

Cutting-edge technology to lift Niue's fishery revenue via better EEZ surveillance and monitoring

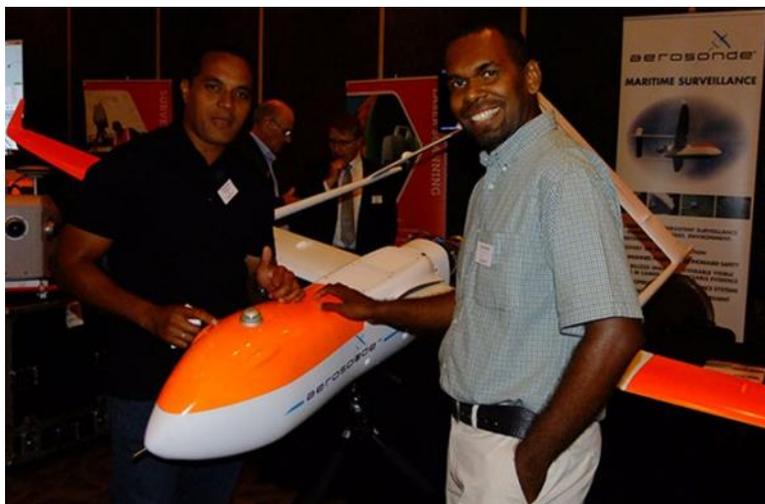
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Auckland, NZ – A drone that monitor and surveys Niue's oceans could increase its fishery revenue to rival its number one earner – tourism according to Mr Launoa Gataua, Niue's Monitoring, Control and Surveillance (MCS) officer.

Mr Gataua, who is attending the WWF Emerging Technologies Workshop that started in Auckland today, is confident that with better monitoring, they would be able to capture the income they suspect is leaking through unmonitored and suspected illegal fishing carried out in its 360,000 square kilometers of exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Annually, tourism brings in just under \$6million to a country with a GDP of \$28.5million (2012). Meantime, Niue's longline fishery industry, ceased in 2011, was resurrected in June 2013 when the first license was approved. So far, Niue has licensed 7 foreign longline fishing vessels, 5 of which were flagged to Fiji, 1 to the Cook Islands and 1 to the United States of America. Its current license cap is set at 10.

Prior to 2011, the fishery produced an annual average catch of 130 tonnes, worth an estimated NZ\$942,000. While historically, average annual catches between 1999 and 2008 were less than 20 tonnes.



Mr Launoa Gataua & FFA's Surveillance Operations Assistant, Steve Masika

Niue rely heavily on the Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and to a lesser extent Observers to monitor its waters, both are coordinated by the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA).

But these programs need vessels to be more effective. And that's an asset Niue does not have. In fact, only three Pacific countries do not have patrol boats, Tokelau and Nauru the

others. But normally, this is not an issue for Niue as the surveillance of its EEZ is the role of New Zealand which is part of its constitutional responsibility to Niue.

However, New Zealand did not provide any surveillance in 2015 as its assets were diverted elsewhere according to a number of sources. Mr Gataua said if New Zealand did provide surveillance, they were not made aware. But the bottom line is that Niue was left hapless as it does not have the means to replace the gap with a provider.

It meant reliance on the VMS and the occasional visit by other world powers in the Pacific such as the French who dropped in last year, providing a semblance of monitoring and surveillance. An ad-hoc approach but one Niue is grateful for.

Yet there are other challenges facing Niue with finding Observers.

“We have two observers on the island. One has met the national requirement at regional level but right now we can’t deploy any of them because they are also government employees. We just don’t have enough bodies,” said Mr Gataua.

On top of that, local Niue youth are not enthusiastic or interested in being observers. This is exacerbated by the country’s number one problem which is depopulation which means there are not too many options with a population pool of under 1,600 people (compared to 24,000-plus in New Zealand).

“Population wise, most, if not all youth that may be interested in being observers are employed by the government or private sector. The end result is we can’t get the Observer program up and running,” he said. The last Observer that Niue deployed was ten years ago, in 2004.

It means Niue’s two-man fishery’s unit rely heavily on VMS for monitoring the EEZ. As well as reports from visiting yachts that come through the Cook Islands.

“We get the occasional report from visiting yachts who usually say they see ships in our waters but are too far away to identify the vessels. For us, those vessels are probably fishing illegally but we’re not picking them up through the Automatic Identification System (AIS) or even VMS so we can make a judgement. That’s an indication of Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

“Each of those ships sighted is lost income for Niue. But there is nothing much else we can do. It’s too hard for us to monitor the area.”

And this is where the WWF Emerging Technologies workshop offered hope to Mr Gataua and Niue.

“I’ve noticed one technology product that is of interest to us,” he confirmed.

“A device that could be placed on our domestic charter vessels that can monitor and lookout for fishing vessels while they’re out on the ocean. It also doubles as a safety back-up for our domestic vessels.”

And then there is the drone.

“Like everyone at this conference, I would love to have that drone for Niue,” he smiled.

“But having said that, it’s a question of what is practical and realistic for Niue. Can we run it economically and will we have the human resources to man it? Can maintain it over the long run? Which regional agency will facilitate it, how long, and is it the best fit for Niue’s needs?”

But there is no doubt in Mr Gataua’s mind that the technology solutions to Niue’s fishery monitoring and surveillance needs are displayed at the WWF workshop today. A solution that would increase their fishery revenue significantly.

As the Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries states, tuna catch in 2024 will be worth double what it is in 2014. This will be achieved by increasing value rather than volume, by eliminating oversupply and targeting higher value products and markets. In line with increased value and profitability, there will be scope to increase access fees for countries that wish to continue licensing foreign vessels.

And technology that is available today can provide the ‘value’ the Roadmap is aspiring to.

“As one of the presenters revealed today, the technology to remove the AIDS gene sequence from a cat is available. It has cured the cat of AIDS,” said Mr Gataua. “They have inserted a mammoth’s DNA into a live elephant and in five years time expect to bring back the first extinct life form back into planet earth.

“I’m thankful for the opportunity to come to this workshop and hopeful that I can get something out of this for Niue. It would be a super bonus to go home with something for our decision-makers to consider.”

While the dream is but a decision-makers’ pen away, Mr Gataua acknowledged the invaluable work by FFA and its technical staff.

“FFA is our main body for MCS. They practically provide us with everything. Without them we wouldn’t have progressed as much especially with VMS where anytime we have problems big or small they are there for us.

“They’re doing a tremendous job and I can’t thank them enough really.”

Story Credit: Pacific Guardian; Author above.