

# Social Safeguards Assessment

Community-based management of threats to wetland biodiversity at Lake Letas, Gaua Island, Vanuatu

## **Eco-Livelihood Development Associates**

### **Indigenous Peoples in the project area:**

The project area on Gaua island comprises land, water and resources that are in the customary ownership of indigenous people. Some areas have been leased by the indigenous owners to immigrants from outer islands.

Gaua has a population of almost 2491 people according to the 2009 national census. Its annual growth rate is 2%. The main populated areas are villages along the coastal areas of north-eastern, western and southern sides of the island. The native Gauans live on those mentioned part of the islands. Immigrants from the two neighbouring islands of Mere Lava and Merig who bought land on the island reside on the eastern side of the island. Dolap is the largest village of Gaua island situated on the western side.

There are five languages traditionally spoken on Gaua known as the Lakon or Vure, Oirat, Koro, Dorig and Nume. Mwerlap is the immigrants' traditional language. There is a council of chiefs that oversees the development affairs of Gaua Island. The council of chiefs works closely with Torba Province through its sub-provincial office to call meetings. The sub-province recognizes five representatives that formed its community development committee. This committee is represented by chiefs, churches, women, youth and province; at times it discusses community or island development issues during the interim period when there is a turnover or while a new council of chiefs' executive is being set up. The people have traditional agricultural economies through fishing and horticulture.

### **Assessment of project impacts (both positive and negative):**

The project had an environmental focus and sought to promote sustainable (rather than ecologically destructive) livelihoods and activities by the local people. It aimed to protect the Crater Lake, Lake Letas, and its catchment by keeping it in its present largely undisturbed condition. At present, local people make very limited use of the Lake and its natural resources, such that exploitation is probably sustainable. Thus, the project was inherently beneficial to the integrity of Gaua Island and the East Melanesian Islands Hotspot.

Principal positive impacts of the project were:

- Maintenance of an ecologically sustainable fishery conducted in artisanal context, targeting eels and freshwater prawns in Lake Letas.
- Maintenance of traditional livelihoods and activities at levels matching or acceptably close to long term historical patterns.
- Prevention of loss of natural biodiversity and disruption of the lake ecosystem, which might otherwise occur due to introduction of exotic fishes.
- Development of ecologically sustainable eco-tourism managed by local people on their own lands, based on the attraction to visitors of the unaltered natural lake ecosystem.
- Increased capacity of participating local leaders and sub-provincial officers in regard to ecologically sustainable development and biodiversity conservation.

- Raised awareness among local people, including children, in regard to issues for protection of biodiversity and ecologically sustainable development.

No significant negative impacts of the project were identified.

Some saw and argued that introduction of tilapia fish to Lake Letas—which naturally has abundant eels but no other fishes—would provide a new source of protein for local people. However, adequate protein is available from traditionally harvested eels and prawns and from fish and other animals traditionally secured—and still available—from surrounding marine areas.

As a result of the project the local people saw that the potential introduction of exotic tilapia has had devastating impacts on biodiversity and the condition of wetland ecosystems, worldwide. Accordingly, they never want tilapia to be introduced on Gaua and this is reflected in the message on the signs erected by the project, which bans tilapia not just from the lake but from the whole island.

### **How free, prior and informed consultations were carried out with the affected communities during design of the project (before submission of Lol):**

The protection of Lake Letas has been in discussion since year 2007 through a Landholders Conservation Initiatives (LCI) project led by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEPC). The first agreement by the island council of chiefs for protecting the Lake was obtained through LCI project. Again, through the establishment phase of a major project known as the GEF 4 - Forest and Protected Area Management (FPAM) in 2013 led by the Forestry Department (Mr Presley Dovo), two years before the Lol was prepared, indigenous people of Gaua were again engaged in discussions on the protection of Lake Letas and its resources. Associates of EDA were involved in these meetings with FPAM project. This activity led to expressions of concern by the local people about the need for protection of the lake and willingness to support efforts to that end. Sub-provincial government officers have also been consulted and have close working collaboration with the council of Chiefs to have the area under protection. In the first week of September 2015, during preparation of the Lol, a representative from Gaua (Mr. Daniel Nenet), who is a member of a locally-based environment committee, attended professional development workshops in Port Vila and was involved in further discussions with EDA associates about the proposed project.

### **Outline of measures to avoid adverse impacts and provide culturally appropriate benefits:**

The project looked to avoid adverse impacts by ensuring that any benefits to members of the community were distributed fairly and equally for e.g. the sharing of knowledge through awareness presentations by the project leads and business created through the community's catering service towards the meeting. Furthermore, as occurred on lands in customary ownership, it would have been impossible to progress without the full support and engagement of the indigenous landowners. Community leaders (Council of Chiefs, the provincial community development committee, Gaua Island Tourism Association, others) and sub-provincial officers were closely involved in the project implementation and did provide additional controls on potential impacts.

### **Explanation of how these measures were monitored:**

Community leaders (Council of Chiefs, the provincial community development committee, Gaua Island Tourism Association, others), sub-provincial officers and collaborating NGOs based on Gaua were asked to monitor progress of the project, including community

attitudes, and reported regularly to EDA on these matters. The project workplan included a project deliverable every quarter ('Compliance with CEPF Social Safeguard Policies has been monitored and reported to IUCN').

**Details of a grievance mechanism:**

The project used existing grievance mechanisms established under cultural norms for Gaua. The two main authorities are the Garet Council of Chiefs and the sub-provincial office; these are supported by the Management Committee for Lake Letas Community Conservation Area.

There were no grievance raised in the duration of this grant and therefore there was no need to contact the project leads or the CEPF Regional Implementation Team at IUCN.

**A map of the area of work**

Map of Gaua (Santa Maria) Island, Vanuatu, showing Lake Letas and its outflow river. The project area included the lake and its small surrounding (crater) catchment. Lake Letas has an area of 200 ha and is about 7 km long by 2 km wide.

