

COVID-19 Impact on Fishing and Coastal Communities: Russell Islands, Solomon Is.

Covid-19 update #2, 30 May 2020



Summary

Twenty-seven key informants were interviewed in nine Russell Island communities to determine recent changes that may indicate impacts of the COVID-19 situation on coastal and island communities in the Solomon Islands.

Results have shown that:

- There is an increase in internal migration as family members, students, and people that have been laid off employment in Honiara, are returning to their island communities.
- A lag in agricultural production is a concern for communities as returnees begin to plant gardens.
- There is an increase in fishing activities, including illegal fishing in traditionally owned fishing grounds.
- Marine managed areas (MMAs) have been fished by those unaware of management rules.
- Prices for fish have slightly increased.
- Rice is in shortage in some places and has increased in price. This is a concern villagers have for the future.
- The perennial lack of access to freshwater would be a particular sanitation issue in case of disease outbreak.
- The increasing population is a concern for those in charge of the over-stretched medical services.

Introduction

The pandemic caused by the virus, COVID-19 has had wide-ranging effects on coastal and island communities throughout the South Pacific. Solomon Islands has not recorded any cases of COVID-19 but the virus and the closing of international borders have had a trickle-down effect on all aspects of life, ranging from loss of employment to the closing of schools.

Staff from the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR) visited nine coastal communities in the Russell Islands to determine the immediate effects of the COVID-19 situation. Russell Islands are part of Central Province, located West of the main island of Guadalcanal in Solomon Islands, comprising two main islands, Pavuvu and Banika, with several smaller islets.

What did we do?

A questionnaire developed by Worldfish was used with 27 key informants from the 9 most populated Russell Islands' communities over a 3-day period. The total population for these communities is estimated at 4,450 individuals. The target communities and their estimated populations are listed:

Community	Pop.	Community	Pop
Louna	1,000	Lioselen	400
Hae	500	Baesen	300
Niu Mugava	100	Maraloun	450
Alokani	300	Karamoloun	300
Nukufero	1,100		

Our findings

Village Migration

Movement of people back into the villages are people native to these villages; students make up the greatest number, and others that had been away for years due to work commitments. Most of the returning adults have been laid off employment.

Community	No. of people returning to community	% Approx. population increase
Louna	90	9%
Hae	35	7%
Niu Mugava	2	2%
Alokan	30	10%
Nukufero	110	10%
Lioselen	28	7%
Baesen	6	2%
Maraloun	18	4%
Karamoloun	6	2%
TOTAL	325	7.1%

Food Security

All communities felt that they currently had enough food, which could stretch to enough food for those returning.

Gardening is the most common and most reliable method for people to produce more food. The most important foods in the village are cassava, potato, and wild swamp taro.

The primary marine and fisheries resources are fish, seashells, clams, and trochus.

If a staple food such as rice were to be in short supply, the communities would definitely feel the impact. A slight increase in population has a noticeable impact on village gardens. Family members returning to the community have no gardens; other villagers have to feed them while they cultivate their own. The concern is that root crops can take up to five months to mature before they can be harvested, depending on the species. This is thought of as a risk. However, they will continue to feed the returning families with what limited resources they have.

Fishing Pressure

More people are engaging in various fishing activities. The nearby run-down REPEL coconut plantation which has its main station on Banika Island (Yandina) has been experiencing a population increase. People from islands outside of the Russells have been moving to Yandina. These newcomers have been seen fishing the reefs customarily owned by the native people of the Russell Islands. This increase in pressure on the marine resources over the coming weeks and months is a big concern for the villagers. They have observed more fishing activities around their customary islands, coastal lagoons, and reefs.

It is possible that more fish is being caught. The few locals and people stationed in Yandina who buy fish from the fishermen at community level estimate around 25 – 50 percent increase in the amount of fish being caught.

Resource Management

Most of the native villagers and communities are aware of the marine managed areas (MMAs) around the Russell Islands, the majority in the western Russells.

There are two big settlements of people from other provinces that have settled on Pavuvu Island that have been there for more than 50 years, as well as three REPEL estates on REPEL land. Those living in these settlements and on the REPEL estates have knowledge and information about the marine managed areas (MMAs) in the western region of the Russell islands. However, people coming in because of the COVID19 situation have no knowledge of these sites and have been seen breaking the rules of the MMAs.

Communities with MMAs have noticed an increase in people breaking rules within the MMAs.

4 out of the 9 communities stated that the most common fisheries regulations being broken were the size limits for clams, crayfish, trochus, and coconut crabs.

There has been no raising of awareness by the west Russell local conservation committee

during the period of COVID19 so far. Each of the site communities has been told to look after their own MMAs, and any traditional management rules are communicated verbally to the community. Rules have not changed for the MMAs, but there have been incidents when villagers have had to chase intruders from other villages and the REPEL Estates from fishing within the tabu sites. However, this often happened before COVID19 as well.

Fish Sales

The sale of fish within the village depends on size. Fishermen price their catch on size and species. Currently, it is as normal and there have been no changes noticed by the villagers. The price is around \$5-30 / fish but this is negotiable.

Buying of fish by local buyers in the community has changed. Buying price in the past was \$10-12. Now, the price ranges from \$13-15 and is dependent on the type of fishing method used as well as the species caught. Fish caught from diving is paid at \$13/kg and fish caught on reefs, e.g. Snapper or Spanish mackerel, are paid \$15/kg. This is the current buying price value experienced at various communities.

Buying of fish from local fishermen for commercial sales in Honiara is increasing; buying of fish for consumption within the villages remains the same, as noticed across the 9 communities interviewed.

Changes in the price of staple foods

The price of rice according to respondents is slightly increasing. Before the price was \$10-12/kg. Now, prices of rice per kilogram has increased from \$12-15 depending on the brand of rice, e.g. Sol Rice is \$14/kg, Calrose rice is \$13/kg, etc.

The price of canned tuna fish has increased. Solomon Taiyo products, i.e. a medium sized tin of Solomon Blue has increased from \$6.50 - \$8.50/tin.

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Health and Sanitation

6 of the 9 communities do not possess a fresh water supply, relying on rainwater and well water for household duties. This poses a risk in case of infectious outbreaks, as proper hand washing, cleaning, and sanitising cannot be accomplished.

Additionally, there are only 2 operational health clinics for such a large population. This poses a second risk as access to medical supplies and facilities are limited.

The nurse in charge at Yandina estimates a population increase of 20% with new cases of malaria registering – this places pressure on medical supplies, which will need extra consideration for resupply by government.

Conclusions

While there have been no cases of COVID19 in the Solomon Islands, the knock on effects have certainly been felt in the Russell Islands. The temporary shutting of schools and the loss of employment have driven internal migration to the Russell Islands with the following implications:

- Increased pressure on health services may require increased medical supply and lack of water supplies could hinder sanitizing efforts in case of outbreak,
- Increased pressure on agricultural production until or unless planting can catch up,
- Increased fishing pressure on coastal resources and an increase in illegal fishing activities in traditional fishing grounds needs to be watched carefully – sustainable fisheries management should be reinforced,
- Increases in the prices of fresh fish and staple foods will affect some disproportionately e.g. those without access to fishing or farming.