



# A comparison of rural community perceptions and involvement in conservation between the Fiji Islands and Southwestern Portugal



Baravi Thaman<sup>a, \*</sup>, John D. Icely<sup>a, b</sup>, Bruno D.D. Fragoso<sup>a, b</sup>, Joeli Veitayaki<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centro de Investigação Marinha e Ambiental, Universidade do Algarve, 8005-139 Faro, Portugal

<sup>b</sup> Sagremarisco Lda., Apartado 21, 8650-999 Vila do Bispo, Portugal

<sup>c</sup> School of Marine Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

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## ABSTRACT

Community involvement in conservation provides significant benefits including the ownership of resources and initiatives that integrate traditional and local knowledge into decision-making processes and management activities. This study assesses and compares the effectiveness of community involvement in conservation initiatives in two different countries, by examining the community's level of involvement and their perceptions of conservation in Yadua (Fiji) and the Natural Park of Southwest Alentejo and Costa Vicentina (PNSACV) (Portugal). The hypothesis was that "Effective community involvement contributes to the success, ownership, benefits, positive impacts and sustainability of conservation projects". Using questionnaires, structured interviews and document analyses of past literature, information obtained about community involvement in conservation activities in the two study areas was compared. Results showed that while community members showed high levels of involvement in all conservation activities in the Fiji study (88%), this was not the case in the Portugal study (43%), where results showed that lack of community involvement, leading to ineffective conservation. In both cases, however, the levels of involvement appear to have influenced community perceptions of conservation efforts' impact upon livelihoods. The Fiji study showed that community-focused conservation can be successful given appropriate community involvement. This contrasted with the Portugal study where conservation efforts were not community-focused and often led to conflicts and criticisms. A *bottom-up* approach has been utilized in Yadua, Fiji, whereas a *top-down* approach is clearly observed for the PNSACV in Portugal. A more holistic approach to conservation would empower local communities and ensure the successful implementation of conservation programmes.

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## 1. Introduction

In most Pacific Island Countries and in Portugal, the coastal zone is one of the most environmentally and culturally important and highly impacted areas. In recent years, local communities worldwide, but especially in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, have emerged as leaders in the conservation and sustainable use of their natural resources through initiatives such as the establishment of protected areas, with the number of community-based conservation areas increasing annually (Veitayaki, 1998; Tawake et al., 2001; GEF, 2006).

This *bottom-up* management approach of involving local communities from the start is applied at the local level with a long lasting community based management, where users live in proximity and experience direct impacts and benefits from the protected area (Bartlett et al., 2010; Gaymer et al., 2014). The conservation objectives of these types of areas are at the habitat or ecosystem level and intend to resolve a specific problem (Qiu et al., 2009). The *bottom-up* approach has strong public participation with active engagement of communities and stakeholders (Sayce et al., 2013), therefore it is a complicated and long-lasting process of creation and management of protected areas (Sanichirico et al., 2002). However, conserved areas where the local communities are involved provide significant benefits, including increased success and cost-effectiveness; a sense of ownership of natural resources and conservation initiatives; integration of traditional and local knowledge into the decision-making process; and direct

\* Corresponding author. C. Pascual Albero Burillo 20-4D, Zaragoza 50002, Spain.  
E-mail addresses: [baravi5@yahoo.com](mailto:baravi5@yahoo.com) (B. Thaman), [john.icely@gmail.com](mailto:john.icely@gmail.com) (J.D. Icely), [fragoso.b@gmail.com](mailto:fragoso.b@gmail.com) (B.D.D. Fragoso), [joeli.veitayaki@usp.ac.fj](mailto:joeli.veitayaki@usp.ac.fj) (J. Veitayaki).

community involvement in management activities (including planning, restoration, monitoring and enforcement) (Tawake et al., 2001; Walpole and Goodwin, 2001; Veitayaki, 2004; Danielsen et al., 2007; Waylen et al., 2010).

Lack of community involvement is more likely in more developed countries, such as in Portugal, where there is public or privately owned land that may be protected only by national and/or local authorities. This *top-down* management approach is commonly applied at a regional or national scale where the strategy is centralized by the government and is based on scientific knowledge with limited public participation (Gaymer et al., 2014). Conservation objectives are usually aligned with international commitments, protecting the entire ecosystem and its buffer connection to other ecosystems (Toonen et al., 2013). Because of this centralized strategy, there is often a favourable costs/benefit relationship in the creation of the protected area (Wilhelm et al., 2014) and its implementation is faster than a *bottom-up* approach. Failure of this type of conservation strategy is attributed mainly to a lack of compliance from the users due to the lack of consultation before the regulation is established (Trakolis, 2001; Sanchirico et al., 2002).

In contrast, Pacific Island Countries generally tend to have limited government capacity for protected area management and most of the land and resources are owned communally, rather than individually. This makes community consultation and involvement essential in any conservation activity from the outset.

