

*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

Solomone Rabuli, a fish warden from Nacavaga Village in the Bua Province, recalls as a boy watching the women in his community wade out into the sea and return in no time with something to eat.

“When I was still in primary school, many women would put on a pot of cassava to cook and go fishing. They would return well before the cassava was cooked and we would have fish for breakfast, lunch and dinner,” he said.

Not anymore.

“In my later years, I noticed the women took much longer when they went fishing. They had to go further out to sea for longer periods to catch fish and other seafood. If they had to put on a pot of cassava to cook, by the time they would have returned, the cassava would’ve been completely burnt,” he said.

But it wasn’t until he attended a workshop on helping communities better managing natural resources that he understood why. He was there to be trained as a fish warden, a volunteer position under the Fisheries Department that has the power to enforce fishing regulations.

And it was there that he began to understand that the way his community was fishing and using the land was making it harder to catch fish year after year.

“I was invited to be part of a workshop for fishing wardens. Three days after that, my life changed,” he said. “I realized our lack of understanding and respect for the resources we have been gifted with.”

The basic problem is this: To meet increasing food and income needs, people are fishing more and more. And as they fish more, with limited local management, fish are getting too few to reproduce and refill the fishing grounds with new fish, year after year. Plus, increased land activities is also damaging the places fish need to live and breed, further reducing their numbers. This includes such things as mangrove clearing or burning farmland, which can cause too much soil to run off the land.

“When I returned to the village after that workshop, I made it my goal to inform as many people as possible and to educate them on the importance of protecting our resources and using it wisely,” he said.

Gradually, people began to listen.

“We began to introduce some changes in the village such as the ban on the use of bamboos when fishing and relocation of pig pens away from the shores. While it was difficult at first, I was thankful that the villagers accepted what we told them,” he said.

Four years ago, the village introduced a marine protected area, or tabu area as it is known locally. This is an area where fishing is banned to allow the fish there to grow bigger and breed. Over time, the fish can replenish the tabu area and fish also begin to repopulate areas outside the tabu.

The community also gathered small, less mobile critters, like sea cucumbers, and crabs, to help start reviving their depleted fishing grounds.

“The seafood we once harvested so easily on our shores were nowhere to be found so we gathered different species of various resources from other places and filled our tabu areas with it so they could breed,” he said.

In Fiji, there are more than 450 communities are taking similar actions, including limiting fishing permits, restricting gear and fishing methods, protecting spawning sites and times, and establishing tabus. The communities are all part of the Fiji Locally-Managed Marine Area Network, which was created because communities across the country are having a harder time meeting their food and income needs as their fish stocks decline.

Rabuli believes that part of the challenge facing Fiji in the decline of its resources is a loss of culture.

“The Fijian way of life is when you harvest your crops, a portion of that must be given to the chief. Likewise, when you harvest a catch from the sea, give a portion of the catch where it is due. But this practice has been forgotten, people today only think of themselves and have lost respect for their leaders and each other,” he said.

Rabuli said things are changing for the better, though not as fast as he would like.

“We can see some changes as far as the mindset of people are concerned; the change is taking effect – albeit at a slow pace,” he said.

But perhaps not everyone can see the light in just three days, like Rabuli did.