hundred US dollars per year. For them, selling tritons, blue tangs and anemone fish to shell collectors and the aquarium trade, for short-term gains to purchase medicines, pay school fees, make motor repairs or to purchase electronic equipment, is just part of the monetary economy that government and aid agencies promote.

Lime production for betel nut chewing

Chewing betel nut is an addictive habit widespread in the Solomon Islands. Fruits of the palm *Areca catechu* are chewed with the leaf of a pepper tree, Piper betel, and calcium oxide powder obtained by burning staghorn (*Acropora* spp) corals. Bowden-Kerby (pers.comm.) estimated that the 6 million kg of lime produced each year for betel nut chewers comes from burning about 10 million kg of live *Acropora* corals. The result is that reefs in all of the lagoons in Malaita are depleted of *Acropora* and other staghorn corals. This is an extraordinarily large consumption of lime by a population of just 0.4 million people. It has been calculated, however, that inveterate betel nut chewers consume about 20 kg of lime per year

Lime production is currently one of the biggest threats to corals in the Solomon Islands and some Non-Government Organisations are trying to alleviate this problem. Foundations for the People of the South Pacific and the Solomon Islands Development Trust have tried to work with rural communities to set up coral gardens both for the aquarium trade and for lime production. Coral gardens in Marau are reported to be progressing very well. Baeanisia (pers.comm.) also reported that coral gardens are progressing well in Langalanga Lagoon. Some communities are trying to use the corals sustainably for lime production. Boeni of Fuaga, in Malaita, reported that in their community, several staghorn coral patches are harvested on a rotation system.

Artificial Island construction

Constructing artificial islands, on which to build homes, also threatens coral reefs on Malaita. These artificial islands are concentrated within the Langa Langa lagoon, Lau lagoon and Ata'a area of north Malaita and at Fanalei and Walande in South Malaita. As the need for more artificial islands increases with the population, so too will the demands on coral as a building material.

An assessment of the impact of this practice on coral reefs was initiated by concerns expressed by the Rere Board of trustees of Foueda artificial Island in Lau lagoon. According to Ramohia *et al.* (1999) the Rere Board of Trustees complained (and lodged a legal suit) about the extraction of both live and dead corals for the construction of an artificial Island in Auri, where a new apostolic church was supposed to be built. The Rere Board of Trustees alleged that the extraction of corals damaged their fishing grounds. Ramohia *et al.* (1999) concluded, however, that coral extraction was not the only cause. Over fishing was also a contributing factor.

While this case reveals an awareness of resource owners on the importance of corals and the consequences if they are removed, their concerns were probably expressed because of what they presumed to be an intrusion by outsiders and the possibility of obtaining compensation from them. Should they themselves wish to build more artificial islands, then such environmental concerns about fisheries would probably be ignored.

Logging

The late 1970's and 1980's was the peak of logging activity in the Solomon Islands. Most of these logging activities were concentrated within the Western, Isabel, Choiseul and Makira Provinces, where logging continues. Smaller logging operations also occur in Russell Islands.

No study of the direct effect of logging activities (such as sedimentation or oil pollution) on coral reefs has been done in the Solomon Islands. Elsewhere in the tropics, logging has accelerated sedimentation rates, and in some cases, such as Segara Anakan Lagoon on the south Java coast, by reducing lagoons to tidal inlets and channels (Purba 1991).

Anyone flying over the Solomon Islands can see large plumes of yellowish-red sediment at the river mouths of recently logged catchments. Seen on the ground the catchments are criss-crossed with roughly formed roads and skidder tracks. The soil and clay, deeply churned by the skidders, is piled high along the edges of the tracks as if ploughed. Little attempt is made by the loggers to install any form of drainage. Typically there are no cross drains to minimise sediment movement. No attempts are made to bed down the skid tracks or roads after the logging is finished. There is practically no road maintenance. Washouts are either filled in until next time or the road is re-routed. Road runoff

is often directed straight into streams and rivers rather than being directed into areas of forest that might filter out some of the sediment. Little effort is made to protect the vegetation along the edges of the streams and rivers. No efforts are made to build sediment traps where rivers run into the lagoons. Log sorting and storage areas are typically large, flat, quagmired, in-filled areas pushed out into the lagoons where wave action erodes away the margins.

These practices run counter to the logging code of practice that the Solomon Island Government requires logging companies to sign. Obviously the companies ignore the code. While some Government officers are concerned, enforcement is at best feeble.

All of the poor forest practices mentioned above are evident on Vangunu Island in southern Marovo where Silvania Products Ltd (SPL), a subsidiary of the Malaysian Kumpulan Emas Berhad conglomerate (KEB), has wrecked havoc in the rain forest since 1992. This is a company that, according to its own literature, prides itself with its environmental awareness and its engineering ability to construct roading systems that minimise sedimentation. In fact, in their recently logged areas (Lot 16 R515) there is total lack of attention to drainage even on their main roads.

In the Marovo area, in the vicinity of SPL logging area, villagers report huge sediment plumes following heavy rain. Once the rain has stopped the water may clear within 24 hours to a week. In the rainy season that means that the plumes are a semi-permanent feature. Nobody has studied the effects of such sedimentation on the lagoons and the coral reefs in the Solomon Islands, but, obviously, the sediment reduces water clarity.

As mentioned, corals are partly dependent on symbiotic algae to manufacture food, and the algae depend on light for photosynthesis. So it is the limits of light penetration in the ocean that dictate the lower vertical distribution limits of reef-forming corals (140-150 m depth in clearest oceanic water). Where lagoons and coastal waters are muddied by logging, then coral growth is reduced (commonly to less than 15 m depth) or prevented by diminished light penetration. This is directly a result of the suspended sediment in the water column and often because increased concentrations of nutrients from the sediment plumes enhances the growth of phytoplankton. As a result, the deeper dwelling corals die. Another damaging effect of sediment is that irrespective of depth, it smothers corals. Normally corals cope with sediment by a coating of mucus that is continuously shed. But with abnormal loads of sediment, the corals' defences are overwhelmed. Excessive energy goes into mucus production, and the animals also stop feeding (Lobban and Schefter 1997, Clark *et al.,* 1997, Segar 1998).

Kerrie (pers. comm.) of Adventure Sports in Ghizo reported that logging ships also contribute to coral reef damage. With a full cargo of logs, the ships occasionally touch bottom and in their efforts to break free they resort to kedging on anchors. Where this happens, the damage to the reefs is huge. Logging ships also dump garbage into the lagoons and over the reefs.

Plantations

The main plantations in the Solomon Islands are for coconuts (for copra), cocoa and palm oil. Most of these plantations are grown on fertile flat coastal plains where clearing the original vegetation, road construction, planting and so forth caused relatively little erosion. Some of the largest plantations are on the expansive coastal plains of Guadalcanal. Recently, however, there have been proposals to develop oil palm plantations on easily erodible hill country in other provinces. This has gained impetus as a result of the ethnic troubles on Guadalcanal which caused temporary closure of the long established oil palm plantations owned by Solomon Island Plantations Limited (SIPL). The Government wants to disperse such industries. Other proposals to plant oil palms will therefore probably be promoted, so it

is instructive to consider the environmental impact of the Silvania oil palm project on Vangunu Island in southern Marovo Lagoon.

The Silvania oil palm project

In July 1999, the Solomon Islands Government gave approval for Silvania Plantations Products Ltd (SPPL), also subsidiary of KEB and a sister company to SPL, to clear the same area that SPL had already selectively logged (Lots 16 and 14) to plant oil palms. The Solomon Islands Government has proceeded with this project heedless of the concerns of landowners, resource users and environmental organisations.

