

Perspective: Local communities and tourism operators partner to establish Fiji's largest Marine Conservation Park

Editor's note: Sangeeta Mangubhai is director of the Fiji office of the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS-Fiji). WCS-Fiji has supported local communities and the Fijian Government in better managing the Vatu-i-Ra Seascape since WCS opened an office in Fiji in 2001.

By **Sangeeta Mangubhai**

The Vatu-i-Ra seascape in Fiji, including and surrounding Vatu-i-Ra Island, lies between Fiji's two main islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. It includes an extraordinary 27,000 km² of forests, mangroves, seagrass meadows, reefs, deep channels, and seamounts.

The Vatu-i-Ra seascape is home to the largest population of nesting hawksbill turtles in Fiji as well as green and loggerhead turtles. It is one of the few remaining locations for the highly prized but globally endangered humphead wrasse (*varivoce* in Fijian) and bumphead parrotfish (*kalía*). Local people thrill to frequent sightings of resident pilot whales and dolphins as well as humpback whales passing through on their annual migrations. Strong currents run through the deep Vatu-i-Ra channel, nourishing a magnificent diversity of more than 300 coral and 1000 fish species. These in turn sustain breeding colonies of seabirds, including a population of more than 20,000 pairs of black noddies.

The traditional owners of Vatu-i-Ra Island are the Navuani social unit (*or mataqali*) of the Nagilogilo clan (*yavusa*), who reside in the villages of Nasau and Navuniivi within the larger Nakorotubu District in Ra Province. The Nagilogilo clan has strong cultural and historical ties to the island, as it was believed to be an old village site.

The traditional fishing ground (*qoliqoli*) surrounding Vatu-i-Ra Island is shared by all 28 villages in the Nakorotubu District, and supports a rich diversity of marine life. The waters are popular with a range of recreational uses including game fishing, snorkeling, and diving. The area is a world-class diving destination and attracts approximately 36,000 tourists per year. An [economic valuation in 2014](#) estimated the annual value of tourism and fisheries in the seascape at FJ\$72 million (US\$34 million).

Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park

In 2012 the waters immediately surrounding Vatu-i-Ra Island – about 110 km² in area – were designated a traditional *tabu* area (or periodically harvested closure) by the 28 villages of Nakorotubu District in Ra Province. However, because poaching by outside fishers remains a threat, WCS-Fiji and the Ra Provincial Office have worked since 2015 with communities from the district to create a formal protected area for these waters – providing additional protection for both the unique natural heritage and the associated local culture and way of life.

The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park was formally designated by the villages in 2018. Its boundaries encompass Vatu-i-Ra Island and the surrounding fringing coral reefs, lagoons, pinnacles, and shallow and deepwater habitat. The MPA is Fiji's largest fully protected Marine Conservation Park.

In May 2018, a management plan was established for Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park at a formal ceremony at the Ra Provincial Office, officiated by the Permanent Secretary for Fiji's Ministry of iTaukei (indigenous Fijian) Affairs, Mr. Naipote Katonitabua. The management plan was signed and endorsed by:

- Traditional leaders and representatives from the community;
- The national ministries of iTaukei Affairs, Fisheries, and Environment;
- Suncoast Tourism, a consortium representing tourism operators Volivoli Beach Resort, Wananavu

