

## Sea cucumbers saving lives: the radical charity giving Madagascan fishing communities hope

As fish stocks dwindle, communities that rely on the ocean for their livelihood are struggling to survive. A charity in Madagascar is challenging the accepted wisdom of marine conservation with a combination of sea cucumber farming and family planning.

Dr Alasdair Harris a 35-year-old marine ecologist and his colleagues at Blue Ventures, are at the forefront of a new strand of marine conservation that concentrates on people as much as endangered fish or sea turtles. Their core belief is that MPAs can bring benefits, but at a cost.

Blue Ventures follows a more pragmatic line, appealing directly to local people's self-interest and coming up with initiatives that get to the root of the problem. Harris calls this foot-in-the door approach "the community catalyst model". The approach involved finding the main root causes of any problem affecting the community and seeking solutions with all involved.



There is a long tradition of sea cucumber harvesting in Madagascar for the Asian market. Sea cucumbers are in great demand in restaurants in China, Hong Kong and Singapore, where they are considered a delicacy imbued with aphrodisiac powers. But the area has become a magnet for the black market (on top of commercial fishing). "The industrial fishing of sea cucumbers by highly organised fleets



operating under the radar of the fishery surveillance authorities is new" Harris says. What is happening is incredibly dangerous because illegal Boat Operators pay people a pittance to dive at very dangerous depths using dangerous equipment to cleaning up the seabed; while sea cucumbers should be picked by hand.

Working with the University of Toliara's institute of marine science, the local seafood exporter Copefrito and Indian Ocean Trepang (IOT), a local company that breeds sea cucumbers, Blue Ventures has spent £1.2 million on the project since 2008 to buy a juvenile sea cucumbers and provide technical advice to the communities.

IOT sets aside for the community a third of its juvenile sea cucumbers, and delivers them to the Tempolove farm at about three months old. They are kept in pens in the bay between nine and 12 months (exposed at low tide, covered at high tide) until they are big enough to be sold back to IOT at a price of up to \$2. Since the farm opened in 2009, 24,575 sea cucumbers have been sold at a value of \$20,320. However, theft is a big problem and guarding the resource from poachers has become an imperative.

The project run by Blue Ventures shows that working with the communities can bear fruits and be very profitable to all concerned. A lesson for the Indian Ocean countries.

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