SPPL proposes to plant 6000 ha and may enter into agreement with adjoining customary land owners to plant more. It plans to build an oil extraction plant on the site at Merusu. Many of the roads they require are already formed by their sister Company, although ironically SPPL will inherit all of the problems attributable to the careless way that SPL formed its roads without any attention to design or drainage.

The effect of this oil palm plantation on the slopes of Vangunu and Marovo Lagoon will, however, be much more intense than the earlier logging. This relatively steep erosion-prone area in a region of high rainfall is being completely clear felled by SPPL. The soils are highly prone to erosion and inherently infertile, with almost all of the nutrients bound up in the humus layer. There are proposals to fertilise the palms with NKP fertiliser (15:15:6.5 with trace elements) although apparently no chemical analyses have been made of the soil types in Lot 16. As Thistlethwaite (1999) points out in his draft environmental review of the project, it is important to analyse the soils to prevent excessive application that may eventually run into the lagoon.

Without doubt, the extensive earthworks and terracing (and the remedial work to the SPL roads) will cause massive sediment run off. It is happening already. Eventually once the palms are established, there is complete ground cover, and the roads are redesigned with proper drainage, then the discharge of sediment will decline. But in the interim there may be irreversible changes to coral reefs and marine resources of Marovo Lagoon, the very features for which the area is world famous.

We predict that this oil palm plantation is going to cause significant damages to the corals reefs and marine resources of Marovo Lagoon, and we are inclined to agree with Shearman (1999:1) who wrote ...

"The acidic soils of Vangunu will require regular fertilisation for oil palm production, leading to fertiliser run off polluting the lagoon. The clear-felling of 6000 or more hectares will lead to enormous soil erosion and resultant siltation of the lagoon. Additionally, the large amount of toxic effluent produced during oil palm production may enter the lagoon causing severe pollution. The effect of the oil palm project on the Marovo coral reefs could include large scale death of coral through siltation or pollution, reduction in reef production and fish density and a general lowering of the abundance and diversity of marine resources (including bêche-de-mer and clams). The extent and severity of these impacts is unknown but is expected to affect at least the eastern side of Marovo lagoon between Vangunu island and Nggatokae. This impact would have severe consequences for the Marovo people including loss of food and commercial resources as well as reduction of tourism revenue for local ecotourism operators. Significant pollution would also jeopardise World Heritage listing, further restricting ecotourism potential"

The plantation development also involves the building of a small town, Merusu, for 1500 workers and which Thistlethwaite (1999) estimates will very soon have a population of 6000. Currently the entire population of central and southern Marovo is 8500. Clearly a town of this size is going to have nume-

rous direct and indirect impact on the coral reefs nearby and on the resources of the lagoon. In addition there will be an oil extraction plant and bulk storage facilities for the oil and a new port, all of which may be detrimental to coral reefs and lagoons.

Sewage disposal

None of the urban centres in the Solomon Islands have any form of sewage treatment. The raw sewage is simply piped into the sea, and in some cases the end of the outfall is actually above the low tide mark. Honiara, the largest urban centre, has about nine sewage outfalls along its beach frontage and in most cases the submarine sections of the pipes have been broken by storms. The sewage plumes are clearly visible from the air as one flies west of Honiara. Fortunately there are no large and expansive coral reefs in the immediate vicinity of Honiara, but at other centres, e.g., Ghizo and Munda, new residential and industrial development may greatly increase the volumes of sewage that are discharged in close proximity to coral reefs. Apart from the health risk and reduced clarity of the water, the eutrophication may cause certain fundamental ecological changes such as the growth of algae where previously there was none. In the late 1970's sewage discharged into Hawaiian coastal waters resulted in the rapid growth of the alga *Dictosphaeria sp.* that smothered corals (Clark *et al.*, 1997)

Oil pollution

Accidental spillage of oil and diesel by logging companies is also a problem. In the Solomons there are reports by Horokou (1996, 1997) on the biological and ecological impacts of oil pollution by Eagon Forest Resource's logging operation on Vacho River in north-west Choiseul. In 1993 the timber company had spilled about 12 000 litres of oil into the river (Moseby and Read 1999). The result was a marked decline in river invertebrates (Horokou 1996). Similar spills could occur at sea level when the oil or diesel is unloaded, or there could be leaks from storage tanks. At sea level, any oil slick will probably spread around the margins of the lagoon.

Many villagers we have spoken with have reported that inter-island boats have carelessly pumped waste oil directly into the sea. Gregory Bennett, a Solomon Islands Fisheries Division officer, reported seeing bait-catching punts of the Solomon Taiyo Ltd dumping significant quantities of waste oil directly onto the coral heads at Patutiva in Western Province thus causing the death of many reef fish.

Solomon Islands is a maritime nation, and the disposal of unwanted or condemned vessels is a problem. Increasingly the Honiara foreshore is dotted with wrecked fishing vessels that for various reasons have ended up drifting ashore where they blot the landscape. For vessels still currently in use, but likely to fail certification, their owners may be tempted to abandon their vessels in the Solomons instead of removing them for scrap. The "ecologically sensitive" idea of turning the ships into artificial reefs may therefore have increasing appeal as a cheap alternative.

Villagers of Sandfly in Nggela reported that a few years ago, a prominent Honiara businessman towed an old ship from Honiara and dumped it close to a coral reef patch in Sandfly to form an artificial reef. Large quantities of oil leaked from the vessel, however, and killed corals and fish in the Sandfly region. This demonstrates that using moribund vessels as artificial reefs requires that the vessel first be meticulously stripped of most of its fittings (especially internal linings and glass) and carefully emptied of all lubricants, hydraulic fluids etc, before sinking. Otherwise pollution in one form or another inevitably follows.

Several villagers from Western Province reported seeing oil oozing from World War II wrecks especially the cargo vessels. Off Guadalcanal most of the large warships sunk in Solomon Islands in World War II are in deep water in Iron Bottom Sound where they are concentrated in a small sea area. If the fuel tanks of these vessels corrode at about the same rate, then collectively their oil could become a problem. Fortunately most of these ships lie several kilometres off shore.

The proposed *Silvania* oil extraction plant on Vangunu Island in Marovo lagoon will be three kilometres from the port and bulk storage facilities at Emma Point. Presumably the oil will be tankered by road to the port on roads already described above. As Thistlewaite (1999) correctly surmises, the risk of a major spill is greatest at the holding tanks and during loading where, of course, any spillage may be directly into the lagoon. Thistlewaite recommends that the bulk storage tanks be surrounded by a concrete bund high enough to contain all of the stored oil; only time will tell if this is done.

Ships ballast water

Log ships and to a much lesser extent, container ships, discharge ballast water as they load logs or reduce their draft. The continuing saga of non-indigenous organisms being translocated via ballast water across oceans is of mounting international concern (for a succinct review see Committee on Ships' Ballast Operations 1996). Marine and estuarine organisms uplifted from harbours like Madras, Hong Kong, Manila or Singapore by ships bound for the Solomon Islands will be discharged into Solomon Islands lagoons and in the vicinity of fringing reefs where they may become invasive species.

Currently there appear to be no reports of foreign marine life suddenly making an unwelcome appearance in Solomon Islands waters. This must, however, be weighed against the fact that the Solomon Islands marine flora and fauna is imperfectly known and that no efforts are made to search for adventive species in the vicinity of ports and log-handling areas. Yet another example of the need for baseline surveys.

Ships passing through Solomon Islands waters bound for other places also discharge foreign ballast water into the Solomon Islands sea. This is because fully ballasted bulk carriers, containing tens of thousands of tonnes of ballast water, and bound for Australia and New Zealand to load bulk cargoes, are strongly recommended to exchange their ballast water in mid ocean. This is to rid the vessels of their original harbour water (e.g. from Tokyo) and replace it with deep sea tropical water, which is considered to be a lesser quarantine risk.

