

Anchors Away

How a community in Fiji and an international nonprofit partnered to prevent reef damage and make a better life for all

► BY ALEXA BACH-MCELDRONE

Imagine you're diving in warm, clear water along a 1,000-foot vertical wall of multicolored coral dotted with thousands of curious fish. Schools of tuna and trevally streak by while a humpback surfaces in the distance. An endangered hawksbill turtle glides past you, and a blue ribbon eel peeks out of his cave.

Are you ready to buy your plane ticket?

Spanning the sea between Fiji's two largest islands — Viti Levu and Vanua Levu — the Namena Marine Reserve showcases some of the world's most spectacular tropical coral reefs. It also sustains the people of Kubulau, whose ancestors have fished these reefs for centuries.

In the 1980s and '90s, this vibrant ecosystem was threatened by rampant commercial fishing. Fish populations were declining, and Kubulau's primary source of sustenance and income was disappearing. To halt the decline, chiefs from each of Kubulau's 10 villages banded together to declare the area a

no-take zone — the first in Fiji.

Today, the 70-square-kilometer marine protected area is "the marine equivalent of the Serengeti," says Rick MacPherson, conservation programs director at the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL, coral.org). Tourism is flourishing, with nearly 1,200 divers visiting Namena each year, and diving fees are fueling reserve management and community development.

As the number of divers increased, however, local leaders began to worry that the tourists they were relying on to conserve the reefs might actually be harming them. Existing mooring buoys proved insufficient to handle the increasing tourist traffic within the reserve. As a result, heavy anchors, primarily from live-aboards, were crushing coral and leaving them vulnerable to infection.

In response, the Kubulau community teamed with its longtime conservation partners to devise a solution. CORAL, an international nonprofit dedicated to uniting communities to save coral reefs, had already been working with the community. Now, they joined with Kubulau chiefs and the Kubulau Resource Management Committee to create Fiji's first anchor-free zone within Namena. Together, they mapped out locations for a series of permanent moorings within the reserve; six deepwater moorings serve popular dive sites, and three nearshore moorings enable tourist visits to Kiobo village. All mooring buoys are open to both tour operators and private vessels.

CORAL raised more than \$40,000 to install the moorings and granted it



Protecting Namena reefs is the focus of a multicultural effort.

to partner dive operators. They agreed to maintain deepwater moorings while the Kubulau community services those near shore. Dive and maintenance training was provided to Kubulau community members selected for these roles.

To better enable villagers living closest to the nearshore moorings to capitalize on increased visitation, CORAL and its partners orchestrated business workshops for key community members. Participants learned to conduct tourism feasibility studies, write business proposals, create budgets and develop other skills. Since then, Kiobo community members have launched several ventures, including selling handmade woven products and leading visitors on guided jungle walks.

This has been an all-around success for the Namena Marine Reserve. Villagers get to meet divers and hear how others value their treasured resources, while divers appreciate learning about the Kubulau culture. The startup enterprises diversify the local economy and further reduce the possibility that Namena's waters would again open to damaging commercial fishing.

The accomplishments in Namena clearly show that protecting valuable natural resources can lead to economic and social benefits — not just for today, but for generations to come.

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JIM PATTERSON; OPPOSITE: IMAGEBROKER/ALAMY

PAY IT FORWARD

While these guidelines were designed specifically with Namena in mind, you can — and should — observe them wherever your adventures take you to ensure our planet's marine resources thrive for generations to come.

► All forms of fishing (line, spear and net)

are prohibited in the marine protected area.

► Use mooring buoys where available. If you must anchor, do so only in areas with a sandy bottom.

► Do not collect marine life (plant or animal), either alive or dead. This includes seashells, seaweed, and live or dead coral.

► Do not discard anything in the water, including food

or plant materials. Please properly dispose of all trash.

► Do not walk on the reef flats, even at low tide when reefs are more exposed.

► Never chase, harass or try to ride marine life. Do not touch, handle or feed marine life.

► When diving, maintain good buoyancy control and practice good finning to avoid contact with the

reef.

► Do not put your feet down when swimming or snorkeling. If you must stand up, look down first, and pick a patch of sand or dead coral.

► For additional information about the Namena Marine Reserve, visit namena.org.

Kubulau chiefs and their local and international partners are working to stamp out anchors in Namena.

