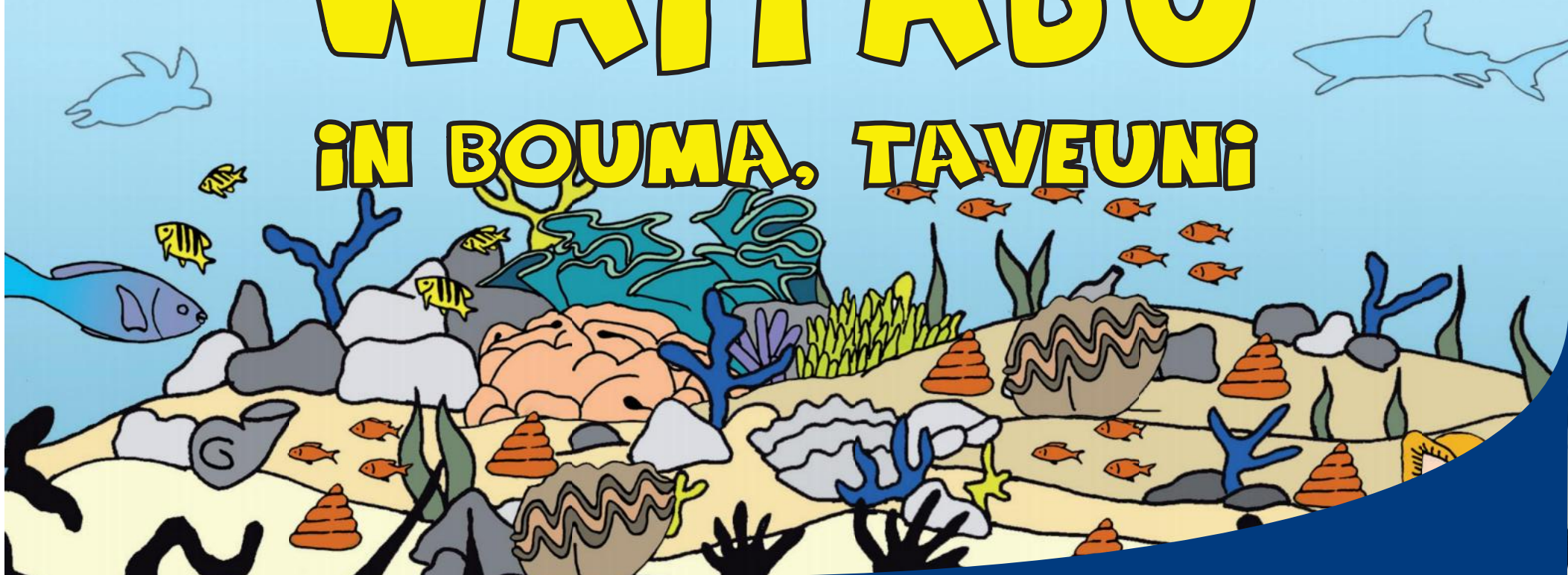


# THE STORY OF THE MARINE TABU OF WAITABU IN BOUMA, TAVEUNI



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In 2007, CI-Fiji established a Science to Action Program to support effective decision makings on resource management through the use of applied natural and social science. This production captures the success story of one the longest community-based marine protected area in Fiji that CI-Fiji has focused many studies on.

**Acknowledgement**

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We also wish to acknowledge the contributions of the Fiji Locally Managed Marine Area (FLMMA) Network, Seaweb, Resort Support and especially the communities of Waitabu Village in Bouma, Taveuni .

This material is a product of the Science to Action Program. Elia's story is supported through the study results of Conservation International's marine projects in Waitabu from 2007 - 2012.

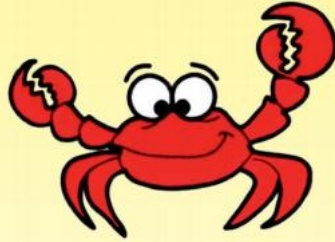


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# THE STORY OF THE MARINE TABU OF WAITABU IN BOUMA, TAVEUNI

Composed by Alumecei Nakeke, Edited by Prof. Konai Helu Thaman and Heidi Williams.

Illustration/Layout by Filipe Waqairagata



# About Waitabu



**W**aitabu is a small village located on the north-east tip of Taveuni, Fiji's third largest island. It is part of Wainikeli District in the Vanua of Bouma including three other villages – Lavena, Vidawa and Nakorovou. The village has a total population of more than 300 people (including men, women and children) and they depend heavily on farming as their main source of food and income. The marine environment of Bouma is shared communally among three villages nearby which are Nakorovou, Vidawa and Waitabu excluding the area belonging to Lavena alone.

The Waitabu Marine Park was established in April 1998 through the agreement of the Waitabu resource owners and was later presented and endorsed in the Bose Vanua of Bouma. It took almost two years for communities to formally observe the marine park as a protected area. In 1998, it was agreed that the Waitabu Marine Park would be a no-take zone for 10 years. This was again reviewed in 2008 and further agreed to remain close for another 10 years. The Park is helping generate income for the people of Waitabu through the use of access fees paid by tourists to snorkel or swim and for tour guiding.

The Waitabu Project Committee is the decision-making body within the community regarding the management of the Marine Park. The Committee was established in 2001 with members consisting of key individuals selected from Waitabu and neighbouring settlements (Wai and Vurevure) affiliated to Waitabu. Monthly meetings are conducted to discuss issues relating to the management of the park both as a business entity and as a protected area.