What constitutes the deep sea as far as international recommendations are concerned are waters deeper than 500 m. Such depths occur quite close to shore all through the Solomons archipelago however. Because exchanging ballast water on the high seas is a lengthy, exacting procedure that can endanger a ship if the weather suddenly changes, ships' masters prefer to make the exchanges in calm seas. Popular exchange areas for New Zealand-bound vessels are the Bismarck, Arafura, Coral and Solomon Seas. The volume of foreign ballast water being discharged into the Solomons sea area during such exchanges is not known, but it could be millions of tonnes given that over 100 million tonnes of ballast water are discharged into Australian ports each year.

Coastal developments

Coastal developments such as the construction of roads, hotels and residential areas are potential threats to coral reefs. They invariably increase sediment run-off, and often cause an increase in sand

and coral rubble extraction for engineering purposes. Where hotels and resorts are situated on the shore there are usually proposals to build wharves and protective piers. This usually involves dredging the adjacent reef for rocks and infill material, with the bonus of creating a navigable boating channel at the same time. Such activities are invariably detrimental to coral reefs. Once the resort is established, however, resort owners may, by various means, protect the surrounding reef life to enhance scuba diving.

Tourism

Tourists have both positive and negative impacts on coral reefs. It depends on the type of tourist and how numerous they are. Tourism that encourages scuba diving is an incentive for resource owners to preserve the coral reefs. Dive operators have a vested interest in the coral reefs and in many places have taken measures to protect them. They are also valuable informants about the state of coral reefs. Careless or inexperienced divers can, however, contribute to coral reef damage as they break delicate corals with their fins, or by sitting on corals to take photographs. Tourists who want to go fishing and spear fishing are another matter, as are souvenir-seekers purchasing large quantities of shells.

Historically the Solomon Islands government has not vigorously promoted tourism. The current ethnic violence on Guadalcanal has reduced the tourist flow to a trickle, and the serious malaria problem deters many. Cruise ships no longer visit. If circumstances change and tourism grows, then larger numbers of Solomon Islanders will be employed in the service industry. This probably translates to fewer folk subsisting on reef resources. Against that, we must weigh the detrimental effects of constructing new coastal resorts, increased fishing to supply the restaurants, and the inevitable increase in collecting shells for the souvenir trade.

Natural threats to coral reefs and lagoons

Natural disasters

Periodically natural disasters such as ash showers from volcanoes, tectonic uplift, tidal waves and cyclones damage coral reefs in the Solomon Islands. In living memory powerful earthquakes, e.g. in 1931, 1939, 1950, and 1952-56, uplifted coral reefs by as much as a metre. Stoddart on the British Royal Society Expedition in 1965 suggested that large dead areas of coral he saw were a result of recent uplift, an explanation also promoted by Weber (1973). There are anecdotal reports of the stench of decomposing marine life on uplifted reef areas of Guadalcanal after a 7.25 Richter Scale earthquake in 1977.

Cyclones periodically devastate reefs, especially when they hit areas where wave action is usually slight. Weber (1973) offered this as an alternative to tectonic uplift as a cause of coral mortality on Guadalcanal. Unusually low tides coinciding with high air temperatures are damaging to corals at and near the low tide level. In 1983, for example, many corals on reef flats died because of a general lowering of sea level in the southwest Pacific as a consequence of the abnormal El Niño event of that year. Protracted periods of unusually low seawater salinity, as a result of excessive rainfall, damages corals inside lagoons, especially in the shallows.

Climate change

Coral growth is from 0.5 and 2.8 cm per year with the greatest growth rates in water shallower than 45 metres depth. In recent history these growth rates have been fast enough to maintain reefs in shallow water as either the seafloor subsides or the sea level rises, or both (Mielke 1989). If, however, the rate of rise in sea level exceeds coral growth rates, then reefs currently emergent at low tide might become submerged, while reef islands would be exposed to increased coastal erosion. Potentially the primary reasons for sea level rise are expansion of seawater and melting of ice caps (especially in Antarctica) as a result of global warming. According to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the most probable forecast is for a rise in the global sea level average of about 65 cm by 2100 or about 6 cm per decade. Changes would not be uniform around the world however. Extreme models predict a 2 metre rise over the next Century (Lobban and Schefter 1997).

The impacts on Pacific islands of sea level rise, increase in temperature and ocean weather patterns have been discussed by Wilkinson and Buddemeier (1994). There are areas in the Solomon Islands that are very vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as coastal erosion. In the longer term, low lying Islands, especially atolls, may be submerged by sea level rise. The Solomon Islands' input to the Pacific Islands Climate Change Adaptation and Assessment Programme (PICCAAP) has been co-ordinated through the Solomon Islands Meteorological Services.

Coral bleaching

Corals, together with anemones, hydrozoans and other invertebrates harbour symbiotic algae, which in the case of corals are called zooxanthellae (dinoflagellates of the genus *Symbiodinium*). Up to 60% of the photosynthates created by zooxanthellae photosynthesis are released through the plant cell walls directly into the coral tissue (Segar 1998). Without zooxanthellae, many corals would starve.

In the 1980's, instances of corals becoming bleached and then dying were reported from various locations around the world. The whiteness of the corals is because the zooxanthellae, normally responsible for the colour of corals, had vacated the coral colonies. Without the sugars normally produced by the algae, a coral colony degenerates and may die unless recolonised by zooxanthellae.

Sometimes the phenomenon appeared to coincide with El Niño conditions that caused a 1-2°C increase in tropical sea temperatures. According to Allen and Steene (1999) there were sixty bleaching events in all tropical seas between 1979 and 1990. Particularly severe coral bleaching in 1997-1998 (an El Niño year) caused an estimated 90% mortality of corals at various locations in the Indian Ocean, especially the Maldive Islands. In the Pacific the coral reefs of Palau were severely bleached such that about 75% of corals shallower than 15 m depth started to die.

Reef building corals are evidently living perilously close to their upper temperature limits, so that when temperatures exceed 29°C for several weeks, then bleaching starts. Temperatures in Palau were 30-32°C during the 1997/98 bleaching event. In shallow depths, a certain amount of bleaching is probably a seasonal event, perhaps caused by low tides coincident with heavy rainfall or high air temperatures. Under these situations, most corals are likely to recover. The bleaching events described here, however, were quite different by being protracted, and occurring to depths as great as 70 metres.

Information about coral bleaching in the Solomon Islands is scarce. A search for Internet web pages containing scientific observations about Solomon Islands coral bleaching produced very little amongst hundreds of references about coral bleaching elsewhere.

Whether coral bleaching has occurred in the Solomon Islands in recent years isn't known for there appears to have been no monitoring. It s possible that the dead and dying corals observed by Morton and others on the British Royal Society Expedition in 1965 may have been a case of coral bleaching.

Currently there is extensive coral bleaching in many parts of the Solomon Islands, coincident with serious bleaching in Fiji. Bleaching was first noticed in January and February 2000, and there are still reports of bleaching in May 2000. Observations at two reefs near Ghizo revealed extensive bleaching of plate and staghorn (*Acropora*) corals. Some anemones are similarly affected. Franck Boulay, manager of Solomon Sports Diving, Honiara, reports that the bleaching is bad in parts of the Florida Islands and that it is the corals on the outside of the reef rather than those inside the lagoon that are worst affected. Boulay claims, however, that he has not measured temperatures in the Florida Group above 29° C. Bilikiki Cruises Ltd. operate dive excursions to 20 sites in Nggela, 18 sites in the Russell islands, 3 sites in the Las Tres Marias Is. (Makira) and 15 sites in Marovo Lagoon. Scott Waring of Bilikiki Cruises reports that most coral reefs currently (May 2000) have about 20% of corals bleached with some of the shallow sites exhibiting bleaching as high as 50%. There are also reports of bleaching from Otong Java (Lam pers. obs.) and on reefs of Fuaga in Malaita (Boeni pers. comm.).

