

Country Overview: Vanuatu

Introduction

The Vanuatu Archipelago comprises more than 80 islands in the Southwest Pacific, and is surrounded by a narrow band of fringing reef generally less than 100 m wide. Its territory includes 680,220 km² of ocean area and two national marine reserves —President Coolidge and Million Dollar Point in Santo.

The majority of the local population are rural and rely on natural resources for their food and livelihoods. Most natural resources are managed by communities with a long history of traditional management.

Dugong Population

The dugong populations in Vanuatu are fragmented and the archipelago forms the eastern extent of the species' range. Only one survey has been carried out to assess the distribution, abundance, cultural importance and threats faced by dugongs in Vanuatu. This 1987 study, involving an aerial survey and postal questionnaire, indicated that dugongs exist in small groups from Aneityum in the south to the Torres Islands in the north. Hence, the main information gap relates to seagrass and dugong distribution.

Seagrass Habitat

There have been two assessments of seagrasses in Vanuatu as part of wider biodiversity surveys published in 1990 and 2011, and nine species have been identified, but a complete scientific evaluation of seagrasses in Vanuatu has not been conducted; therefore, the total area of seagrass beds and the level of threat to both dugongs and seagrasses remain unknown.

Cultural Significance

Dugongs have traditionally been hunted in Vanuatu for their meat and oil, and other parts have been known to be used in handicrafts. However, in some areas Dugongs are protected by customary seasonal restrictions known as "tabu", which aim to ensure the sustainability of natural resources. In the late 1980s dugongs were thought to be hunted mainly in southeast Malakula, northern Epi and parts of Efate, but dugong meat was not considered to be a major component of the local diet.

Current Threats and Conservation Measures

Known threats to dugongs in Vanuatu include targeted hunting and incidental by-catch, boat strikes and excessive tourist interaction. There has been substantial growth in the human population living along the coast since the 1987 survey, and other changes may include an increase in the use of monofilament nets and coastal developments occurring around Efate and Santo, along with increases in small boat traffic.

With the growth in the tourism industry, some communities have attempted to domesticate dugongs by capturing them and fastening a rope to their tails, tethering them in the shallows and

attempting to feed them, the intention being to allow people to swim with them as a tourist attraction.

Developments for housing and tourist facilities since the late 1990s have impacted coastal areas and dugong habitats. Environmental Impact Assessment legislation was introduced in Vanuatu in 2003, but was considered ineffective until amendments were made in 2010. In more remote areas there is limited awareness of the legislation covering dugongs, however, or the ecological services provided by seagrasses.

Key legislation	Content
Fisheries Act No. 55 of 2005	Established Vanuatu's entire EEZ as a marine mammal sanctuary. Regulates international trade in marine mammals.
Foreshore Development Act of 1976	Regulates the development on the foreshore of the coast of any island in Vanuatu. In 2010, the Foreshore Development purpose was linked to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) legislation, making the issuance of permits conditional of satisfactory EIA reporting.
Environmental Protection and Conservation Act (EPCA) of 2010 (formerly Environmental Management and Conservation Act (EMCA) of 2003)	Sets out the requirements for EIAs
Constitution of Vanuatu	Enshrines traditional land tenure as "all land in the Republic belongs to the indigenous customary owners and their descendants"
Land Reform Act	Defines "land" to include "land extending to the seaside of any offshore reef but no further."

GEF Projects

The projects in Vanuatu aim to enhance the effectiveness of efforts to conserve dugongs and seagrasses through data gathering and policy work (VU1). Data deficiencies have prevented the successful integration of dugong and seagrass conservation into relevant national legislation on the use of marine resources and coastal development, including marine tourism development. VU1 will identify dugong hotspots following a desk review of previous assessments and results from the Dugong MoU Dugong survey/questionnaire conducted by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS).

The National Facilitating Committee (NFC) to be established under VU2 is designed as a platform for engaging governmental and non-governmental organisations and relevant businesses in dugong and seagrass conservation. The NFC will aim to raise the awareness of these groups of the importance and status of dugongs and seagrasses with a view to ensuring wide support for the National Plan for Conservation of Dugongs and their Seagrass Habitats (developed under VU1).

The NFC will: advise on the specific activities to be carried out as part of the Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project, taking into account the country's specific context; meet and regularly review

project progress on the ground; and communicate progress and key issues to the Executive Project Steering Committee (EPSC).

Project Partners

Project	Title	Partner
VU1	Improving policies for dugongs and seagrasses in Vanuatu through research and awareness-raising	The Vanuatu Environmental Science Society (VESS)
VU2	National Facilitating Committee for the GEF Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project	The Vanuatu Environmental Science Society Committee Inc. (VESS)