

*Story developed for Communications for Change (cChange)

THERE is silent, unspoken joy among the women of Tavulomo Village in Dama, Bua when the rara trees begin to flower.

Apart from being a pretty sight, the red flowers have for many generations brought good tidings as they mark a period where mud crabs are plentiful and full of meat.

Matila Lolo, 57, has been in the business of catching crabs for more than 30 years and knows all too well the traditional signs that herald in another season of crabs and the promise of a great catch.

“We usually know when it’s the right time to go out and catch crabs by the crows of the chicken and when the rara tree starts to flower. The crow of the chicken can mean three things: the wake-up call in the mornings, the changing of the tides in the afternoon and there are times when they just crow for no particular reason,” she explained.

She said each crow sounded different and over the years, she had learnt to discern these.

“In my years of catching crabs, I have always used my hands to dig into the burrows and get the crabs out of their hiding places. The women in the village also use their hands; we don’t use traps or nets.”

In a day, she can catch from 10 to 14 crabs, and a string of these usually sell at \$60 or \$65.

“If the weather is favourable, then we can come out and catch crabs at least four times. I travel to Nabouwalu to sell the crabs, usually on Saturdays. The money I earn goes towards a variety of priorities including my tithe and offering to the church, the family’s need for groceries and other things, the village activities if required and then sometimes there are people who need money and come and borrow so I share what I have,” she said.

While she’s never returned home empty-handed on any crab-catching expedition, Matila admits that the crabs are not as abundant as they once were.

“I believe the only way to sustain the population count of the crabs and ensure that they have a chance to reproduce is to introduce a tabu where the mangroves are. In our village, there are MPAs but the mangroves are not a protected area,” she said.

Although mud crabs may not have a cultural significance to the Fijian people’s way of life, Matila says it does make the table look good.

“It is like a flower amid any spread of food laid out for visitors and that makes us feel good,” she said.

For a woman who has been catching crabs for many years, Matila knows quite enough about how mud crabs reproduce.

“Mud crabs live in the mud and around mangroves. When we see the male crabs atop the females we know that they are mating. I have also seen the female crabs carrying its eggs under its flap and in the early stages, the eggs are orange. When the eggs turn black, that is the time they go out to sea

to release their eggs. The eggs remain in the sea until they hatch and the young crabs live under the sea until the tide brings them back to shore.”

Matila says there are times when the search for crabs becomes difficult because their camouflaged shells blend into the colours of the mangroves and mud.

A few years ago, the women would wake as early as 4am for a 5-hour walk to the home of the mud crabs.

“These days, we have a boat so we no longer have to walk long hours just to get crabs. We can go out at 5.30am and return home by 9am with crabs and fish – enough to sell and feed our families,” she said.