“Elia... Elia...wake up!” Atonio’s voice went up another notch, tinged with impatience, “Elia!” But his words fell on deaf ears as Elia slumbered on.

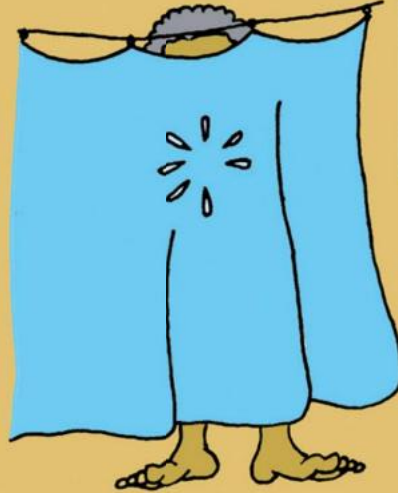
“Elia!” he shouted again, shaking him this time. Elia jumped up, eyes squinting, while his cousin glared at him.

Elia suddenly remembered it was Saturday and his face lit up, for him, Saturday was the best day of the week!

It was early in the morning, and judging by the light coming through a crack in the wall of their hut, he knew they ought to be in the water already.

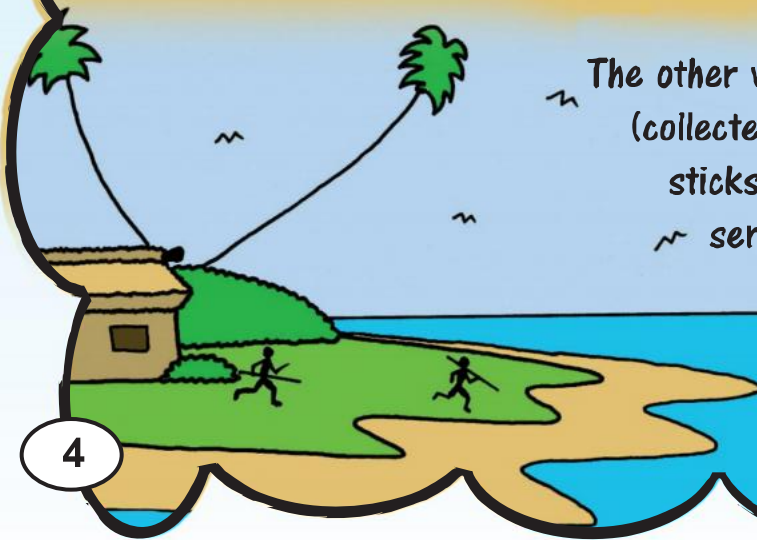


Scanning the room he tried to remember where he'd thrown the khaki shorts that he usually wore for this special activity. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted them in a pile with the other dirty clothes. He quickly grabbed and pulled the shorts on, despite their tattered state, as he truly believed these would bring him luck.




"We will have to hurry as the others are waiting for us", Atonio shouted, as he led the way through the village towards the beach armed with a single-pronged spear in his right hand.


The other villagers were waiting patiently for Elia, each person holding a stick (collected from the shoreline) in one hand and a spear in the other. The sticks had been carefully selected as they needed to be strong enough to serve their purpose.





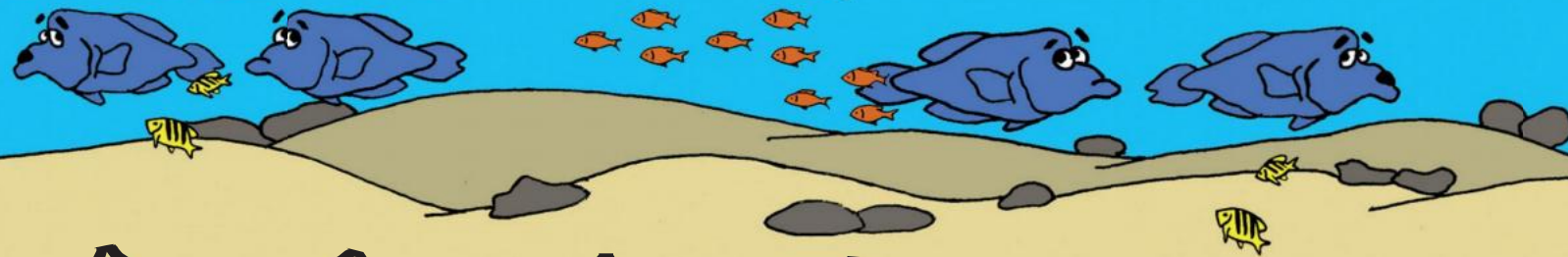


"Hurry up guys! We need to be in the water now because the tide is going out", someone shouted as they slowly waded the 15-metre distance from the village's 'matavura' (or foreshore) out to the reef.



The group moved into position, lined up in a row about five metres apart while waiting for the leader's signal. During this time, Elia's eye caught schools of saqa (trevally), 'varivoce' (humphead wrasse) and a variety of other species swimming by....and then came the signal.

As the leader sharply raised his hand into the air, a hive of activity ensued with a BOOM! The silence was broken with the sound of sticks slashing through the air and on the water while spears aimed at the fish, were shot expertly into the ocean. Elia, though physically short, could see schools of 'varivoce' frantically whizzing past, in an attempt to escape. The fish were trying to swim towards the shore to escape the deadly spears and the movement of people, but the water was far too shallow for them so back into the deep they swam.



The incredible noise confused the fish as to which way they should swim, eventually leaving them the only option of seeking refuge under the “puga” (or hard corals). However, this was what Elia and his team were counting on and, as if timed to perfection, the swoosh of the spears cutting through the water toward the fish could be heard all around.

