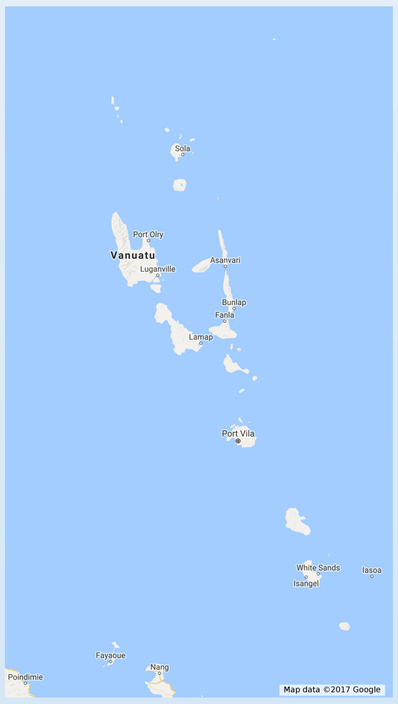
Updating knowledge and increasing awareness of dugongs and seagrass in Vanuatu

Project Summary

Vanuatu is a pacific island nation that lies on the most easterly edge of the dugong range. It is made up of 83 volcanic islands. VESS is working with the Vanuatu Fisheries Department and the Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation to update the information about the distribution of dugongs and seagrasses in Vanuatu and the threats they face. There has only been one previous study on dugongs in Vanuatu in 1988 consequently we know very little about them. Our aims in this project are to update the information of the distribution of dugongs and seagrass and to increase awareness about them within Vanuatu. VESS will also work with the government departments to devise a National Plan of Action for Dugongs and their Seagrass habitats.



Main Activities

We are conducting the CMS standardised dugong catch / by-catch questionnaire survey throughout Vanuatu to gather information on dugongs and seagrass areas. We have adapted the questionnaire to include information about tourism and dugongs as tourism has been cited as a potential threat to dugongs in Vanuatu. We will use the information to create a map of dugong hotspots where there are significant populations of dugongs coinciding with threats to their survival. We will then conduct a campaign to increase awareness about dugongs and seagrasses and how the communities can contribute to their conservation. There will be a national campaign as well as workshops conducted in the dugong hotspots. The results of the survey will also contribute to developing the policies within the dugong and seagrass Action Plan.

Results

Our dugong survey team, consisting of our Project Scientists and undergraduate students from the University of the South Pacific, has been travelling around Vanuatu to conduct the questionnaire survey. So far they have visited 28 islands and conducted over 500 interviews. Whilst the results are yet to be analysed, it is clear that dugongs are still seen relatively commonly around most of the islands of Vanuatu. The majority of people know what dugongs and seagrass areas are, that they play important roles within the ecosystem and that dugongs are protected under Vanuatu law. However there is relatively little knowledge within the communities of the basic biology and ecology of dugongs (and even less so of seagrass) or of the ecosystem services they provide locally or globally.

Mother and two calves photographed from a helicopter

Conducting interviews in the villages

Looking at the posters and books given out during the survey

Interviewing fishers

Two marine science graduates employed by VESS

Next Steps & Lessons Learned

We will be analyzing the data collected during the questionnaire survey creating the map of dugong hotspots in the next few weeks. We will then start our awareness campaign in earnest. Workshops will be organized with the Vanuatu government departments and other NGOs to create The National Plan of Action for Dugongs and their Seagrass Habitats. We are also in the process of applying for further funding to extend the activities of this project. We are close to finalizing a grant agreement with the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund to conduct aerial surveys of dugongs using drones and begin a Seagrass monitoring programme in Vanuatu with communities using the Seagrass Watch methodology.

About Our Organization

The Vanuatu Environmental Science Society is a small local NGO based in Vanuatu, which was established in 2014. Our purpose is to promote science in the fields of conservation, environmental protection and sustainable development within Vanuatu. We believe using science allows communities to make informed choices so they can live harmoniously with their environment. Our aims are to share scientific information with communities in a form they can understand and to fill knowledge gaps where the science is missing with scientifically robust studies, whilst supporting Ni-Vanuatu scientists.