According to Scott Waring, the water temperature for the sites that Bilikiki Cruises visited in 1998 were on average 26°C. In 1998 the average for the sites rose to 28°C and from January to March 2000 increased to 30°C. From September to at least December 1999 mean monthly sea temperatures at Honiara were between 29.5 and 30.0°C.

Crown of thorns starfish

Damage to coral reefs by the crown of thorn starfish, *Acanthaster planci*, is reported sporadically in the Solomon Islands. Most sites in Western Province exhibit minor damage, though in Sandfly Passage, Tulaghi and Ghavutu in the Florida Islands there has recently been considerable damage attributed to the crown of thorns starfish (Scott Waring pers. comm.). Occasionally major outbreaks of crown of thorns have been reported at Mamara just west of Honiara. Triton trumpet shells predate crown of thorns starfish. Although large-scale harvesting of tritons for souvenirs could potentially contribute to increased numbers of starfish, factors other than just reduced predation seem to cause massive plagues of the starfish.

Coral reef conservation

Government policies, strategies and legislation

The Solomon Islands government is a party to several international agreements that are relevant to use and protection of its coral reefs: Biodiversity, Climate Change, Environmental Modification, the Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Marine Life Conservation, Ozone Layer Protection and Whaling.

The government does not have a specific policy on coral reefs, although these are embodied in the general national government policy on fisheries. This stipulates that the fisheries sector is to be developed and managed co-operatively with provincial authorities (where applicable), and that the exploitation of all fisheries resources within the fishery limits should be in a manner that secures optimal social and economic benefits for the people of Solomon Islands. The specific objectives are:

- to achieve and maintain self sufficiency;

- to improve cash income throughout the fisheries sector by way of assisting Solomon Islanders in developing their own resources through self-employment;

- to maximise participation of Solomon Islands nationals in commercial fishing and associated activities;

- to improve the foreign exchange position of Solomon Islands by encouragement of local processing of fisheries resources into value-added products; and

- to encourage the farming of aquatic resources.

According to Wells and Jenkins (1988) legislation prescribing measures for the protection and preservations of the marine environment was promulgated under the Delimitation of Marine Waters Act 1978 and the Fisheries Act 1972 (amended in 1977). The latter act has since been replaced by the 1998 Fisheries Act.

This Act provides for the management and development of fisheries in Solomon Islands. It highlights several principles that the Minister has to consider when exercising his powers and functions under this Act. One is that the Minister shall pay due regard to the principle that Solomon Islands fisheries resources shall be managed, developed and conserved so as to ensure resources are not endangered by over-exploitation; but are utilised at a level that ensure their optimum sustainable yield.

Another principle advocates sustainable development and applies the precautionary approach to conservation, management and exploitation of fisheries resources in order to protect the fisheries resources and preserve the marine environment. In this context, exploitation of fisheries resources in Solomon Islands shall be done through properly devised management plans. Marine conservation areas may be declared under this Act.

Other important legislation pertaining to the protection of coral reefs are:

- The Environment Act 1998 makes provision for and establishes integrated systems of development control, environment impact assessment and pollution control. It shall also prevent, control and monitor pollution. This Act caters for national and regional environmental concerns.

- The Shipping Act 1998 regulating matters on the protection of the marine environment and prevention of marine pollution from marine vessels. Under this Act, the Marine Division has the authority to prosecute violations of the Act. The Act incorporates various International Maritime Organisation (IMO) Conventions.

- The Wildlife Protection and Management Act 1998 that provides protection, conservation and management for wild life. Potentially it regulates the export and import of certain animals and plants to comply with obligations imposed under the convention on International trade in Endangered Species (CITES), although the Solomon Islands is still not a party to the CITES convention. According to the chief fisheries officer (Research), Mr Edward Oreihaka, the Government is still working towards becoming a signatory.

Two important documents that are helping effect the aims of this legislation are The National Environmental Management Strategies produced by SPREP and The State of the Environment Report produced by Leary under the auspices of the Solomon Islands Government in 1993. Priority 4 of the National Environmental Management Strategy is relevant to coral reefs. It recommends strengthening the database of resource information database, with great emphasis on reefs, estuaries and lagoons. Due to unavailability of funds, the recommendation has not been implemented.

In regard to the provinces, Tony Nori, (Acting Principal Fisheries Officer, Provincial development unit of Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division) has stated that the government is working on drawing up

a fisheries ordinance for the provinces. This will regulate fisheries and management and provide for sustainable management of resources at the provincial level. Western Province already has an ordinance providing for the sustainable management of its resources called the Resource Management Order (RMO)

Indigenous management systems

Indigenous management through customary marine tenure has been recognised as an important component of the sustainable utilisation and conservation of inshore marine resources, in particular coral reefs and mangroves. Papers published on customary marine tenure, its relevance and implications for conservation and management include: Baines (1985), Hviding (1988, 1996), Hviding and Ruddle (1991), Johannes (1982), Pulea (1993), Akimici (1991) and Foale (1998). Hviding and Ruddle (1991) described the customary marine tenure system as a potentially valuable alternative for inshore fisheries management.

Johannes (1978) reviewed some traditional conservation measures employed in the Pacific including Solomon Islands. The most common methods of indigenous conservation and management practice currently in place are serial prohibitions on harvesting, limited entry and complete prohibition of access. In serial prohibition, access to coral reefs is prohibited for a certain period. Limited entry restricts the numbers of people entering an area. Complete prohibition may apply to areas of cultural significance, including coral reefs.

In most parts of the Solomon Islands, there are two main forms in which serial prohibitions are exercised and enforced. The reef owners may ask either a Christian leader (priest, pastor or minister) or a 'kastom man' to place a tabu on the reef or alternatively the group owning the reef may place a tabu on the reefs themselves. Prohibitions in the form of tabu from the Christian leader or 'kastom man' take the form of a 'conditional spell'. Foale (1998) has described serial prohibitions in Nggela.

One area with restricted entry is Ramos Island (also called Onogou Island) between Isabel and Malaita. It is widely believed in Nggela, Isabel and Malaita that the spirits of the dead rest on Onogou. Anyone travelling to this island must be accompanied by someone who can communicate with the spirits. Strict protocols must be adhered to and not to do so will usually result in death. Because of such strong inherent beliefs and the restrictive nature of fishing on the island, entry is limited. This has helped to conserve marine resources around the island.

Cultural and religious beliefs such as the practice of not eating certain foods at certain times of the year by certain groups, or a total prohibition of eating of certain species, also contribute to conservation. For example, in the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) communities, only finfish are consumed, due to religious prohibitions on the consumption of anything without fins and scales. Robert Vavozo (pers. comm. 2000) reported a great abundance of invertebrates (especially crustaceans and holothurians) within the reefs of Dovele in Vella Lavella which is a SDA stronghold. The sale of these species is not prohibited under SDA religious regulations however. In reality their relative abundance relates to the distance to markets and the perishable nature of the lobsters.

Dietary preferences may aid the conservation of some species. In Nggela it is believed that eating turtles causes whooping cough and respiratory problems. Although turtles are still consumed in Nggela, the consumption rate is much lower than in Isabel and Malaita where these beliefs are not held. If, however, the ban on the sale of turtle shell were removed, then the catch rate would probably increase in Nggela and everywhere. In the Lau Lagoon in Malaita, dugongs are not eaten because of cultural beliefs.

