

International Waters Program — Cook Islands

Raea T*

National Coordinator IWPCOOKS, Cook Islands

Introduction

The International Waters Project (IWP), which is implementing the 'The Strategic Action Program for the International Waters of the Pacific Small Island Developing States' (SAP), involves 14 participating Pacific Islands countries: Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The IWP is intended to address the *root causes* of degradation in the Pacific Islands international waters. It is intended to do this through the use of regionally consistent, country-driven, targeted actions that integrate development and environment needs (GEF/UNDP 1999). The IWP has two main components: (i) an oceanic component that focuses on the management and conservation of tuna stocks in the western central Pacific; and (ii) a coastal component that focuses on integrated coastal watershed management.

The coastal component of the IWP is aimed at national and community-level actions to address priority environmental concerns relating to:

- marine and freshwater quality
- habitat modification and degradation
- unsustainable use of living marine resources.

To address these concerns at the local level, the IWP will support the establishment of pilot or demonstration projects, one in each of the 14 participating countries. Each community-based pilot project is intended to address the root causes of degradation affecting one or more of the following four focal areas:

- Marine protected areas
- Coastal fisheries
- Freshwater resources
- Waste reduction.

Under the IWP in the Cook Islands, a pilot project has been established to address problems related to the protection of freshwater resources. The project is being hosted by Takuvaine village

and provides a case study for addressing watershed management generally in the Cook Islands.

Objectives

The main objective of the Cook Islands IWP is to find cost-effective ways to ensure access to clean and safe drinking water in Takuvaine and eventually throughout the rest of Rarotonga. The IWP Local Project Committee has identified that a Water Catchment Management Plan could offer a cost-effective and sustainable solution.

The Problem

As in many Pacific Island countries, there is currently no chemical water treatment in Rarotonga.

Water testing has found that the quality of tap water falls below international safety standards with faecal coliform exceeding acceptable levels at most intakes around Rarotonga. Tests are now consistently returning positive for faecal coliform from the faeces of warm-blooded animals. According to the IWP and community analysis of the possible causes of the problem, it appears that unlimited and uncontrolled access to the catchments is the main cause to the entire problem along with an unaware general public of the area's fragility.

An economic valuation study commissioned by the Cook Islands IWP estimates that water pollution is costing this island of 10,000 people around \$7.4 million every year.

Challenges

Some challenges that IWP Cook Islands has encountered during the implementation of the project include:

- selling the IWP concept of community ownership of the project
- lack of community structure and leadership
- lack of respect for traditional systems and protocols
- managing community expectations that the money would be spent on infrastructure
- convincing communities that their drinking freshwater is contaminated with e-coli bacteria
- convincing the community that the presence of humans in the catchments is a threat to the quality of drinking water
- ensuring that everyone in the community has a say in decision-making
- lack of collaboration amongst water testing agencies.

Over the past three years a lot of IWP time was spent on community engagements in the form of meetings, workshops, working bees and even facilitating social events. The engagement process was mostly on selling the concept, which is contrary to the norm where governments use to

provide infrastructure, equipment or the control over project funds being handed to the community as a mean of measuring project progress or success.

The two-pronged approach making up the IWP-concept focuses on community-base initiatives supported by the strengthening and collaboration of national institutions, which is of particular interest as compared to other approaches being employed by other government-facilitated projects in the past.

For so long, government has been doing all the thinking and planning without community inputs, but the expectation was on the community to comply or to implement the plans. Of course, most of these kinds of initiatives have failed. Those that have survived did not go far mostly because funds have run out, which were normally the main incentives used along with empty promises.

Actions

The goal of the IWP project in the Cook Islands is to *provide access to good quality drinking water for the Takuvaine Community as well as to the rest of the communities on the Island of Rarotonga*. And the objectives are to develop a management plan for the catchments of Takuvaine and that of the rest of Rarotonga.

To achieve its objectives and stated output as per the project monitoring plan, IWP Cook Islands has developed a communications strategy. The objective of the strategy is to help the wider public and key decision-makers to understand the objectives, processes and benefits of the project at the community and national level.

The communication activities included the development of project brochures, radio and a television program aimed at promoting the management plan before it is fully enforced.

The IWP concept is being used by other organisations within the community such as the women's organisation and the local government to develop work programs.

A community structure is now being introduced back into the community. The Pu Tapere (village leader to represent the two chiefs) has now been elected and is slowly gaining the respect from community members and recognition from the national government.

There was a lot of publicity on the project and the work of the committee through the local and some international media. This has done tremendously well in attracting back community interest.

Four agencies now conduct water quality testing. However, the result could not be compared as the testing and collection protocols were not the same. IWP facilitated the tabulation of the Ministry of Public Health's results from the past ten years and is now is facilitating the development of a national water testing standard and protocols.

While the community has accepted that the water is contaminated, they have opted for a low-cost solution by developing a management plan for the for the Takuvaine catchments. This will serve as a pilot for the rest of Rarotonga's catchments. While the Management plan is yet to be implemented, the growers using the catchments have prohibited the use of chemicals in forms of pesticides and fertilisers within the catchments. They have also banned animals from the area. Already, some of them have started to monitor the activities of tourists and visitors within the catchments.

Achievements

The Cook Islands IWP has achieved the following at the pilot communities:

- Increased social interaction among the people in the pilot community especially amongst landowners and growers to address freshwater quality issues
- Increased capacity to identify and address the root causes of environmental problems
- Sharing new skills and products from their demonstration activities helped to increase a sense of belonging and pride in their own village. The village has been highlighted by the local and international media.

At the national level, the IWP has acted as a catalyst to increase integration and improved cooperation among all stakeholders dealing with freshwater issues. Also at the national level the economic valuation study has greatly assisted in rallying government support of the project and will come up with a policies on freshwater management for the Cook Islands.