

CORAL COAST, FIJI (9 July 2010)

Strengthening the role of marine education and traditional knowledge is crucial to the future of sustainable development in the Pacific region, according to the 2010 International Pacific Marine Education Network (IPMEN) conference. Held at Outrigger on the Lagoon, Viti Levu, Fiji Islands, the three-day conference concluded today with several key outcomes, including commitments from UNESCO and the Fiji Ministry of Education to undertake immediate initiatives to make this a reality.

“Pacific Islanders, who are custodians of the rich but threatened marine biodiversity in the region, have for centuries applied customary management practices in the traditional governance of their fishing grounds,” noted associate professor Joeli Veitayaki, coordinator of the Marine Studies Division at the University of the South Pacific (USP). “While remnants of the system remain today, the people have witnessed increasing threats as they have to share their resources with other people with whom they must now work to ensure its sustainability.”

Hosted by the USP Marine Studies Division and Institute of Applied Science, the conference brought together 87 participants from a dozen countries to address ways marine education can help Pacific communities prepare for the new millennium. The conference topics included climate change impacts on Pacific children, incorporating traditional and place-based knowledge to build healthy coastal communities, the changing role of women in fisheries, and gaps in existing Pacific marine education.

Dr. Jan H. Steffen, science program officer, UNESCO Office for the Pacific States, headquartered in Apia, Samoa, acknowledged and underlined the importance of traditional value systems, natural and ecological knowledge and marine education as cornerstones for sustainable development of Pacific Island countries. “Over the last decade, UNESCO has been working with Pacific communities and governments on a range of programs closely related to the theme of the conference,” he noted. These include documentation of traditional knowledge, marine biodiversity conservation in Biosphere Reserves, traditional navigation and boat building, school-based monitoring of coastal erosion and coastal community education, and the conservation of Pacific cultural and natural heritage among others. Linking the recommendations by the conference participants to current regional efforts, Steffen offered IPMEN the opportunity to become part of the capacity-building program under the Pacific cultural and natural heritage hub, which is currently under development. The hub will serve as a web portal and clearinghouse to facilitate the flow of information to educators, researchers, donors and other interested parties on publications, education and outreach resources and capacity-building projects in the Pacific Islands.

On the local level, the Fiji government supported the goals of IPMEN with a commitment to include marine education into Fiji’s school curriculum. Mr. Nemani Drova, Fiji Ministry of Education’s Curriculum Development Unit Director, said he would write a proposal to his Minister, Mr. Bole, before November 2010 to introduce marine science as an academic subject in Fiji’s secondary schools. He is hopeful that the Ministry will embrace the idea and allow a Cabinet paper to be written, with the development of relevant curriculum by 2011. Fiji currently does not include marine education in its primary and secondary curriculum although most of the students come from coastal villages or are connected to them.

The conference ended with participants committing to undertake various projects. One

project is a combined youth forum with Fijian school students and Coorparoo Secondary College, Brisbane, Australia. The forum will create opportunities for the students to share learning, gain an understanding of traditional values and forge a better future for Pacific marine life.

IPMEN is a group of marine educators throughout the Pacific. It aims to foster collaborative relationships that will lead to the creation of resources, programs, training and leadership necessary to build ocean literacy at every level of society in the Pacific region. Countries and territories represented at the 2010 conference included Australia, Canada, Chile, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Hawaii, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Marshall Islands, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Peru and the United States,. The 2010 IPMEN conference presentations will be accessible by web at www.coexploration.com. The next IPMEN biennial conference to be held in Chile will open opportunities to Latin American countries to share their cultural heritage and commitment towards the Pacific Ocean for an East-West dialogue about sustainability of the marine ecosystems and climate change challenges.

The 2010 conference was sponsored by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, US National Marine Educators Association, Papua New Guinea National Fisheries Authority and the University of the South Pacific. Webcasting was provided by the College of Exploration. Additional support was provided by Nautilus Educational (Australia), Conservation International, Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area (FLMMA) Network, Centro AquaSendas -COPAS (Chile), BriTer Solutions (Australia), SeaWeb and the International Ocean Institute, among others. For more information, go to www.ipmen.net.



The IPMEN conference included visits to community villages and classrooms and to learn about ongoing marine education and conservation projects. Pictured is Australian Grade 2 student Aurora Davey, who accompanied her mother to the conference, with school children at Tagaqe District School. The visit has provided a chance for links between the Fiji school and Aurora's school. (photo courtesy of Natalie Davey)



A dozen IPMEN conference participants from Hawaii, Japan, Saipan, United States, Indonesia and Australia visited Tagaq District School. Other participants chose to visit other villages and marine conservation projects during the field trip component of the conference. (photo courtesy of Natalie Davey)