In a survey on the status and management of inshore fisheries, Oreihaka and Ramohia (2000) reported the common perception among villagers that regulations instituted by national governments are more effective than traditional ones. Nonetheless, indigenous management systems, regardless of their deficiencies, are still important in the conservation and management of coral reefs and resources in the Solomon Islands. These practices form an important part of the life and culture of people. Any national conservation and management strategies must be sensitive to these practices. Oreihaka and Ramohia (2000) recommended that national management strategies on resource conservation should closely involve community leaders and resource owners.

Marine Protected Areas

A measure that potentially could be effective in safeguarding reef biota is establishing marine protected areas. If, for example 10% of the reef areas were protected and the protected areas were chosen strategically with regard to down stream effects, then reproductively mature fish and invertebrates within the areas will probably re-seed the over-fished regions. Smith *et al.* (1997) discussed the importance of marine protected areas as a refuge from fishing and in allowing target species to increase in abundance and body size, resulting in an exponential increase in egg production.

The problem is that all reef areas are "owned" by various Solomon Islanders who claim traditional fishing rights. To persuade them to relinquish fishing rights for a common benefit is a daunting task. The NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude, that has proven to be a major stumbling block in establishing marine reserves in nations like New Zealand (where there are about 20 marine protected areas), will be will be an order of magnitude more difficult in the Solomon Islands. Then there is the problem of policing any marine protected areas that are established. This is important because if the local people agree initially to a marine protected area becoming established, then they are likely to change their minds if outsiders poach the reserves.

A variation on the marine protected area could be to allow certain reefs to lie fallow for several years and to rotate such areas around the islands so that all coastal villages are involved in the process – i.e. amplifying the indigenous serial prohibition. While the concept will not be foreign, the fact that the areas would have to be closed to fishing for years at a time instead of a few months would probably be unacceptable. And if such a system were established, then the venture would again depend on effective policing.

People in the rural communities live from day to day. On any day the most pressing concern is food for that day. Planning is uncharacteristic. Therefore the necessity to live just today normally out weighs the long-term goals of conservation. The common reply to the message of conservation when it is preached to the villagers is..."It is easy to be sitting in a comfortable chair in an air-conditioned office, with the government providing a roof above your head and a salary at the end of the month to be preaching conservation, come and live with us and know the challenges we face". Any conservation project must therefore be holistic in approach and implemented bottom up rather than top down.

One of the biggest challenges in the declaration of marine protected areas in a society like Solomon Islands, where compensation is almost a way of life, is the provision of an alternative for the people. This need should not escape the planners and administrators. Marine protected areas and conservation measures must build within a frame work sustainable alternative projects. This does not mean cash hand outs however.

Five protected islands designated as bird sanctuaries that were listed by Wells and Jenkins (1988) are no longer protected. The acts under which they were instituted have been repealed (Biliki pers. comm.).

Plans are underway to set up a tourist resort on Mandoleana Island (one of the designated bird islands), though local people currently dispute ownership of the island. Since the islands lost what protection they previously had, the aquarium trade has contributed to significant degradation of coral reefs (Ishmael Tavasi, pers. comm. 2000). Tavasi stated that corals around the islands, especially around Mandoleana Island, have been broken and damaged. The current land dispute regarding Mandoleana Island has also been a major impetus for local people to destroy the coral resources on the Island. Each of the land owning claimants is trying to exploit the resources of the reefs to their fullest before any decision about the ownership is made. They may even protract negotiations to ensure they have ample time to "clean out" the reef resources before the island is designated a sanctuary.

Apart from the Arnavon Marine Conservation Area described below, the only area of Solomon Islands Reef that has been consistently protected for nearly two decades was the fringing reef immediately in front of the former Coastal Aquaculture Centre at Aruligo about 25 km northwest of Honiara. It was generally acknowledged that many of the species that were depleted elsewhere were relatively abundant in this reserve. Ironically, although the area was right in front of a research organisation, no effort appears to have been made to compare the biodiversity and the abundance of reef animals on this reef with adjacent reefs that were routinely fished. Sadly this opportunity was lost along with the research station was closed after being attacked in November 1999.

The Arnavon marine conservation area

The Arnavon Marine Conservation Area in Manning Strait between Isabel and Choiseul Islands was initially designated an off-limits area under a trespass law by the Ministry of Natural Resources in 1975, and was later included in the Provincial Protected Lands Bylaw in 1979. In 1980 a wild life sanctuary of 1000 ha was established within the Arnavon Islands under a local Government ordinance, principally to protect the nesting grounds of hawksbill and green turtles.

The reserve was, however, subsequently abandoned due to disputes over ownership of the Islands (Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division internal information paper). According to Wells and Jenkins (1988), the move to establish a protected area was not made in consultation with all parties who believe they had rights to that area under customary law. Wells and Jenkins (1988) further stated that an aggrieved party, in protest, destroyed a Worldwide Fund for Nature-funded turtle hatchery that had been established as part of a conservation programme – not an auspicious start.

Another endeavour to relieve pressure on the Arnavon Reefs was providing the villagers with new fishing equipment so that they could catch deep sea snapper and tuna – the rationale being that the deep sea fishery would compensate for the loss of the reef resources. The reef fish are, however, worth about the same as the deep sea fish, and their capture requires a lot less time at sea. What happened therefore, was that the villagers fished local reefs to greater effect, with their new equipment.

In 1992, renewed interest by the Government and landowners in reviving a protected area for the Arnavon Islands and surrounding marine areas resulted in the Environment and Conservation Division and the Fisheries Division of Solomon Islands and The Nature Conservancy re-establishing the protected area. A community-based management committee is supported by The Nature Conservancy. The Arnavon Marine Conservation Area may be the first successfully established marine protected area with community support in the South Pacific.

Future developments

There are plans to designate more sites as marine protected areas. The Solomon Island/Japanese Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division/ OFCF joint project on trochus and green snail reseeding of coral reefs is negotiating with landowners to declare Alokan Island in the south of Russell group as a marine

protected area. The negotiations have been progressing well, and the chief has already closed the island from any fishing activities, especially night diving. Only fishing for church fundraising is currently allowed (John Legata pers. comm. 2000).

The Ghizo office of Worldwide Fund for Nature is also planning to declare Kennedy Island, near Ghizo as a marine protected area. A resource management order is currently being drafted but enforcement will be one of the biggest challenges. Plans are that dive operators will be involved and that a levy will be imposed to fund enforcement and protection of the marine protected area. Worldwide Fund for Nature is also planning awareness campaigns on rural communities especially on the ecology and reproduction of invertebrates. There are plans to produce videos aimed at showing local communities how reef organisms are ecologically interlinked and the implications of over fishing (Simon Foale pers. comm. 2000).

One of the fundamental problems in establishing marine protected areas anywhere is the ability of the governing body to demonstrate convincingly the effectiveness of the reserve. If it is argued that establishing the reserve will increase the diversity and the abundance of reef species, and improve the chances of re-seeding depauperate reefs, then this needs to be demonstrated. An initial baseline survey of the site and of controls is essential. Then a monitoring programme is needed to identify post-reservation effects. This is no small task. Long term monitoring of coral reef resources requires considerable scientific expertise, and continuity in terms of funding and personnel. It also requires that the staff involved have the appropriate taxonomic, sampling and statistical skills. Unfortunately, as is mentioned below, such facilities and resources are lacking in Solomon Islands.

While it is possible to contract out such baseline and monitoring work organisations like the University of the South Pacific, SPREP or ICLARM, continuity requires that the contract be long term funded, and that the research organisations have some realistic guarantee of safety.