“One more and that will be enough for our Sunday meal”, Elia mumbled to himself as his spear went into the water once more. With a smile of satisfaction he called out to his cousin as a signal that he had caught enough. They were soon joined by the other members of the team who had also caught their required amount. Laughing happily, they made their way back towards the village together, satisfied with their day’s catch.



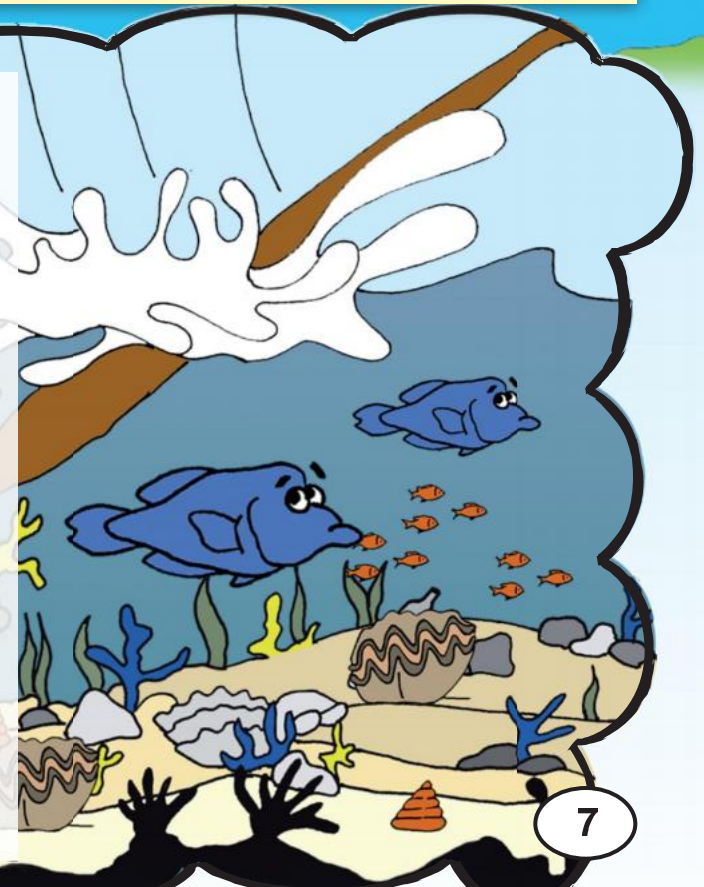




This event took place some time ago. Today we find Elia sitting under a tavola tree at the grand old age of 70, reminiscing about those “good old fishing days” – a time when the reefs of Waitabu were plentiful and beautiful. The people of the village were happy and lived well. At the end of each day, there would always be someone returning from the reef with plenty of fish to share, and with the knowledge that there would be enough to go back for the next day.

Elia remembers with fondness his life as a young fisherman in Waitabu, Taveuni, when fishing in a big group was fun. It was also a time when the villagers came together as a community, to work for a common goal. It was not simply a day to fish; it was a day to share funny experiences of struggles encountered while trying to catch a fish and not to stumble and fall on top of one another until the village headman would raise his voice, indicating that the fishing was over for the day.

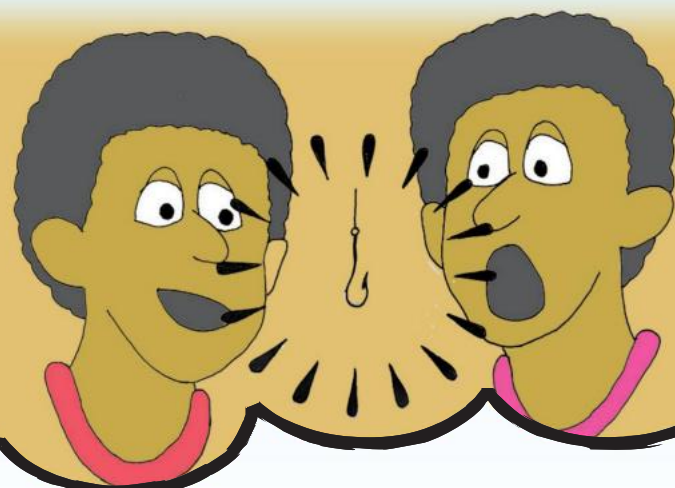
Women from the village would also go out to fish, sometimes throwing stones in the water to scare the fish and catch them with the “i taraki” (hand-nets) from the ‘puga’. These were the fishing practices of the old days – a time of abundance, with enough fish for a whole village to eat; a time when everyone had three meals a day, each meal consisting of a variety of seafood, including fish, lobster, or clams.



Elia's thoughts went back to the day when the first fishing gear was introduced to the village, and how excited everyone had been. He remembers the day clearly.

"It was one afternoon when I was returning from school, and from a distance I saw people from the village outside my home."

Eager to learn what had lured them there, he walked towards the crowd and peered into the house from the window. Inside, he could see his mother seated in the middle of the room, surrounded by men, women and children. She slowly opened her basket and pulled out some sort of string attached to a strange looking piece of metal. Elia looked on, confused about all the fuss when he heard his mother explain, "Just throw this line and hook, into the sea and the fish will grab it. Then all you do is pull the line. It will catch whatever fish you want."



"I've been told that you don't need to move around anymore while fishing anymore. You can just stand in one place and throw this line into the sea," she explained as she held up the bizarre looking equipment that Elia, and most of the villagers, had never seen before. The crowd was listening attentively, "It is called a fishing line" she announced. All eyes were glued to Elia's mother as she proudly demonstrated how it should be used.

