



## MEDIA RELEASE

### Cook Islands look to Australasian COE for policy advice

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A delegation of senior coastal environment managers from the Cook Islands visited Australia recently learning the keys to successful marine conservation and sustainable economic development policy first-hand from some of the world's leading researchers.

The small nation of just 20,000 people spread across 15 separate islands is rapidly emerging as a 'must see' tourism destination in the Pacific. With such growth inevitably comes pressure on the Cook Islands' natural resources – and the coastal and marine environment in particular – so developing sound policy for management to keep up with the expected growth is becoming critical.

The delegation, hosted by the Global Coral Reef Targeted Research and Capacity Building for Management (CRTR) Project's Australasian Centre of Excellence, has been funded by the NZ-AID Cook Island Marine Resources Institutional Strengthening Project (CIMRIS). Over a 14-day period, delegates met with experienced coastal managers and policy developers in both Australia and New Zealand.

One of the visiting Cook Islanders, Paul Lynch, a lawyer with the Cook Island National Environmental Services, said that with nearly 80 per cent of the country's exports derived from fish products and pearls, and the increasing focus on the islands as tourism hot spot, the delegates were keen to strengthen the capacity of their country's policy developers and law makers to guide the long-term management of its relatively pristine marine resources.

"Sound policy and management of the coastal environment has never been more important for the Cook Islands," said Mr Lynch.

"With degradation of coral reefs and declining fish stocks in many parts of the world, we want to be able to learn about the advances in research and development of integrated approaches to environmental management from countries such as Australia and New Zealand, who in many ways are leading the regional marine research effort."

Topping the list of discussions while in Australia were topics as varied as fisheries and whale conservation, coral reef management, marine protected areas, environmental law, impacts of effluent and run-off management from coastal development and agriculture and wetland and mangrove management. The delegation will also tour Moreton Bay to view the outcomes from implementation of the highly regarded 'Healthy Waterways' initiative.

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CIMRIS spokesman and tour leader, Geoff Dews, said while the Cook Islands were famed for their near-pristine marine environment, the islands' natural resources would in future require effective management and policy by local people who had links to international best practice, access to mentors in countries such as Australia and New Zealand and that were skilled in understanding the implications of current advances in research.

"Like many countries in the Pacific, the Cook Islands are fringed by coral reefs, lagoons and deep ocean," he said. "While this has enormous appeal from a tourism and fisheries perspective, there is potential for significant impacts on the coral reef habitat from inappropriate development to accommodate the growing tourism interest in this spectacular country.

"For example, in some countries around the Pacific and in other regions, impacts from such rapid development and inappropriate use of the reefs and coastal environment have led to diminished water quality and increases in fish and coral disease.

"The Cook Islands are in a unique position to learn from experts about successfully balancing economic development and a fragile, small island environment. This knowledge can then be adapted into developing policy and management plans for the different environmental issues potentially facing the 15 islands."

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