

MINISTRIES AND COMMUNITY UNITES FOR THE PLIGHT OF TONGA'S TURTLES

Representatives from various sectors of the community and around the Kingdom attended a workshop in early June focused on turtle conservation in the Pacific. The workshop was facilitated by Lui Bell from the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP).



Participants from MAFFF, Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Tourism, environmental NGOs, private sector, Civil Society and fisherman attended the two day workshop. Discussions took place about the challenges and issues facing Tonga and the Pacific in relation to sea turtle management, taking into account conservation issues and traditional use of turtles.

Tonga is home to four species of marine turtle, with the Hawksbill listed as 'critically endangered' with a population decline of up to 90% in the past 10 years and the Green sea turtle, listed as 'endangered' with a decline of up to 70%. Regulation and compliance for protecting these migrating turtles is relatively weak and as a result, unregulated fishing is a risk to both the fishermen's sustainable livelihoods and the turtle population.

The group plan to work together to create a strategic plan for managing this valuable resource, exploring the development of economic opportunities for the fisherman in maintaining the tradition of catching turtles while preserving the population. Potential ideas discussed at the workshop included eco-tourism opportunities which would also serve to benefit the wider community.

Currently, the closed season for hunting male turtles is August to February, with females protected year round. Leatherback turtles (both sexes) are protected year round. It is illegal to interfere or capture nesting turtles, take or be in possession of turtle eggs, or take turtles smaller than 45cm. It is also illegal to use a speargun for the purpose of catching or killing any species of turtle or kill a turtle that has been tagged.

Research suggests there is little awareness or compliance with regulations with nests being regularly disturbed, small turtles available for purchase and spears being a favourable method of capture.

An awareness program would be beneficial to promote current legislation, strengthen compliance and assist the community in understanding more about Tonga's turtle population.