"That is how the first fishing line came about in our village," remembers Elia, "Soon after, each household owned at least one or two. It became one of the easiest tools for catching fish and was used for many years in the village."

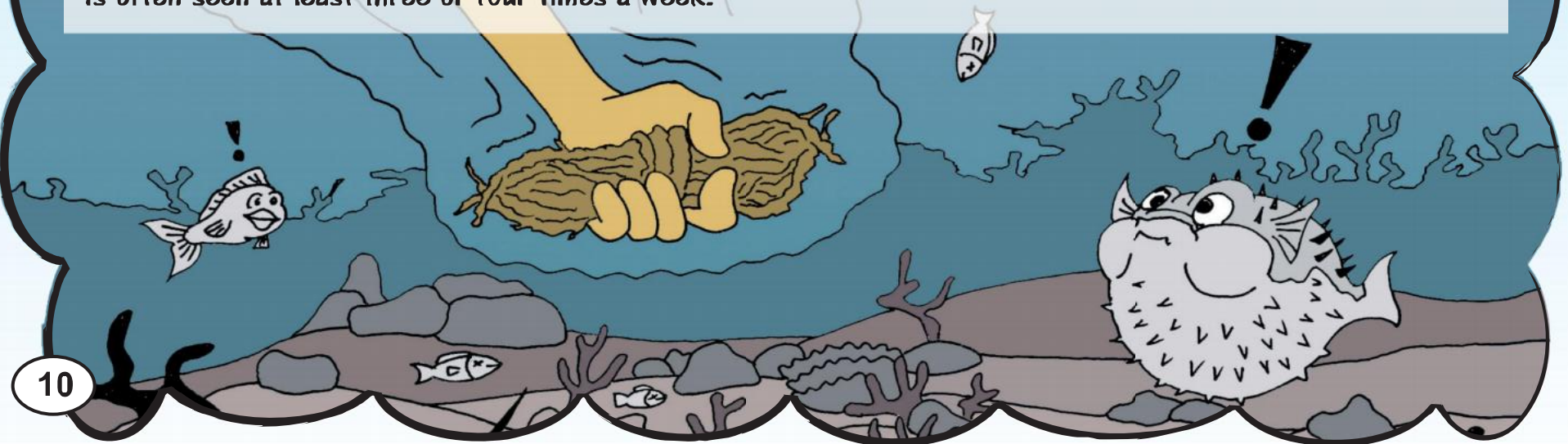




Over time newer equipment and methods were introduced to the village.

Elia recalls the changes he had observed in the village during that period. Group fishing was no longer practiced along the 'matavura'. Everyone had started to move further away to the reef because they had become reliant on the new equipment and were exploring new places to use them in order to get the best results. The traditional way of fishing in a large groups had been substituted by individuals going out with his or her new fishing gear as they were easier to handle and quicker to catch fish with in the water.

The women had also begun to depend on a plant root known as 'duva' during annual events when they are expected to catch lots of fish for various social functions. The roots of the plant are pounded and the toxic juice squeezed out while submersed in the water, practically killing everything on the reef irrespective of size. It was a quick and convenient way to catch fish - but one of the most deadly methods used. Unfortunately, this practice is often seen at least three or four times a week.



Spear guns soon followed, used often by the young men in the village. And as the village population began to increase over the years, the greater the number of people who go out fishing and using the newest, most effective gear to feed their growing families also increased. The spear guns eventually became a tool for competition among young men, vying to catch the biggest fish of the day. Because of the accuracy and efficiency of the spear gun, fishermen now have the opportunity to become experts and subsequently abandon the use of hand spears. Spear guns also allow fishermen to swim closer to the fish and allow them to be more selective, usually choosing the largest of all the fish they would see. Fish caught this way were often only sold to buyers from outside the village and the greater the demands from the buyers, the greater the fishermen's efforts of catching more fish during a day's trip.

Eventually, this cash exchange for fish was seen as opportunity to create a regular source of income for the villagers. The daily catch of large reef fish generated enough money for each household to be able to pay for their children's education while supporting their everyday living expenses. Sadly over the years, the use of spear guns became difficult to control. Fishermen were catching fish from everywhere targeting every type of fish, of any size in their search for money.



Elia remembers a time when he had to travel out to sea to catch fish for his evening meal because there was hardly anything left on the reef in front of his village. This was the result of increased fishing and lack of control over new fishing gear types that have been introduced over the years. People in the village were beginning to move out further and further - even encroaching into neighbouring fishing boundaries. They were fishing for much longer just to be able to catch an adequate amount of big fish each day.

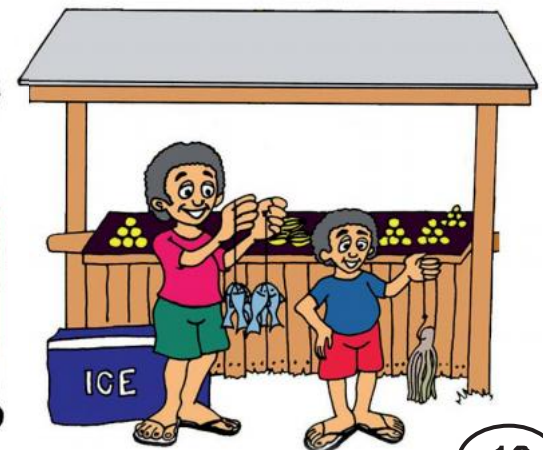
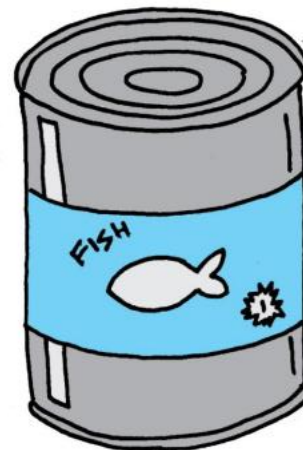
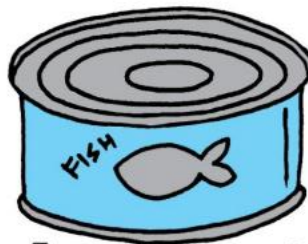




