

*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

WHEN women go out to catch crabs these days, it would most likely be for a *jaba* or a commitment and not necessarily for the table or the family's meal.

So says Tarusila Veibi Ratu, the Bua Yaubula Management Support team rep who has been working closely with the villages in Bua, Vanua Levu in an attempt to increase the awareness of conservation.

Recently, Mrs Ratu, or Taru as she is better known in the Northern province, has devoted much of her time to a scoping exercise of mud crabs and educating people about the dangers of over-harvesting.

"We have noticed a decrease in the number of mud crabs in this area because people are only catching them to sell for money. In the 60s and 70s, they just catch crabs for their family, for dinner or for the table. Nowadays they are starting to sell crabs so every day they go out and get mud crabs to sell.

"So every day, say 20 ladies go out to the sea, they pick three crabs each or more. That's 60 or 90 crabs and whatever amount they catch goes to the market."

She said as people harvested crabs on a daily basis, they failed to realise that the population of mud crabs was decreasing.

"We've come across some villages where people say they'd like a nursery so when they harvest, they'll go for the big ones and the males. The females and undersized ones, they'll leave them in the nursery and pick the big ones to sell to the market," she said.

She said villagers indicated this was a way they could monitor the size of crabs they took from the nursery or tabu area.

Taru said what made the decline all the more obvious was the increasing demand for mud crabs.

"There were no markets for crabs in the 60s and 70s but nowadays people are looking for money to meet their family needs and they start to fish for undersized crabs so that is one main reason the number of crabs are decreasing.

"Some villagers have alternative livelihood projects like poultry farming, some women in the province have a mothers club that have sewing machines and they sell whatever they sew like dresses or doormats and get money out of that. Others go for beekeeping projects or make honey."

Taru says she wishes to visit the mud crab breeding ground or nursery in Navua so she is able to share what she has learnt to the people of Bua.

"I want to visit that place so I can compare it to our areas here but most of the ladies here say that the breeding grounds here are OK and that they've got quite a good place for breeding crabs."

She said there were no rules or limits on the quantity of crabs caught by individuals and there were no traditional methods of harvesting.

“Women catch crabs with their hands. There are no traditional rituals or protocols to follow when going to catch crabs. From Kubulau to Lekutu, there is no place where they observe a traditional exercise to catch crabs,” she said.

She said there was also no cultural significance of the crabs to the Fijian people.

“In any feast or vanua gatherings etc, the crabs are like decoration for the table because it’s delicious. In the city, when there’s a function and there are crabs, we know the hosts are wealthy because they would’ve spent hundreds of dollars to have crabs on the menu. But in the village, we just go out to sea and we have crabs for dinner.

“Village life is easy if you want to eat crabs because you just go out to sea, catch crabs and you have a good meal whereas in the city, you have to find people who are selling it, you’d like to buy it but sometimes it is just too expensive.”

In her travels around the Bua province, Taru has made some interesting observations.

“Whenever we come across a place where there’s a lot of mud crabs, it is a sign of the health of the mangroves and ecosystem. From the riverbanks to the mangroves and out to sea, if you see crabs there, it shows that that area is healthy. The breeding place for mud crabs is the reef. If you see that there are lot of crabs around these areas, it shows the tabu area is nearer to the shore or the mangroves.

“In Dama, anyone can go out fishing for mud crabs. On any occasion, the women go out to catch crabs. But in Nacavaga, there are four mataqali in tikina Solevu. Each mataqali owns a portion of the mangroves where they conserve mud crabs.

“Whenever there is an occasion for the church, vanua, government or when there are important visitors, the mata or representative goes to the turaga ni mataqali to seek permission to catch crabs. They are only allowed to catch crabs for a day and by evening, the ban is back in place. Because the tabu areas are close to each other, the spillover from the other tabu areas replenish the mud crabs count in the recently harvested tabu.”

Taru said this was the first story of mud crabs conservation she had come across.

“There is no proper market where women can sell the crabs so anybody who has enough money to buy crabs can buy it. Costs range from as cheap as \$7 a kg to \$20. Some women try to sell it off as quickly as possible so they reduce the price. This is a challenge faced by the women. There are middlemen who are truck drivers and shop keepers who buy the crabs and transport them to Labasa, Savusavu or Suva and re-sell it at a higher price, sometimes they sell it in pieces.”

With her passion for nature and years of experience, Taru is proud to see the change that is taking place in Bua. She is confident the province is on the right track and vows to keep it that way for as long as she can.