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# The frontline tuna guardians

## Protecting our marine resources

By Robert Matau

October 2013

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When Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) observer Chris Ragi (not his real name) boarded a tuna purse seiner fishing boat for the first time in 2009, he did not know what to expect.

He was engaging in his first job observing the region's tuna, which at the time was valued at US\$1.5 billion. Little did he know that tuna would take him to places he had never been to. The Solomon Islander certainly did not believe that two trips later, his accurate report and observations on a United States flagged purse seiner would take him to a Hawaiian hearing to testify, earning the boat owners stiff penalties for fishing violations. We chose to withhold his identity as he has continued to serve the FFA faithfully and provides them with reports and data that are crucial to fisheries monitoring and assessments each year. After he reported the violation in 2009, United States National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Hawaii called him up in 2011—querying his report. “They asked me to verify the data I had provided the FFA and how I had observed the whole episode. “After the interview, they told me the issue would ultimately lead to a court hearing and there was a high possibility that I would be called to testify against the boat for the violations.” As the case developed, he was advised to prepare himself and avoid any contact with other boats. Then in January 2012, he was flown to Hawaii to testify before a United States Coast Guard Administrative Law Judge against the ship he was observing, as the case was an administrative one. “It was not only going to be my first

trip to the United States of America but it was going to be the first time I was testifying in that situation,” Ragi told ISLANDS BUSINESS in Honiara. In his testimony, he related how the ship set a purse seine net around a pod of False Killer Whales. “The fish were swimming underneath the whales and the crew were trying to chase the whales to get to the fish underneath, but in the process one whale got trapped and they tried to cut it free but the fish also escaped in the process,” he said. “As an observer, we don’t give advice to vessel operators nor do we ask them to stop...we only observe and report what we see. “I noted in my logbook that the vessel was interacting with the whales and whilst they should stick one mile away, they got as close as 20 to 30 metres.” Ragi got off in the Federated States of Micronesia after spending a month on the boat and flew back to Honiara where he reported the incident to his superiors at FFA. “I also reported that they were using lights on their boat and life boats as a makeshift Fishing Aggregate Devices (used to lure fish that are attracted to light and large objects on the surface of the ocean) and in the morning they were able to catch the fish,” he said He joined five other observers who had given similar reports on other boats in the hearing and NOAA took the vessels, flagged as United States boats fishing under the United States Tuna Treaty in the region, to task. The evidence from observers like Ragi, secured a US\$1.5 million fine against six US tuna purse seiners—which is significant in the US Treaty observer programme with the FFA, which has been in existence since 1988. All of the boats had been accused of fishing on fish aggregating devices (FADs) during the FAD ban in 2009, a measure put in place across the region to reduce catches of small bigeye tuna. Several vessels were also charged with placing FADs during the closure and setting their nets on whales. The observers gave evidence in two long-running cases brought by the US authorities, who enforce regulations on their own fleet fishing in Pacific Islands waters, under the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Convention Implementation Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act. An official of the Enforcement Section of NOAA Office of General Counsel (the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration) paid tribute to the six Pacific Islanders. “The observers were the heart of the cases and did a terrific job. The judge’s decision demonstrates that he found the observers credible, trustworthy and persuasive,” Section deputy chief Alexa Cole said. The observers (from Solomon Islands, Marshall Islands and Federated States of Micronesia) were called to testify in Honolulu in early 2012. All six had been placed onboard the vessels by FFA and had been trained cooperatively by staff of FFA and the Secretariat of

the Pacific Community (SPC). An observer training officer from SPC updated the hearing on the training observers receive, and the Pacific Islands regional observer standards that they have to meet. An economist from FFA was also called to testify about the value of tuna catches—an important factor in setting the penalties. SPC and FFA have been supporting the development of national observer programmes in their Pacific Islands member countries for many years, and over 700 observers are now deployed. Purse-seine vessels fishing in the region must carry an observer at all times. A lot of data recorded on the boats is processed by the SPC and forms part of the scientific data presented each year on estimated catches—which also influences appropriate conservation management measures.

Observer training is currently supported by a number of development partners—the European Union, New Zealand, Australia and Japan—but most other costs of the observer programme are recovered from the fishing industry. Today, the value of the Pacific's tuna fishery has increased to US\$3 billion, thanks to various sustainable fisheries measures put in place by FFA and the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, made up of Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Solomon Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau and Papua New Guinea. The US is also currently re-negotiating the terms of its current treaty and they have agreed to increase their fishing access fees from US\$21 million to US\$63 million. Underpaid, spending long periods away from home, yet highly motivated, FFA fisheries observers continue to be the region's frontline tuna guardians.

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