Elia recalled how the situation in the village has worsened. Making money had become the priority; there were more children in the village, who needed to attend school. This means that their parents and grandparents would need to catch more fish to sell. Night diving was more popular than day fishing as people discovered that it was easier to catch fish while they are sleeping - easy targets for fishermen armed with spear guns and torches.



With changes to fishing and fishing methods, the diet of the village-folk also began to change. Ironically, families began eating canned fish and beef bought from shops. The fresh fish caught daily by the fishermen were often sold for cash instead of being consumed by the villagers, thus contributing to the increasing number of sickly, malnourished village people.



The reefs in and around the village looked unhealthy partly because of the increasing number of people who were trampling over them every day, each time they went out fishing. Rubbish from the packaging of the newly purchased food items along with other household waste were being dumped up and down the coastline and into the sea and rivers. Slimy and leafy-looking plants called algae grew on the reefs, suffocating the corals that provided food and homes for the fish and other marine life. Invertebrates like clams, octopus, lobsters, crabs, and sea cucumbers had all but disappeared. Big fish were a rarity on the reefs now and people are catching smaller and smaller-sized fish on their lines - some smaller than the size of their palm.



“We would have been doomed if it wasn’t for the village meeting we had 15 years back”, said Elia thoughtfully, as he glanced at the white lady who from a distance, he could see training the youths of the village. Helen had been assisting the youths of Waitabu to monitor their reefs over the last 15 years and had shown them how to observe the changes that have happened from time to time. She helped them understand and communicate the impact of the ‘tabu’ their (now) elders had established 15 years ago. The Waitabu Reef Monitoring is now a yearly event which brings youth together from several nearby villagers in Bouma, learn basic survey techniques of counting fish, invertebrates and corals on the reef.

“One day, we were visited by Helen who told us that nothing was going to survive on our reef anymore because it was in such a bad condition. She told us that they were damaged and there were dead corals everywhere”, Elia relayed, “Oh.... this made the village elders very worried since they had seen these changes unfold over the years, and now they need to seek advice.”





Elia together with other elders in the village had never felt a fear such as this before. What would the future look like for the people of Waitabu?

He remembered the day when one of the villagers said to him, "We must do this for our children's future before it is too late! I have seen the sudden decrease of our resources because of the way we have been using them over the years until today....if we act now to save the last of what we have, we will always be able to have more in the future."

A few months and a series of village meetings later, the elders declared a 'tabu' for Waitabu. They established a firm rule that for 10 years, the tabu would remain closed and no one from within or outside the village would be permitted to take anything from it.



During the first three years of the new 'tabu' the reefs within the boundary began to show exciting changes. The corals began to look healthy again, bringing the reef slowly back to life. Steadily, the small fish and invertebrates started to return to live on the revived reef. Eventually, the fish that had once disappeared, started to return, a few at a time to begin with, but over the years, they all came back in large numbers.

