

More data needed for decisions on seabed minerals

COLLECTING more information about the marine environment is a "critical need" if people are to make informed decisions about seabed mining, said the director general of an environmental programme in the Pacific.

Concerns about the possible impacts of deep sea mining activities in the Pacific region, including the Cook Islands, have been the focus of consultations held by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC) and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).

As part of this ongoing work SOPAC, SPC's Applied Geoscience and Technology Division, co-hosted a regional training workshop with SPREP on the environmental impacts of deep sea minerals activities from 9-13th December 2013 at the Tanoa International Hotel in Nadi, Fiji.

The Cook Islands were represented at this regional training workshop by Liz Koteka from the Office of the Prime Minister, Teherii Koteka (Debate winner), Vavia Tangatataia from the National Environment Service, Teina MacKenzie from Te Ipukarea Society and Paul Lynch and Alex Herman of the Seabed Minerals Authority.

SPREP director general David Sheppard said there is a critical need for more baseline environmental data to be collected to enable Pacific countries to ensure informed decision making and strengthen the responsible management of their deep sea mineral resources.

"SPREP as the environmental agency is committed to partnering with SPC and SOPAC to try to bring more environmental information to the table. But the companies themselves need to allocate money for independent scientific studies of the biodiversity and the environment in the deep sea. There is good understanding of the mineral deposits but we need to have the same level of information of the deep sea ecosystems where they occur.

While no deep sea mining activities have yet taken place, the workshop aimed to identify and assess national and regional environmental management needs and to develop a process for strengthened strategic planning and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA's) before any deep sea mining activities occur.

Two government officials, one each from the environment and mineral development agencies of each of the 15 Pacific ACP States, and representatives from Civil Society were also invited.

According to a SOPAC release, this workshop was part of the ongoing work of the SPC-EU Pacific Deep Sea Minerals Project to build national capacity and greater public awareness of the key issues related to the development and management of deep sea mineral resources in the Pacific.

Sheppard said seabed mining needs to be considered within the wider context of the marine environment and its resources.

"To date much of the discussion has been focussed on project level EIA but this needs to be done within a wider context of strategic plans and assessments such as marine spatial planning, cost benefit analysis and sustainability appraisals. We need to consider deep sea mining as only one of the potential uses of our ocean resources and consider it in an integrated way along other uses such as conservation, fisheries and tourism paying particular attention to accumulative impacts, setting acceptable thresholds, equity of benefits and long term sustainability."

Sheppard said the Nadi workshop was a critical step forward to improve knowledge and co-operation across the region.

"The aim is to get key stakeholders, and that includes civil society, environmental experts in the governments of Pacific countries, and also those people that are knowledgeable in this area. So we'd like to have a cross-section to have quality participation and to really come

out with some useful recommendations as we go forward.

"But we need to proceed cautiously in line with the precautionary approach especially since this is an activity that has not been carried out anywhere in the world and ensure that public consultation and participation in decision making is at the core of this process."

SOPAC director, professor Mike Petterson, says the workshop was also held to address poor public awareness about deep sea minerals and the possible impacts of mining.

"While it is true that we still face a lot of 'unknowns' there are also many 'knowns' and the Nadi workshop will help us to learn from some of world's leading experts on the deep sea en-

vironment," he said prior to the workshop. "As a region we need to use this best current knowledge to put in place regulatory measures before any seabed mining starts. By proactively agreeing common standards and tools across the Pacific, we can empower member countries to protect their marine environments and apply the precautionary approach, whilst exploring the economic opportunity presented by their seabed minerals.

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as a template for conducting environmental impact assessment before any seabed mining commences. But, I have to stress that, while SOPAC will continue to play an important role in helping countries to

agree to common standards, the ultimate responsibility for protecting the marine environment inevitably lies with Pacific Island countries themselves, not regional agencies like SPC."

Dr Malcolm Clark, principal scientist at New Zealand's National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) says many of the most damaging impacts of seabed mining will occur at the seafloor, and in most cases this will be too deep to directly affect Pacific Island fisheries.

"It is important to ensure that mining doesn't occur in known spawning areas or regions where small fish are abundant. Knowledge of the nature and extent of sediment plumes generated by the seafloor mining operation must be assessed before mining starts. The discharge of processed waters also needs to be carefully understood, and should occur deeper than the depth of fisheries and other important animals," he said.

Currently the SPC-EU Deep Sea Minerals Project provides

the only means for Pacific Island countries to work together to manage and minimise any potential environmental impacts from future deep sea mining activities, according to SOPAC.

Akuila Tawake, the manager of the SPC-EU Deep Sea Minerals Project, says this regional approach will help Pacific Island countries to avoid irresponsible mining practices.

"We are encouraging Pacific Island countries to move away from what we call a 'race to the bottom' scenario, where countries have to work on their own and compete against each other. I think that's a bad scenario for the whole region. We want them to work together, against a background of limited resources, and limited knowledge that they have, so we can pool those resources together and strengthen our policy and our legislation and our capacity to be able to fully and meaningfully engage in this new industry," he says.

■ SOPAC release



Left to right: TIS executive member Teina Mackenzie, EU project manager Akuila Tawake, debate winner Teherenui Koteka, EU Ambassador Andrew Jacobs, Teherenui's mother Elizabeth Wright and EU's Attaché for Natural Resources and Infrastructure Thierry Catteau at the regional training workshop with SPREP on the environmental impacts of deep sea minerals activities from 9-13th December 2013 at the Tanoa International Hotel in Nadi, Fiji. 13120326

Radio to feature in donor meeting

A SERIES of radio talkback shows and interviews will be held with local leaders and international donor partners during a meeting next month.

The Cook Islands will soon be hosting government representatives from China, New Zealand and Australia, plus officials from development agencies such as the United Nations, European Union and Asian Development Bank.

The Development Partners meeting is an annual event designed to update donors and build confidence in how their money is being used.

A feature of this year's meeting, which runs from February 10-14, will be the use of radio communication.

Tamara File, from the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management's Development Coordination Division (DCD), said talkback shows are planned to air in Rarotonga on February 11 and in Atiu the next day.

Interviews with leaders on local and international development issues will also be recorded and broadcast on Radio Cook Islands, Radio 88 FM and Matariki FM.

File said the meeting happens to

be running at the same time as World Radio Day (February 13), which aims to improve international co-operation between broadcasters.

"World Radio Day is a way of celebrating radio media and how important it is. It was used way back during the war, long before television became what it is," File said.

The global event is also designed to encourage major networks and community radio stations to promote access to information, freedom of expression and gender equality over the airwaves.

File said the DCD is looking for young people, particularly women, who are interested in learning more about radio.

These people will have the chance to carry out interviews during the donor meeting and to gain some experience in broadcasting.

Those interested, including radio stations willing to provide resources and contribute to World Radio Day in the Cook Islands, should contact File at tamara.file@cookislands.gov.ck or phone 29521.

■ Ben Chapman-Smith



Radio Cook Islands announcer George 'Captain G' Paniani on air with a caller during a radiothon in 2011. 14010901