Reef re-stocking

Restocking the reefs with some of the most overfished species is technically feasible, but has not been attempted on any large or meaningful scale in the Solomon Islands. A potential problem is the high mortality of transplants if left unprotected. For example, experience in giant clam cultivation suggest that mortality rates of unprotected juveniles might be prohibitively high relative to the cost of the spat (Munro 1993).

The Solomon Islands Government and ICLARM established the Coastal Aquaculture Centre, previously based at Aruligo, as a co-operative venture. The Centre succeeded in rearing giant clams (*Tridacna gigas*) for the aquarium trade and for reef re-stocking, and successfully demonstrated the captive breeding of bêche-de-mer for reseeding reefs. A Solomon Islands' Fisheries Division/OFCF project to re-seed coral reefs with trochus and green snail coral reef was also conducted at the Centre.

Concerns about depletion of reef fish harvested for the aquarium trade have prompted the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) and ICLARM to start a project to see if they can grow aquarium fish from fry caught in light traps and surf nets. Most fry perish before they colonise reefs, so the concept of growing fry in aquaria, where mortality would be much lower, is a good one. The project is still in its early stages. ICLARM is planing trials at Nusatupe.

The closure of the Aquaculture Centre at Aruligo after it was attacked, in November 1999, by a group of self-styled Guadalcanal militants from another part of the island, has however, severely disrupted these projects. Key scientific staff left Solomon Islands and stocks of animals in aquaria at Aruligo were purportedly eaten. With Solomon Island Government funding, ICLARM plans to compensate for the loss of facilities at Aruligo by enlarging its field station on the island of Nusatupe near Ghizo in Western Province.

Aquaculture

The development of aquaculture industries could potentially relieve pressure on reef resources. ICLARM has demonstrated the viability of a long-line pearl oyster farming industry in Western Province. There is real potential for developing such an industry in the Solomon Islands. Aquaculture ventures typically require considerable foreign investment, however, and this is unlikely while the economic future of the capital, Honiara, and the political stability of the nation is compromised by ethnic violence.

There is interest in encouraging villagers to cultivate and dry carrageen seaweeds like *Eucheuma* for the phycocolloid industry (Why 1985). Trial *Eucheuma* farming began in Solomon Islands in 1987 when a seaweed farming project initiated by Fisheries Division and funded by the UK's Overseas Development Administration, planted out seedstock of *E. alvarezii* obtained from Fiji (South 1993). Grazing by rabbit fish (Siganids) was a major problem until a shift to more exposed locations gave better results. By 1990 four farms produced an export of 2.5 tonnes (Skewes 1990). Despite these optimistic signs, the Solomon Islands *Eucheuma* industry collapsed. *Euchema. alvarezii* have colonised habitats and can still be found in former seaweed farming areas.

The financial return to the producers, relative to their effort is, something that needs to be carefully considered along with any assurances made to buyers about continuity of supply. The marine colloids industry depends on guaranteed supply. The scenario where a village is expected to produce consistently a container-load of good grade dried *Eucheuma* per month when the same amount of cash might be earned by selling fish from the reef, is something that must be realistically considered by anyone making a financial investment in such a venture.

Until recently there were two successful prawn farms in Solomon Islands. In 1998 they exported prawns worth $SBD1.3 million (Table 1). Both farms were situated west of Honiara. In 1999 all of the equipment of one farm was destroyed by members of the Isatabu Freedom Force (previously known as the Guadalcanal Republican Army) and the staff terrorised. The other farm, which struggled to operate under trying conditions for a year has also been forced to close. The number of Solomon Islanders put out of work by both prawn farm closures, some of whom have had to return to a subsistence life style, is indicative of how such aquaculture ventures may relieve pressure on coral reef resources.

Problems for conservation

Ineffectual enforcement

Despite some restrictions and regulations, there is little evidence to suggest that the Government of the Solomon Islands has successfully managed and conserved any of its commercially important reef species. Part of the problem is that even with the best of intentions the Government has little ability to enforce any of its regulations especially in remote areas. One of the authors (Hay) had to buy an adult leather back turtle captured by the Police Force near Aruligo in December 1999 to prevent the police officers from butchering the protected animal.

Measures to conserve stocks also need to be applied effectively and in a consistent and co-ordinated manner within Government, otherwise there is uncertainty and chaos. A tendency for some Government ministers to exercise discretionary rights without consulting their departments for advice

is a problem. Such action fails to make use of the departmental information, for which, ironically, the Government may have paid large sums to obtain. It also destroys morale within the department as officers feel research is pointless if blithely ignored. And it undermines departmental officers in the eyes of the public and business community. It is difficult to prove any allegations of corruption concerning ministerial discretion in issuing fishing licenses.

As an example, because of declining populations of sea cucumbers, a national fisheries regulation banning the catching and exporting of the sandfish species (*Holothuria scabra*) became effective on 24 July 1997. On 29 February 2000, however, the current Minister of Fisheries arbitrarily lifted this ban without advising his Fisheries Division; the Enforcement Section was only made aware of the change in regulations through comments made by a commercial bêche-de-mer dealer. Currently a similar situation may be brewing in issuing licenses for the life fish trade. Such unilateral and arbitrary actions by politicians are a major threat to conserving marine resources in the Solomon Islands.

The inability of fisheries officers to enforce existing fisheries regulations, or even to monitor what is happening in such a huge archipelago, endangers coral reef resources. Currently, and for several years, the Solomon Islands Fisheries Division has had an acute shortage of operational funding. There is no money for research and very little for testing compliance in near shore waters. Without sufficient funds to secure existing facilities and equipment against theft; to maintain its equipment; to provide boats, motors, fuel, radio equipment; for travel and for aerial observations, then the Division is impotent.

Eroding indigenous management

At the village level, while indigenous management systems play an important role in conservation and management of coral reefs they have inadequacies. The success of prohibitions placed as a tabu from the Christian leader or kastom man depends upon the belief that going against this may result in a curse or bad luck. These tabus are still successful to some extent, though erosion of cultural values due to western European influences and the presence of social dissidents within the society has resulted in some failures.

Where the reef owners place tabu on a reef, the tabu has to be enforced and intruders chased away. Where the reef owners are in consensus, the tabu is successful. But disagreements between individuals of the social owning group may result in the continued harvest by some individuals regardless of the tabu. Poachers, especially at night, are a common problem on such closed reefs.

Johannes (1978) argued that the two main factors contributing to the demise of traditional marine tenure conservation are the introduction of a monetary economy and the breakdown of traditional authority. Crean (1999) supported this contention and suggested that fisheries management is an equilibrium between centralist and community-based forces where the focus is the exploitation and management of common property resources (CPRs). Crean (1999) further argued that national developmental aspirations and commercial activity has weakened traditional social hierarchies resulting in the marginalisation of customary law and the advent and promotion of an exogenous legal system through a modern centralised governing system. This in effect created a functional dichotomy in the coastal resources exploitation and responsibilities, resulting in a shift from community based management of coastal resources to a central-based management. The decline of traditional management controls and the adoption of new and more efficient fishing methodology to satisfy a `production oriented harvesting system' resulted in the decline of recuperative capacity of coastal ecosystems (Crean 1999). Oreihaka and Ramhia (2000) stated, most villagers perceive that such a centrally based management system would be the most effective. In contrast Crean (1999) also discussed how such

a centrally based management system has succumbed to pressures in Shetland Islands, in the North Atlantic resulting in a shift to community-based management systems. Hopefully over time an equilibrium in Crean's (1999) model may be achieved which will result in better management of the coral reef resources of Solomon Islands.

Difficulties in establishing marine protected areas

Because all of the reef areas are custom owned, the concept of permanently setting aside areas as marine reserves is generally unacceptable. This is particularly so during a period when the population is being encouraged, even coerced, into embracing a western-style capitalist economy, and locking up the very resources that could be sold therefore appears to make little sense to villagers. This is discussed more fully under the section on marine protected areas above.