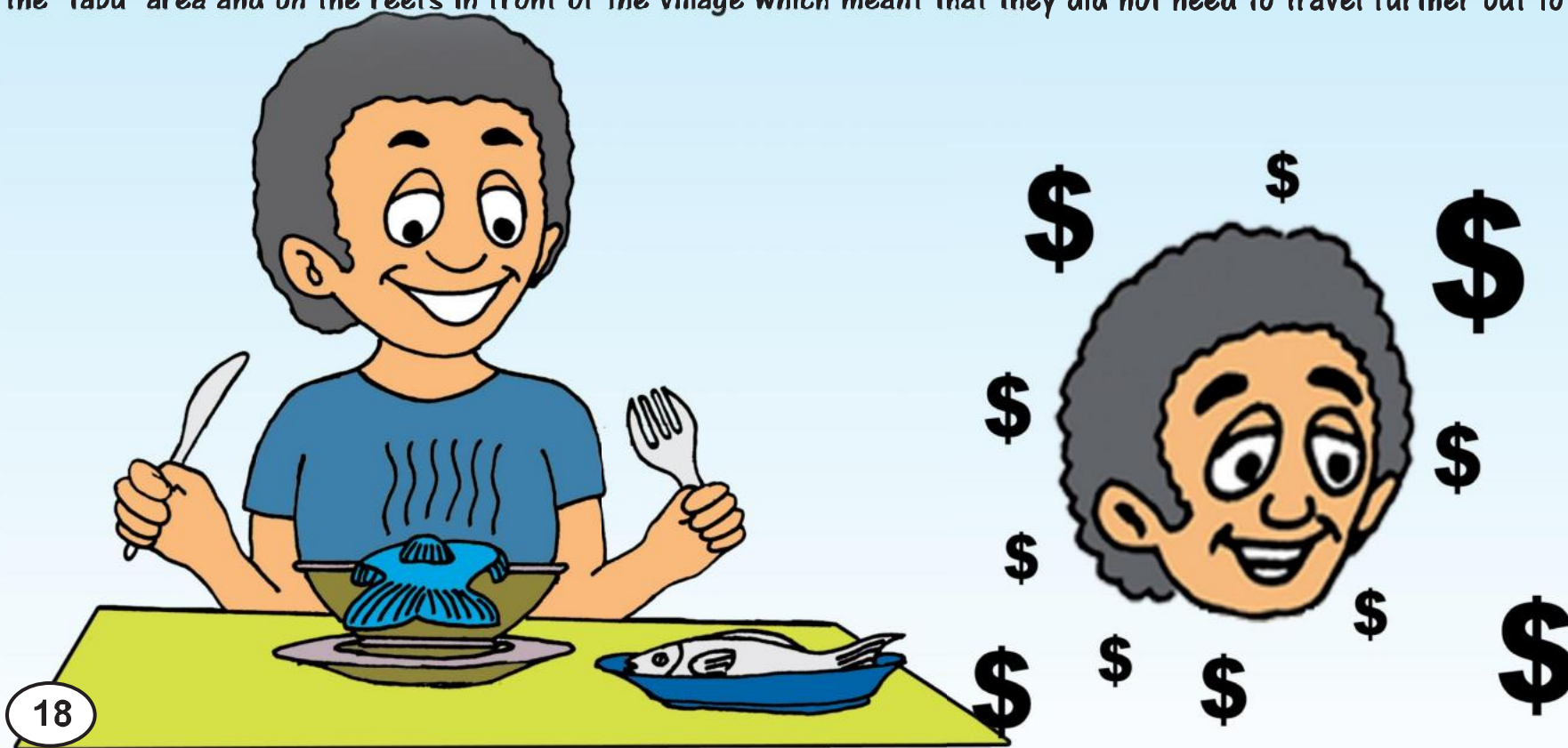
"The corals are looking alive and the fish are returning, and we are catching fish just outside the tabu!", exclaimed one of the villagers during an afternoon meeting three years after the tabu was established.

After 10 years, there were even more greater changes to be seen in the 'tabu'," Elia recalled. "The corals were looking radiant, displaying so many different colours that the reef almost resembled a flower bed in the water. There were lots of soft and hard corals from blue to green and purple in colour. Big-sized fish like the sevaseva, (sweetlips) kawakawa (groupers), nuqa (rabbitfish), rawarawa (parrotfish) and saqa (trevally) and many more were once again seen in the 'tabu'. Trochus and giant clams started to scatter in numbers atop the reef. Bech-de-mer were countless on the sandy ocean floor. Reef cleaners such as rabbitfish, surgeonfish and parrotfish again populated the reef and busied themselves ridding reef of the slimy and overgrown algae that had previously been killing the corals.



Treasured and sacred events that had long disappeared such as the harvesting of 'balolo' (worm-like creatures) were again possible. For so long the villagers had travelled far out to sea to catch 'veata' (sea slug) because of its absence within the 'matavura', but the 10-year 'tabu' had brought back this sea delicacy to the shoreline."

The 'tabu' was returning the reef to the state that Elia once remembered. For him, this proved that the 'tabu' concept worked and was serving its purpose by providing hope for the people of Waitabu. Eating fresh seafood once again became the norm of the village, returning happy, healthy smiles to everyone's faces. The villagers were catching more fish outside the 'tabu' area and on the reefs in front of the village which meant that they did not need to travel further out to sea.

