

Fisheries Division

Ministry of Agriculture & Food, Forests and Fisheries Sea Cucumber Press Release – April 2011

The Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Agriculture & Food, Forests & Fisheries is aware that there is a lot of public interest and enquiries on the status of the sea cucumber fishery in the fisheries waters of the Kingdom of Tonga. This press release is aimed to provide the public with information on the background history of this fishery and the current status of sea cucumber within the fisheries waters of Tonga. The Ministry is governed by the Fisheries Management Act 2002 which clearly spelled out that the core responsibility of the Minister and its Division lies on **conservation, management, sustainable utilization and development** of the fisheries resources within the Kingdom.

As background to the sea cucumber fishery in Tonga, the fishery started early on in the 1980s. In 1990, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community conducted a survey with the objective “to assess the potential for bech-de-mer fishery...” in Tonga. The 1990 survey found that “there were substantial stocks of sea cucumber that could support a small fishery” in Tonga. Thus, the fishery took off commercially in the early 1990s. In 1996, another survey was conducted which clearly showed “stock depleting”. In turn, his Majesty’s Cabinet closed the sea cucumber fishery in Tonga for 10 years, effective from 31st December 1997. Later survey in 2004 found that “there appears to be potential for re-opening the fishery” and as a result the sea cucumber fishery was reopened in 2008 upon completion of the 10 years closure.

To promote economic development as well as achieving other core functions of the Ministry such as conservation, management and sustainable utilization of sea cucumber, the Ministry put management regimes in place to achieve these objectives. Such initiatives included the adoption of the Tonga National Sea Cucumber Fishery Management and Development Plan and the Fisheries Management (Conservation) Regulations 2008. Management measures including closing season (1 Oct – 31 March) as this is the spawning season for sea cucumber, limited quotas allocated to each Island groups, size limits, ban use of scuba diving and limited number of license.

Latest survey (Nov 2010-Mar 2011) concluded that there is a sign of stock depletion especially those sea cucumber (white teatfish & black teatfish) with high commercial value whereas low value species such as lollyfish and snakefish are still in average level of healthy stock densities. Trend of export data supports this, indicating a shift from high value species to low value species, showing target subsistence species (such as snakefish – *te’epupulu*) increasingly becoming dominant as an export species.

The Ministry would like to inform the public that there is overall sign of depletion but not over exploited of sea cucumber in Tonga. For 2011, small quota of about 100 tonnes of sea cucumber is allocated for commercial purposes which is a declined from 312 tonnes in 2010.

It is also vital to remind that illegal fishing and export of sea cucumber hinders economic development of Tonga because it places the sustainability of fisheries stocks at risk. Data from overseas market indicated trading of sea cucumber from Tonga during the moratorium period

(1997-2007). Between 2008 -2010 Fisheries Division received T\$114,140.13 from selling of confiscated sea cucumber from known illegal fishing. It is evident that without the support of Customs, Police and the Tonga Defence Services, the Fisheries is unable to combat illegal harvesting and export of sea cucumber. Border control plays an important role in combating illegal export of sea cucumber.

Sea cucumber fishery plays an important role in terms of supporting economic development for Tonga but if all the enforcement Ministries fail to combat illegal harvesting and export of sea cucumber, then this very important fishery will, very soon, collapse.