Lack of research facilities and espertise

Fundamental to marine conservation is having the ability to monitor how the various human effects listed above impact on coral reefs and lagoons. We need to be able to measure change, and that requires undertaking careful base-line studies. Also required is a clear understanding of nearshore coastal processes, e.g. an understanding of circulation patterns. These tasks require expertise in a wide range of marine science disciplines and "in house" analytical facilities, e.g. for analysing seawater chemistry.

In a country where primary school education is not yet compulsory and few Solomon Islanders have the benefits of more than two or three years of formal education, it may seem out of place to advocate for a much stronger marine biological research capability in the Solomon Islands. The economy is, however, heavily dependant on the tuna industry and the predominantly rurally based population is heavily dependent on reef fisheries for their very sustenance. So if fisheries resources are mismanaged, as some already appear to have been, the consequences may be severe.

Currently the only government funded facility likely to have any capability for nearshore oceanographic and marine ecological research is the Fisheries Division of the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries. Research is not, considered, however, to be a major divisional role. Most of its activities relate to running an observer programme on foreign-owned tuna vessels and in issuing licences.

This Division is also perpetually broke with substandard accommodation. Most of its equipment has been stolen, there are no laboratory facilities, and the library is poor. Morale is low, trained staff are leaving and there is little motivation for, or interest in, research projects unless someone else pays, and then they tend to be for desk-top or questionnaire type studies. The Division's coastal research capability is minuscule. It has little to no expertise in nearshore oceanography, water chemistry, phytoplankton, zooplankton, algae, invertebrates, soft bottom benthos, coral reef ecology, mangroves, and biosystematics. Little field work is accomplished. Initiatives for research invariably come from overseas agencies like WWF – rarely from inside the Country. The last major piece of original fisheries research requiring sampling and extensive field work was a bait-fish study over a decade ago (Hay pers. obs.).

In the absence of any effective government-funded research agency, that leaves the various non government agencies. The largest is ICLARM, previously based at Aruligo and now sharing the small island of Nusatupe near Ghizo with a relatively large airfield. As mentioned, ICLARM has been

mainly interested in the aquaculture of overfished reef animals with the view to restocking reefs, starting new industries (e.g. pearls) and supplying the aquarium trade. Recently ICLARM began an environmental study to monitor the effects of logging operations on inshore marine ecosystems. This was in conjunction with the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) in New Zealand who, in the absence of any analytical facilities in the Solomon Islands, had to take all water and sediment samples back to New Zealand for analysis. Whether this study will continue in the light of current ethnic tension is uncertain.

The Japanese aid agency OFCF has funded research on restoring some overfished species, e.g. greensnail, and has worked collaboratively with both ICLARM and Fisheries Division. OFCF joint projects are contingent on a Japanese-Solomon Islands fishing agreement acceptable to Japan.

The University of the South Pacific (USP), part owned by the Solomon Islands, has the potential to provide the Solomon Islands with much of the marine ecological expertise it requires. Most Solomon Islands marine scientists graduate from USP through its Marine Studies Programme at Laucala Bay in Suva. Currently USP has a Centre in Honiara; but it mainly teaches undergraduate courses, and there is little emphasis on marine sciences. A decade ago the University Council gave approval for relocating the University's Institute of Marine Resources from Suva to the Solomon Islands. Given its roles and goals, that Institute was best placed to fill several of the major gaps in research capability. In May 1999 the Solomon Islands Government gifted USP with a site and core facilities for the Institute at Aruligo. But because of terrorist activity, the facilities and site had to be abandoned, together with the adjacent Coastal Aquaculture Centre. So the task of relocating the Institute to Solomon Islands took a massive backward step. Currently USP and the Solomon Islands Government are working together on finding a new site for the Institute of Marine Resources.

Conclusions and recommendations

There are clearly numerous threats to the ecological stability of Solomon Islands reefs and lagoons. The impact of the Europeans, and more recently Asians, has been and is out of all proportion to their numbers. They have introduced international trade and new land practices such as logging, plantation development and mining that often cause excessive sedimentation in nearshore waters. In matters of fishing, as Boutilier (1975) suggested, it is possible that foreigners from temperate climes, where there tend to be huge numbers of relatively few coastal fish species, may apply bulk fishing techniques on the assumption that the same situation applies in the tropics – where, in fact, the reverse applies; i.e. there are many more species but in lower numbers.

Some activities, such as fishing and logging are currently damaging reefs. Others such as plantation development on hill country, new variations on fishing, pollution from industrial and urban development, and perhaps new mining ventures are potentially damaging. Precisely how damaging we don't know, because few studies have been conducted in the Solomon Islands. But on the basis of research done elsewhere, there is clear cause for concern.

The current and potential effects of human activities on coral reefs and lagoons need to be researched. Predictive cost benefit analyses including environmental costs and benefits for new ventures are vital; but for them to be meaningful there is an urgent need to monitor the effects of current activities. How else do we learn from our mistakes? Instead we have a situation where, as in the case of Silvania's southern Marovo plantation development, the only study the government commissioned, after granting permission for the project to go ahead and four years after *Silvania* commenced development opera-

tions, was a desk-top study assessment that expressed concerns like the social problems associated with an influx of labour and an absence of any marine ecological information. It seems somehow unlikely that such concerns will be heeded by the developers given their previous poor adherence to the government code practice for logging. They are hardly likely to fund a long-term marine survey.

What is really required is a robust monitoring programme to measure the long term environmental and social impacts of developments already underway, such as plantations. Only then are we likely to predict the impacts of expansions in the industry.

A perceived urgency to decentralise urban development because of the disruption that ethnic violence has caused in Honiara, coupled with the expediency of discharging raw sewage into the sea, as currently occurs in Honiara, could easily result in the rapidly growing towns like Auki, in Malaita, discharging large volumes of raw sewage to the detriment of local reefs. Plans to mine deposits of gold, nickel, copper and phosphate elsewhere in the archipelago are likely to be detrimental to lagoons and reefs because of runoff from land clearance, access road construction and associated port development.

Lasting solutions to environmental problems are usually those that people seek for themselves; but such solutions are only possible if most of the people actually perceive there to be a problem. Relatively few Solomon Islanders are aware of reports of coral reef destruction overseas. Even graphic television programmes like those by Jacques Cousteau showing methods and effects of overfishing in the Philippines have little impact in a country where there is no national TV channel, relatively few satellite dishes and many villages lack electricity. Compounded by the very high illiteracy rate, perhaps most fundamental problem of all that threatens coral reefs may be that most of the rural fisher folk are unaware that their reefs are really under threat.

There is no simple single solution to the overfishing problem but some definite improvements could be made. The government could outlaw wasteful practices such as the live reef fish trade by arguing that there is much less waste in exporting chilled or frozen fish for similar returns. It could outlaw or severely restrict the harvesting of fish like anemone fish for the aquarium trade by arguing that scuba diving tourists wanting to observe the fish in the field attract more foreign revenue. It could also heed the advice of Adams *et al.* (1992), which the Government commissioned, and prohibit, by law, the use of scuba and hookah equipment to harvest any reef-dwelling species. And finally the Government can, as it has done, prohibit further commercial exploitation of species that have clearly become scarce.

Restocking depleted species by re-seeding depopulated reefs with hatchery-reared animals is another approach, and the animals that best lend themselves to this practice are mainly shell fish and sea cucumbers. As yet, however, there has been no large-scale restocking programme anywhere in the Solomon Islands though the task is technically feasible.