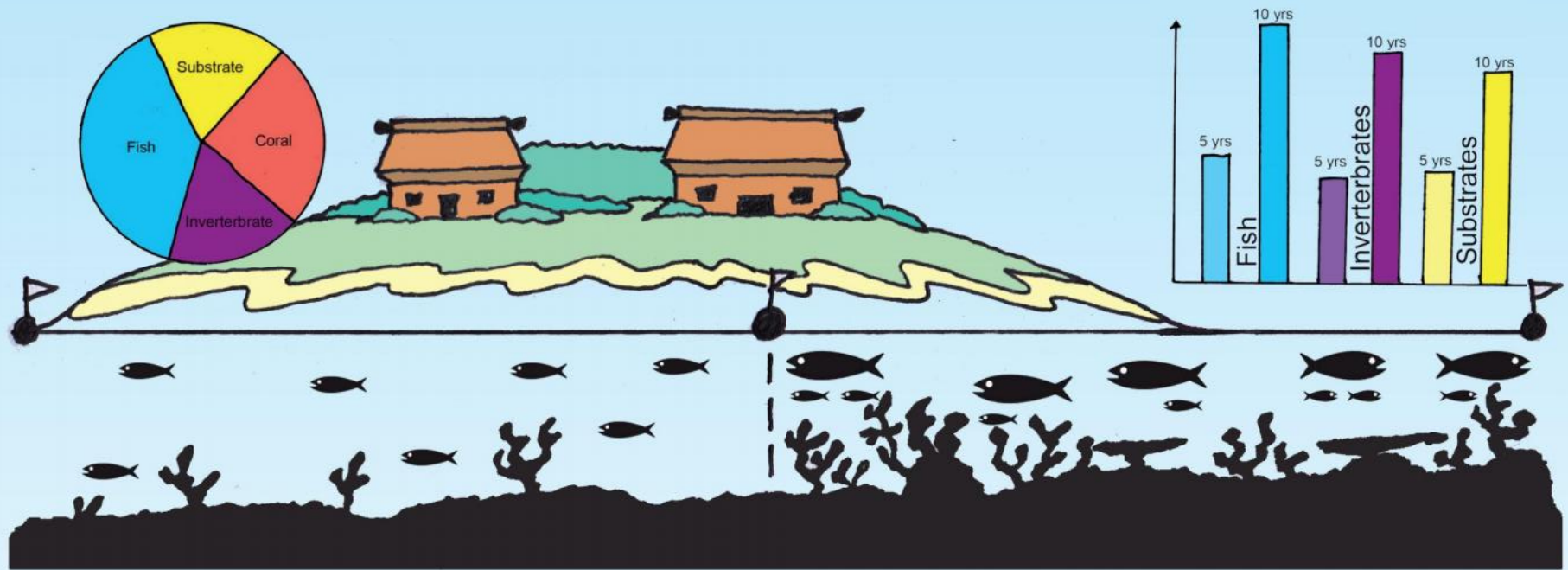




Thinking back over all the good things that the 'tabu' had provided for the people of Waitabu over the years, Elia smiled proudly and mumbled to himself, "from a barren reef, this is now our pride."

Over the past 10 years, tourists from around the world have travelled to Waitabu to snorkel in the 'tabu', guided by trained village youths. Through this process, the 'tabu' has also become an income generating and employment avenue for the villagers. As a result, more children are attending school because parents have been able to afford to pay their school fees. Other development projects in the village including the building of communal facilities have also helped to improve life in the village since the 'tabu' was established.

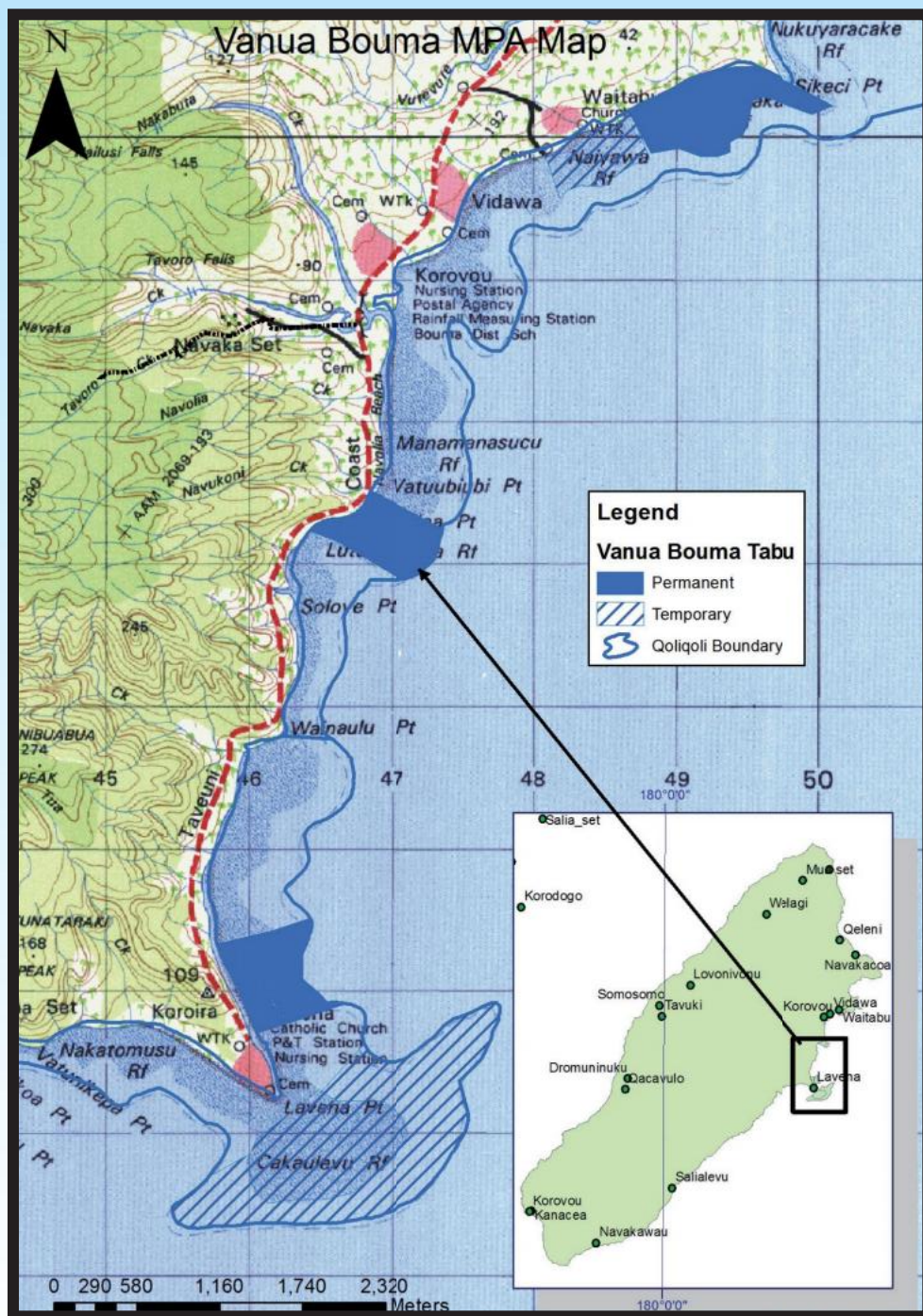




In recent years, scientists who have heard of the Waitabu success story have come to study the 'tabu' and the positive changes it has brought to the villagers. Often they would impart some advice to Elia and his people, telling them that by keeping the 'tabu' closed will continue to provide more food and income for the village in the future. Elia has also been told that for as long as the village keeps the 'tabu' in place, it will ensure the productivity of the nearby reefs, creating an important pool of resources for many marine fish and invertebrates.