In the Fiji Islands, the perceptions on conservation activities of the target communities have not been fully explored. Berkes (2004: p628) argues that to improve conservation, we need a better understanding of the nature of people, communities, institutions, and their interrelations at various levels. Although protected areas are clearly a valuable tool for conserving the environment, protected area managers need to consider how the conservation of these areas may impact the people who use them, and how users, in turn, impact those areas. Historically, the majority of research on protected areas has focused on the natural environment. However, more recent studies have shown how social and cultural factors, rather than biological or physical ones tend to influence the success or failure of a protected area (Pomeroy et al., 2006). Consequently, applied social science research has been seen as a key component in the successful planning, development, management and monitoring of protected areas as it allows for the gauging of public perceptions of conservation management and effectiveness while also providing for possible management changes, often leading to open dialogue between managers and stakeholders. Studying people's perceptions and values can help managers to: i) identify what is important to different users; ii) determine outreach and educational needs; iii) justify management decisions; iv) promote resource protection; and, v) identify potential conflict areas (NOAA, 2009: p8).

Using a case study and comparative approach, this study explores the effectiveness of community conservation in Fiji and Portugal through an assessment of the level of involvement, impacts and perceptions of the respective local communities in conservation initiatives. The overall objective of the study is to examine and make comparisons of the role of the respective communities, their various levels of involvement as well as their perceptions of the coastal conservation activities in the two study sites. More specifically, the study examines the initial objectives of each project, the effectiveness and impacts of community involvement in these, and the status of each activity from a community perspective. These specific objectives are achieved by investigating i) the processes used to involve communities in the project; ii) the effectiveness of community involvement; and, iii) the benefits and challenges of community involvement in conservation activities.

The underlying assumption of the study is that conservation is likely to be successful if there was well-supported community involvement in all phases leading to a community sense of ownership, benefit from, and commitment to, the objectives of conservation initiatives.

The main hypothesis used to derive the research questions was:

*“Effective community involvement contributes to the success, ownership, benefits, positive impacts and sustainability of conservation projects”.*

The main research questions were:

- “To what extent is the community involved and how has this contributed to the status, ownership benefits, impacts and sustainability of the project?”
- “What is the current status and how has the nature of community involvement contributed to the impacts of the conservation project on community perceptions and livelihoods?”

## 2. Study areas: Yadua (Fiji) and the PNSACV (Portugal)

### 2.1. Fiji – Yadua and Yadua Taba

The first study site is the small tropical volcanic islands of Yadua and Yadua Taba, in Bua province, situated in the northwest of the Fiji archipelago in the Southwest Pacific Ocean (Fig. 1). The smaller island (Yadua Taba), lies southeast of Yadua, the two islands are separated by a shallow 250 m channel (NTF, 2008). It is the site of the Yadua Conservation Project (YCP), a range of conservation activities, both marine and terrestrial, focusing mainly on the conservation of the endemic and critically endangered Fijian crested iguana (*Brachylophus vitiensis*) (Gibbons, 1981), located on the neighbouring uninhabited island of Yadua Taba. Here the local community of Denimanu Village, on Yadua Island, plays an important role in the overall conservation process. Yadua is an initiative of the National Trust of Fiji (NTF), a statutory body responsible for the protection of Fiji's natural, cultural and national heritage.

Yadua, the larger of the two islands, has an area of 13.6 km<sup>2</sup> with Denimanu village, being the only community present in the area. Although Yadua and Yadua Taba are part of Bua province, the inhabitants of Denimanu are settlers from other provinces of Fiji and do not have rights to the islands although they can use the resources for a variety of subsistence purposes (NTF, 2008). At the time of the study, Denimanu had a population of 233, consisting of 129 males and 104 females (Davetanivalu, 2009).

Yadua Taba is a 0.72 km<sup>2</sup> uninhabited island (ECF, 1994) and is home to the world's only natural breeding population of the Fijian Crested Iguana, *Brachylophus vitiensis*. In 1980, in response to the need for conservation, the Yadua Taba Crested Iguana Sanctuary (YTCIS) was established as Fiji's first wildlife sanctuary. Today, Yadua Taba is permanently leased by the NTF through the Native Land Trust Board (NTF, 2008). Listed in the IUCN Directory of Protected Areas in Oceania in 1991, Yadua Taba was given the status of IUCN Management Category IV as a “Managed Nature Reserve”. Since then visits to the YTCIS have been restricted to researchers and media personnel and unauthorized landings on the island are prohibited (NTF, 2008).

Conservation activities on Yadua and Yadua Taba relate primarily to *B. vitiensis*, an herbivorous iguana endemic to Fiji and restricted to tropical dry forest (TDF) habitats. It is currently listed under IUCN criteria as Critically Endangered (IUCN, 2009), and is the only Fijian reptile listed as ‘endangered’ in the Fiji National

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