Except for studies on the aquaculture potential and captive breeding for reef reseeding of giant clams, trochus, green snails and bêche-de-mer (all heavily overfished species) no studies have been done to asses the stock, ecology and biology of most of the fisheries on coral reefs. Initially it will be necessary to engage outside scientific expertise to undertake such tasks, but it is absolutely vital to develop a domestic skill base simultaneously. It is important that the expertise, the field data and the "memory" of such monitoring programmes remains within the country.

It is worth repeating here some of Wells and Jenkins (1988) recommendations plus some from the National Environmental Management Strategy:

- commercial fisheries development in reefs and lagoons should be undertaken with care as the Solomon Island fisheries resources are not as rich as they might appear to be;

- traditional knowledge of reef and lagoon fisheries should be used as a basis on which to build modern small-scale fisheries;

- coastal developments, such as road, hotel and other construction activities, should be undertaken with great care;

- a system of protected areas should be developed, with participation of customary landowners;

- there should be an improvement of environmental awareness and education. In this regards resource owners should be made aware of the resources they have, how to utilise them sustainably and the precautions they should take to protect these resources; and

- a strengthening of information database on reefs, estuaries and lagoons.

The coral reefs of Solomon Islands though reported to be one of the least disturbed by Maragos (1988) are probably the least known. Further studies need to be conducted to create an inventory of coral reefs in Solomon Islands. A lot of studies need to be conducted to determine the biodiversity of the coral reefs. The coral reefs support one of the biggest fisheries both for subsistence and artisanal purposes. The management of reef resources is, however, essentially boom and bust with belated, weakly enforced checks and controls. Studies on stock assessment, biosystematics and ecology of the fisheries resources need to be initiated and completed.

Mariculture is likely to relieve the pressure on reef resources, and for this reason most Pacific island nations, including the Solomon islands highlight aquaculture as a priority area in their fishery. Yet to date commercial mariculture in the South Pacific has been, with some notable exceptions, largely experimental, a failure or at best marginal (Veitayaki and South 1997). Part of the problem is that mariculturing predators requires a consistent supply of protein-rich feed in a region where protein is typically in short supply. With the exception of *Eucheuma* farming, most aquaculture ventures require foreign investment, and financial investors require some assurance of political and economic stability. That no such assurance is currently possible in the Solomon Islands is demonstrated by the recent closure of existing aquaculture industries.

Finally, if the people of the Solomon Islands are to safeguard the ecology of their reefs, then some how the entire rural community is going to have to adopt, collectively, a long-term plan for reef sustainability in place of a prevailing attitude where individual villages view reefs as a source of sustenance and cash for their day-to-day existence. The day-to-day method can only hope to succeed if the population is stable and there is little desire for economic growth. Neither applies in modern-day Solomon Islands where none of the statistics and trends bode well for coral reefs. A burgeoning, largely rural population with little opportunity for urban employment, and a desire for development, must depend increasingly upon nearshore marine resources both for food and for cash. At the same time the Government and foreign aid donors are encouraging Solomon Islanders to enlarge the coastal fishing catch. If the resources are frittered away and given little or no chance of renewal, then the resources will be lost and Solomon Islanders will face the same overfishing problems as Indonesian, Philippine, Mediterranean and Newfoundland fisherfolk, to name but a few examples.

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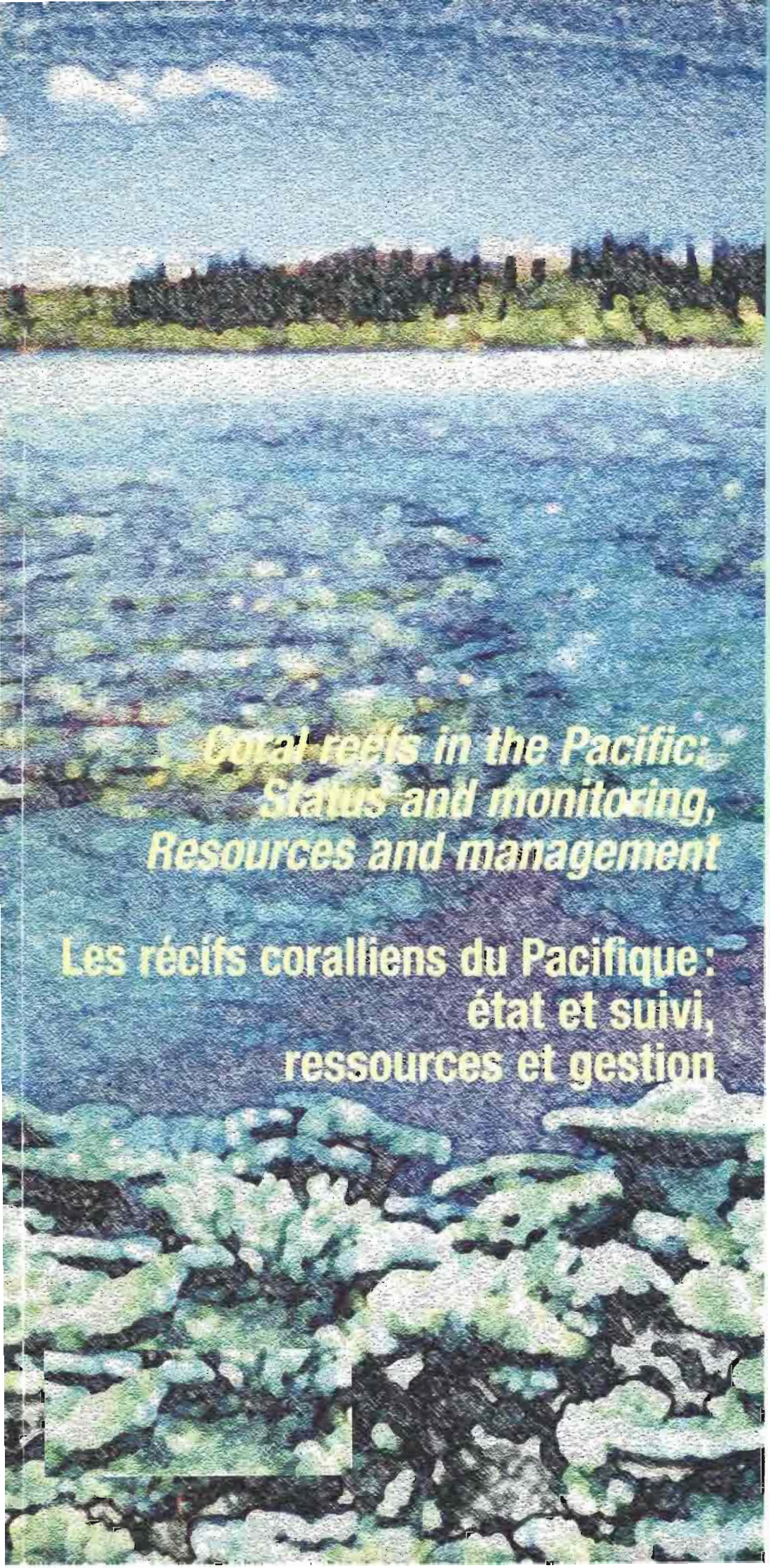

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Publication éditée par :
Centre IRD de Nouméa
BP A5, 98848 Nouméa CEDEX
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Modèle de référence bibliographique à cette revue :
Adjeroud M. *et al.*, 2000. Premiers résultats concernant le benthos et les poissons au cours des missions TYPATOLL.
Nouméa : IRD. *Doc. Sci. Tech.* II 3, 125 p.

ISSN 1297-9635
Numéro **II** 5 - **Septembre 2002**

Distribué pour le Pacifique par le Centre de Nouméa

A regional symposium
International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI)
Symposium régional

International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI)
22-24 Mai 2000
Noumea IRD Centre - New Caledonia

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