The Waitabu community has decided to keep the 'tabu' closed for another 10 years and to extend the boundary of closure to form another new 'tabu' directly in front of the village. This new 'tabu' will be open for use after five years and with it comes the hope that there will be plenty fish by then.



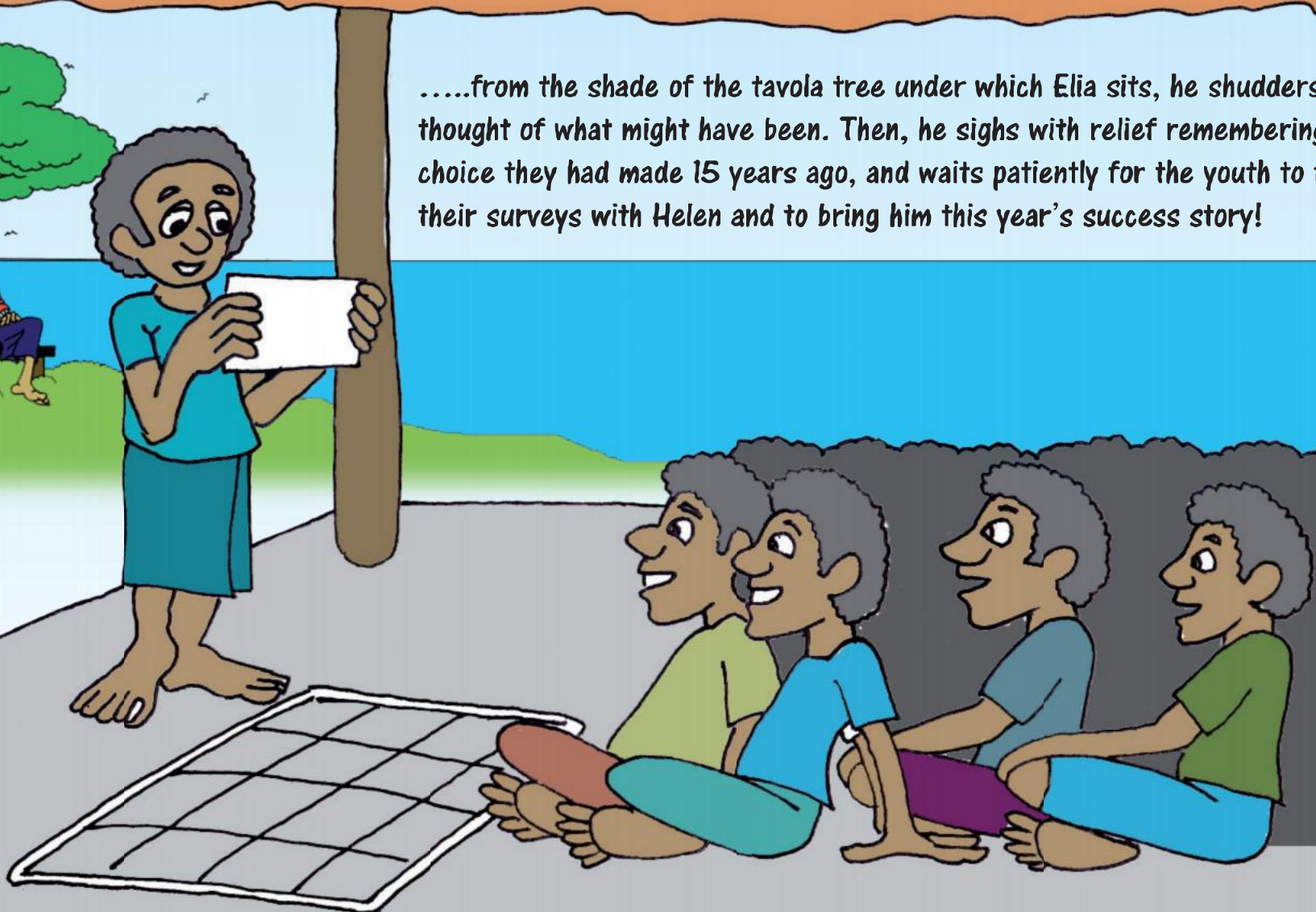


Elia often hears tales of the success of the 'tabu' in Waitabu being spoken about around the island, and recently attributes these tales to the creation of similar 'tabu' in nearby communities within the Bouma area. The people of Waitabu have joined forces to help other communities within Bouma to address some of the problems they currently face in their 'iqoliqoli' (traditional area reef fishing ground). Their aim was to create network of 'tabu' to help secure the long-term benefits for both their 'iqoliqoli' and their people.

Storytelling and information sharing about the importance of the 'tabu' occur frequently between community members. Each time a meeting is held, there are more tales to recount, as the 'tabu' of Waitabu has become a never-ending story.....



.....from the shade of the tavola tree under which Elia sits, he shudders at the thought of what might have been. Then, he sighs with relief remembering the choice they had made 15 years ago, and waits patiently for the youth to finish their surveys with Helen and to bring him this year's success story!





**Elia Gasaiwai** was born in Waitabu Village in 1943. He is married to Litiana Lewenuya and has 5 children, 14 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren. He belongs to the “Tokatoka” Waisoki, “Mataqali” or clan of Waisoki, “Tikina” or district of Wainikeli and “Vanua” Bouma in Taveuni in the province of Cakaudrove.



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