

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FISHING AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES



Update #5: Vava'u Group, Tonga August 10, 2020

Summary

Ten respondents from seven villages in three districts in the outer island group of Vava'u in Tonga were interviewed to determine the associated impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic. Results from the surveys have indicated that:

- More than half of the respondents believe that the Covid-19 pandemic and related impacts have had a noticeable effect in their communities,
- Overall, no net migration was apparent,
- Food security is not an issue for the majority of respondents at this time, with the exception of a few respondents from the Outer Islands,
- There has been an increase in both fishing and farming activities,
- The important, cultural practice of sharing food amongst villagers continues,
- The price of tinned fish has increased in most of the villages surveyed,
- Over half the respondents believe that fisheries management rules are not being broken currently or are being broken less than before,
- The Special Management Areas (SMA) Program through the Ministry of Fisheries in Vava'u has assisted the community through increased access to information, knowledge of rules, increased abundance of marine life, and improved awareness of resource ownership by the community.



Introduction

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Kingdom of Tonga (population 103,252¹) declared a State of Emergency on March 21 and closed international borders on March 23. Although Tonga has zero recorded cases of Covid-19, preventative measures were taken to ensure the safety of the general population. A nationwide curfew from midnight to 5am extends daily, social gatherings have restrictions for indoor and outdoor events, and social distancing and good hygiene measures are advocated by the relevant authorities.

What did we do?

A rapid response survey questionnaire was designed to investigate the associated impacts the pandemic may have had on coastal and island communities. Staff from the Vava'u Environmental Protection Association (VEPA) conducted inperson interviews with ten key informants from some of the most remote islands in Tonga, the Vava'u Group (population 14,922²).

Nine males and one female respondent were interviewed from three districts: Neiafu (n=2), Outer Islands (n=7), and Eastern District (n=1), from May 27 to August 7. Respondents were from seven villages within the three districts: Falevai (n=1), Nuapapu (n=1), Hunga (n=2), Holeva (n=1), Ovaka (n=2), Taunga (n=1), and Makave (n=2). The surveyed communities are all involved in the Special Management Areas (SMA) Program currently ongoing in Vava'u.

Our Findings

Major Events

A majority of the respondents (70%) mentioned Covid-19 and the related restrictions as the major event in their community this year. This was also reported in five out of the seven villages.

Event	Male (M)	Female (F)	Total
Covid-19	6	1	7
None	3	0	3
Total	9	1	10

Most villages reported no or little migration; although in one village, fifty-two community members working and schooling away returned to their island community and in another, approximately fifty villagers returned to work and school away from their village.

Two respondents added that the Covid-19 restrictions had affected their ability to continue harvesting sea cucumber; one respondent mentioned their community was still recovering from the impacts of Tropical Cyclone Tino, which hit the nation in January; and one respondent reported that the restrictions had a positive effect by making the community safer through fewer social problems.

Food Security

Most of the informants (60%) reported there was enough or more than enough food available in the villages. Four respondents from the Outer Islands reported less food availability than last year, attributing this to Covid-19 restrictions, an increasing population, and the destruction of gardens by rampant pigs.

¹ Tonga 2011 Census of Population and Housing, Volume 2 Analytical Report

² Same above

Food available in village	Respondent
Big problem	1
Not enough	3
Enough	4
More than enough	2
Lots	0
Total	10

80% surveyed stated that the customary sharing of food amongst families and community members remained intact.

“People still value our traditional way of living and still share food with neighbours, especially on Sundays.”

The majority of respondents (90%) mentioned an increase in both farming and fishing activities, as well as 70% stating an additional reliance on buying produce from stores and local markets.

Half of the respondents indicated that there was no change in the price of rice; however, most of the respondents (80%) indicated an increase in the price of tinned fish.

Price of rice	Resp.	Price of Tinned Fish	Resp.
Increased	3	Increased	8
Decreased	0	Decreased	2
No change in price	5	No change in price	0
No answer	2	No answer	0
Total	10	Total	10

Fishing Pressure

90% of respondents reported more or a lot more people engaged in fishing activities, (Neiafu, as well as four out of the seven respondents from the Outer Islands). The rest (30%) believed that fishing pressure had remained the same or decreased.

“Due to Covid-19 restrictions, there is less food being sold at the market, the price of seafood being sold at the local market has increased, so many people tend to find daily food from the ocean.”

No. of people fishing now	Respondent
A lot less	1
Less	1
Same	1
More	6
A lot more	1
Total	10

90% of informants observed an increase in fish catches around the village, attributing this to their village Special Management Areas (SMAs). According to respondents, the SMAs have allowed stocks to return, reduced the number of outside fishers, and caused the communities to think more about their marine resources.

Resource Management

Most of the informants (60%) expressed that fisheries management rules were not being broken. The remaining believed that less people than before were breaking management rules.

No. of people breaking mgmt. rules	Resp.
None	6
Less people than before	4
Same	0
More people than before	0
No answer	0
Total	10

90% mentioned the SMA Program as a source of information for local rules, national regulations, as well as the reason for their increased catches.

“We have listed names of those who are legally permitted to fish within our SMA and those who are not, to ease patrolling.”

Potential Support Required

The majority of respondents stated financial stress (90%) as their biggest worry currently and half mentioned food availability concerns. Respondents were asked their views on the desired government support during the crisis. Further general support was identified,

including a vessel for patrolling the SMAs, provision of water tanks, assistance in repairing solar panels, improved communications, and additional qualified personnel for the medical centre.

Conclusion

The results from the Vava'u Group in Tonga have indicated that:

- Most respondents mentioned Covid-19 as the major event in their communities this year,
- Overall, there was no evidence of positive net migration,
- Food availability is an issue in some communities in the Outer Islands in Vava'u,

- Both fishing and farming activities have increased,
- Community sharing of food is still an important part of Tongan culture,
- Price of tinned fish has increased in most of the villages surveyed,
- Most respondents believe that fisheries management rules are not being broken currently or are being broken less,
- Informants believe that the ongoing SMA Program in Vava'u has increased community knowledge on management rules, and national regulations, as well as increasing fish species and numbers within the closed areas,
- The biggest concern for respondents was financial worries, followed by food availability.

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