

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON FISHING AND COASTAL COMMUNITIES



Update #9: Pohnpei, FSM 5 December 2020

Summary:

Fifteen respondents from twelve villages in three municipalities on Pohnpei Island in the Federated States of Micronesia were interviewed to investigate the associated impacts from the coronavirus pandemic on coastal and island communities. Results from the surveys indicated:

- All respondents were aware of the coronavirus pandemic,
- COVID-19 restrictions have affected the majority of those surveyed,
- Decreased village populations were reported by sixty percent,
- Food availability was not raised as a concern for the majority,
- Fishing and farming activities have increased according to over half of the respondents,
- Traditional sharing practices continue to occur throughout most of the villages surveyed,

- Prices of staple foods like tinned fish is reported to have increased by most, price of rice is reported to have increased by a third of respondents,
- Increased numbers of people fishing was reported by half of the respondents,
- Rule breaking of current fisheries management efforts was reported by over half of those surveyed,
- Family stress and requests for financial assistance were registered by about half of the informants.

Introduction:

As the coronavirus pandemic continues globally, trickle down effects in the Pacific are still impacting island nations with and without active cases. The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) (population 104,650¹) has had no cases of COVID-19 but, since the first survey results

¹ <https://www.fsmstatistics.fm/social/population-statistics/>



from Kosrae and Yap in June², international borders remain closed, and state government imposed restrictions and advisories are still in effect.

What did we do?

A rapid response survey questionnaire designed to investigate the associated impacts the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on coastal and island communities was conducted around Pohnpei Island (population 36,832³). Staff from the Locally Managed Marine Area Network of Pohnpei (PNI-LMMA) conducted phone surveys and face-to-face interviews with predominantly male, one female and four youth key informants from three municipalities: Kitti (n=6), Nett (n=4), and U (n=5).

Fifteen surveys from twelve villages were conducted from 26 June to 4 September 2020. From Kitti Municipality, Diadi Village (n=1), Enipein Pah (n=1), Pehleing (n=2), Rohi (n=1), and Salapwuk (n=1). From Nett Municipality, Lehdau Village (n=1), Palipowe (n=1), and Parem (n=2). From U Municipality, Awak Powe Village (n=1), Mwand (n=1), Rohi Powe (n=1), and Saladak (n=2). The majority of respondents were male (n=14), with only one female interviewed.

Our Findings

Major Events

Most of the informants (74%) stated that COVID-19 and its related impacts were the major event for the year. Respondents mentioned the closing of schools, travel restrictions, and the canceling of planned social gathering events, like sports and graduation ceremonies.

“People are really concerned about this COVID-19; in most households water dispensers are being displayed with soap for washing hands.”

The rest mentioned that they were aware of the pandemic but did not feel any changes had occurred to their lives and they were currently not concerned.

Event	Female (F)	Male (M)	Total
COVID-19	1	10	11
None	0	4	4
Total	1	14	15

Notably, just over half of those surveyed (60%) reported a decrease in village populations during this time. With the exception of Parem Island, outward migration numbers have been minimal, comprising of ten individuals or less, or an average of -9% per community. Due to its close proximity to Pohnpei, residents from the mainland were able to return to the island when social distancing measures were implemented. Three out of four villages in U district reported no changes in their village populations.

Food Security

The majority felt that currently there was enough food available for all villagers. The one individual interviewed from Salapwuk Village reported more than enough food. One individual from Parem Island reported that food availability was a big problem, however, the other respondent from Parem Island reported that there was enough food available for all. These opposing views were attributed to a difference in employment. Employment on mainland Pohnpei was more likely negatively affected than those who rely on fisheries activities around Parem Island for full time employment.

Food available in village	F	M	Total	%
Big problem	0	1	1	7%
Not enough	0	0	0	0%
Enough	1	12	13	86%
More than enough	0	1	1	7%
Lots	0	0	0	0%
Total	1	14	15	100%

Over half of those surveyed (60%) observed an increase in both fishing and farming activities. A majority (74%) reported no changes in traditional sharing practices, two individuals (14%) reported increased buying from stores, and one mentioned food preservation techniques.

“We still use the old method like buried breadfruit and stuff to make mahr (fermented breadfruit). We also manage to salt some fish in a bucket because we don’t have a freezer.”

² LMMA Network, KCSO and TRCT. 2020. Covid19 Update #3: FSM. 15 June 2020. LMMA Network

³ <https://www.fsmstatistics.fm/social/population-statistics/>

The majority (67%) reported no changes in the price of rice, whilst a third (27%) reported an increase in the price. A majority (74%) reported an increase in the price of tinned fish, whilst about twenty percent reported no changes in the price of tinned fish.

Price of rice	Resp.	Price of tinned fish	Resp.
Increased	4	Increased	11
Decreased	0	Decreased	0
No change in price	10	No change in price	3
No answer	1	No answer	1
Total	15	Total	15

Fishing Pressure

Over half of the informants (53%) observed people fishing more or a lot more during the time of the surveys. Forty percent reported no changes, and only one informant observed less fishing pressure during this time..

No. of people fishing now	F	M	Total	%
A lot less	0	0	0	0%
Less	0	1	1	7%
Same	0	6	6	40%
More	1	6	7	46%
A lot more	0	1	1	7%
Total	1	14	15	100%

“Ever since COVID hit, prices on pelagic fish has gone up so more people are buying reef fish, causing locals to [go] night spearfishing more often.”

Resource Management

73% percent of those surveyed believed that fisheries management rule breaking was not happening, the same or less than before, with about a third of all respondents (27%) indicating they thought that more people than normal were breaking fisheries management rules.

No. of people breaking mgmt. rules	Total	%
None	6	40%
Less people than before	3	20%
Same	2	13%
More than before	4	27%
Total	15	100%

“People share information that is changing so people are aware of news and everything.”

Informants listed the most common fisheries management rules that were being broken; these included the harvesting of undersized fish, catching of banned species, and poaching from marine protected areas (MPAs).

Additionally, proactive marine management measures suggested by informants included prosecuting those caught breaching MPA rules, the provision of sound advice on limiting fish catches, as well as the need to raise awareness on the importance of local compliance and enforcement.

Potential Support Required

When asked about current stressors in their lives, just over half (53%) mentioned family stress, followed by financial worries and food availability each mentioned by six respondents (40%).

When posed with the question, “if you had to ask for any assistance from government during this time, what would it be?” Eight respondents (53%) requested financial assistance, two (13%) mentioned improved infrastructure like school repairs and water tanks, two respondents (13%) requested a decrease in the price of imported goods, one respondent mentioned assistance with fishing gear, and one respondent requested that the authorities carry out their promises. The rest did not answer the question.

Conclusion:

At the time of the surveys, results from Pohnpei have indicated:

- All surveyed were aware of the coronavirus pandemic.
- COVID-19 restrictions have affected the majority of respondents.
- Outward migration was reported by over half of those surveyed.
- Village populations decreased by an average of 9% in those communities reporting outward migration.
- Food availability is not reported as a problem for the majority.
- Farming and fishing activities have increased according to half of the informants.

- Traditional sharing practices have not been affected.
- The price of tinned fish is generally reported to have increased and a third of informants reported an increase in the price of rice.
- Fishing activities have increased as observed by half of those surveyed.
- The most common concern was family stress, indicated by half of the informants.
- When asked about potential support, financial assistance was mentioned by half of those surveyed.

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