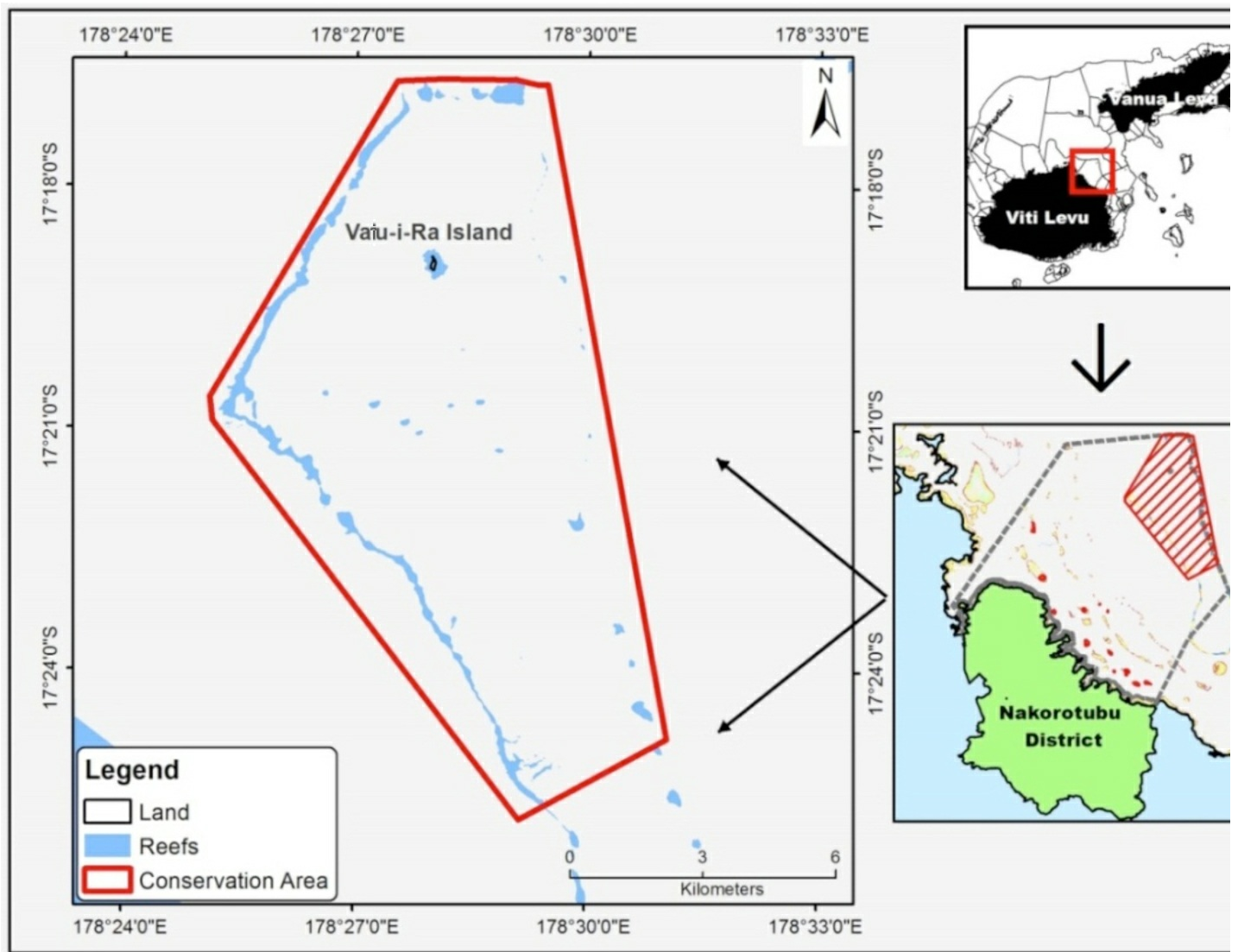


Figure. Boundaries of Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park

- Beach Resort, and NAI'A Cruises Fiji;
- The Ra Provincial Office; and
- WCS.

Any forms of destructive or extractive activities are strictly prohibited in the Park. In addition, the Fijian Ministry of Fisheries ensures that fishing licenses given out for Ra Province exclude the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park. The MPA has five main objectives:

1. Protect the unique biodiversity of the island and the surrounding reefs;
2. Protect the unique cultural history of the area;
3. Protect critical breeding grounds for fish so that the spillover from this Conservation Park supports community fisheries in the adjacent *qoliqoli*;
4. Establish a voluntary mechanism through sustainable tourism that will ensure the sustainable financing of the Conservation Park while supporting sustainable development of resource owners; and
5. Establish Vatu-i-Ra as the leading Conservation Park for Fiji and the wider South Pacific.

Sustainable financing to support the Conservation Park and community development

To support implementation of the Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park management plan, the three members of Suncoast Tourism have established a "voluntary contribution to conservation" scheme. Divers and other visitors to the Park can pay a voluntary contribution of FJ\$15 (US\$7) that is valid for a year. The revenue will be placed into a Trust Fund, with 30% of the fund allocated to support day-to-day management of the Conservation Park. The remainder will support education for tertiary students from Nakorotubu District.

The park contribution is voluntary rather than mandatory because, under Fiji's Surfing Areas Decree of 2010, communities cannot charge fees for watersports within customary fishing grounds. The FJ\$15 amount was based on similar tourism-related charges in other parts of Fiji, and was what the tourism sector felt initially they could sell to their clients (tourists visiting the Park). Similar to other parts of Fiji, the park's management may eventually look at increasing the contribution amount.

The Conservation Park has a seven-member Management Committee that oversees the park's management (with five representatives from the community, one from tourism, and one from NGOs; the Ra Provincial Office provides secretarial support). A three-member Board of Trustees – individuals who have agreed to serve on the board in their individual capacity – oversees the Trust Fund to ensure it complies with the terms of the Trust Deed developed by the Fiji Environmental Law Association.

In early 2018, the Board of Trustees endorsed its first education grants to 18 students from the Nakorotubu District studying medicine, law, human resource management, business, language, engineering, and environmental management. It is hoped that the fund, if managed in an open and transparent way, will contribute to the conservation of this highly diverse area, protect the cultural and historical values that are important to local communities, and support education and community development that improve the quality of life and living standards of resource owners and communities in the Nakorotubu District.

Given the level of engagement with communities around the use of this kind of mechanism, it is one of the most promising options for protecting marine areas while also providing a revenue stream for communities.

For more information:

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Note: The Vatu-i-Ra Conservation Park is supported by the Pacific Community's RESCCUE (Restoration of ecosystem services and adaptation to climate change) project to promote marine conservation and sustainable coastal fisheries management in one of the Pacific's great wild places, the Vatu-i-Ra Seascape. The RESCCUE project is implemented by the Pacific Community and funded by the French Development Agency and the French Global Environment Facility over a five-year period (2014-2018). The goal of RESCCUE is to contribute to increasing the resilience of Pacific Island Countries and Territories in the context of global changes, resorting especially to economic analysis and innovative funding mechanisms. RESCCUE operates on seven pilot sites in Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Vanuatu.

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