



OP-ED

Blue Transformation, the Pacific Way: Communities, Ocean and the Future of Aquatic Food Systems

opinion



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For Pacific Island peoples, the ocean was never simply a resource to be managed — it is *vanua, fonua, aiga, whenua moana*: ancestor, provider, pathway and identity, bound together in systems of reciprocity that long predate the language of “blue economy” or “aquatic food systems.” Long before global institutions spoke of sustainable ocean governance, Pacific communities were already practicing it — through tabu areas and rahui, customary marine tenure, seasonal fishing calendars and knowledge passed down through generations of navigators, fisherfolk and reef custodians.

Today, as the world grapples with climate change, population growth and food insecurity, global attention has turned to what the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) calls “Blue Transformation” the idea that aquatic food systems must grow sustainably, nourish people, generate livelihoods and protect ocean ecosystems. The Pacific region, framed by our leaders not as a scatter of “small island states” but as the **Blue Pacific Continent**, is central to this conversation. It is global framework which is finally catching up to what Pacific communities have long known, and whether they can be reshaped to serve Pacific priorities, in Pacific way.

An Ocean of Identity, Not Just an Asset Class

The Pacific covers roughly a third of the Earth’s surface, and stewards some of the richest tuna resources, most

diverse reef systems and most extensive exclusive economic zones on the planet. Home to some of the world’s richest tuna resources and vast ocean territories, Pacific countries have long demonstrated that economic development and ocean stewardship can go hand in hand. Yet the challenges remain significant. Small island developing states face increasing climate risks, fragile supply chains, high dependence on food imports and growing pressure on marine ecosystems.

The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent, endorsed by Pacific Islands Forum Leaders, is explicit that ocean health, food security and cultural identity are inseparable — this is not simply an environmental or economic policy question, but one of survival, sovereignty and wellbeing for atoll nations, high islands and everything in between.

FAO’s latest State of **World Fisheries and Aquaculture (SOFIA)** report confirms that global fish production has reached record levels and that aquaculture is now among the fastest-growing food sectors worldwide — but it also warns that many marine resources remain under strain and sustainability remains a major concern and that improved management is essential to secure future benefits. For Pacific nations already living with coral bleaching, ocean acidification, sea-level rise and more intense cyclones, this warning is not abstract. It shapes what ends up on the table in a household in communities or lands in local markets, or a canoe returning to shore in the outer islands.

Community-Led and Technically Supported – A win-win pathway

Where Blue Transformation succeeds in the Pacific, it tends to succeed because it starts with communities, not around them. Small-scale and subsistence fishers, often women, who dominate near-shore gleaning and post-harvest processing across much of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia, remain the backbone of food security and coastal livelihoods, even though their labour is frequently undercounted in national statistics. Any strategy for resilient aquatic food systems must be built around their knowledge, their access to markets and infrastructure, and their authority over adjacent waters, not treat them as beneficiaries of a plan designed without listening to them.

This is where locally led initiatives are already showing the way. For Pacific nations, this message is particularly relevant. Sustainable ocean management is not simply an environmental issue; it is a matter of food security, economic sovereignty and resilience. Healthy fish stocks support coastal communities, generate public revenues and provide one of the most nutritious sources of protein available. This is where FAO’s Blue Transformation agenda becomes especially important.

Through its global roadmap, FAO promotes three mutually reinforcing objectives: sustainable aquaculture growth, effective fisheries management and more efficient aquatic food value chains. These priorities are

highly aligned with the needs and aspirations of Pacific Island countries.

Across the Pacific, FAO is already supporting innovation and transformation. Countries including Kiribati, Palau, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Solomon Islands and Nauru are advancing digital agriculture and fisheries strategies designed to strengthen productivity, improve market access and increase resilience against climate shocks. In Fiji, initiatives connecting farmers, fishers, tourism operators and local markets help create stronger local food systems while reducing dependence on imports.

SOFIA also highlights the critical role these fishers play in nutrition, employment and local development. Ensuring that they have access to markets, infrastructure, technology and social protection is essential for building inclusive and resilient aquatic food systems.

The Urgency:

Climate change adds urgency to this agenda. Rising sea levels, coral bleaching, ocean warming and increasingly extreme weather events threaten both food production and livelihoods throughout the Pacific. Yet aquatic food systems can also become part of the solution. Sustainable fisheries, responsible aquaculture and healthy marine ecosystems contribute to climate adaptation, biodiversity conservation and more resilient local economies. SOFIA emphasizes that aquatic food systems can provide important environmental and climate solutions when managed effectively.

The Pacific has often been described as “large ocean states” rather than “small island states.” This perspective captures an important truth: the region possesses enormous ocean assets and extraordinary expertise in managing them. The future of Blue Transformation will depend not only on global commitments but also on local leadership, indigenous knowledge and regional cooperation.

FAO’s role is to support this journey by providing data, scientific evidence, technical assistance and policy guidance. Through SOFIA and other initiatives, the Organization continues to help countries understand emerging trends, identify opportunities and make informed decisions that balance economic growth with sustainability.

The message emerging from the latest SOFIA report is clear. The world needs more nutritious food, healthier oceans and stronger coastal economies. The Pacific Islands already possess many of the ingredients necessary to achieve these goals. By embracing Blue Transformation, the region can continue to lead globally in demonstrating that ocean prosperity and ocean stewardship are not competing objectives, but two sides of the same sustainable future.

In the decades ahead, the Pacific may not simply participate in Blue Transformation, it may well define what successful Blue Transformation looks like for the world.

About the author:

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