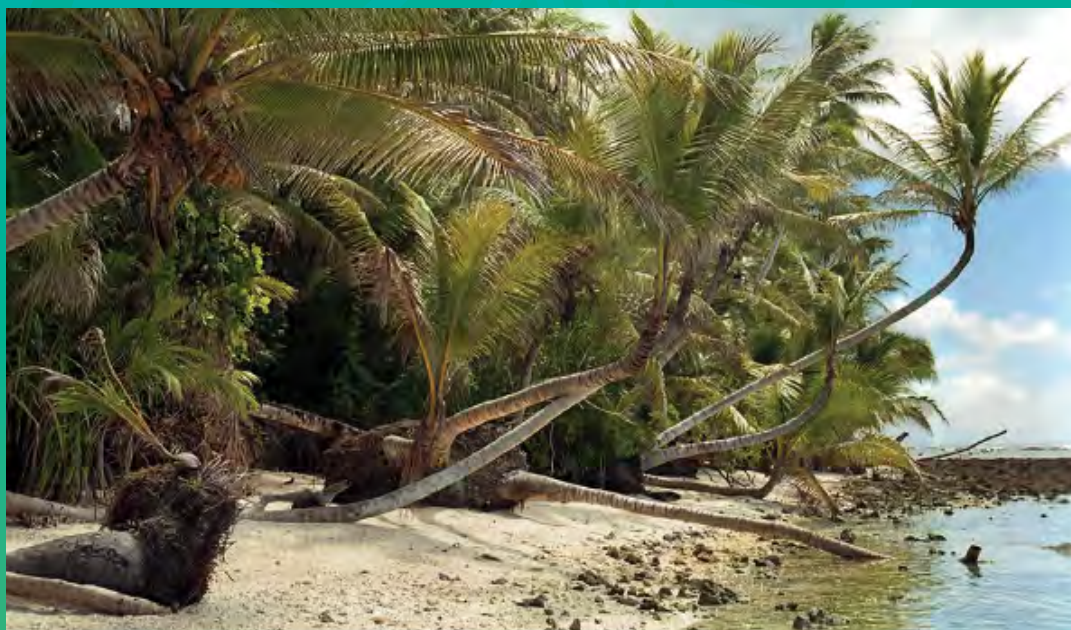




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Coconut Risk Management and Mitigation Manual for the Pacific Region



Compiled by R. Bourdeix, J. M. Sourisseau and J. Lin

Suva, December, 2021



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Coconut Risk Management and Mitigation Manual for the Pacific Region

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38. DIETARY HABITS IN THE PACIFIC REGION

By R. Bourdeix, R. K. Myazoe and J. Lin

Description

The massive and growing importation of food is a risk for agricultural production and for Pacific region as a whole. It triggers a spiral of increased external dependence, a growing trade imbalance, an allocation of foreign exchange available for consumption and not investment, the acceleration of rural-urban migration and urban unemployment, the aging of the farming population, and finally stagnation and decline in agricultural production. In the case of the Pacific region, westernization of dietary habits also has strong health issues.

Occurrence and severity

Pacific Islands Countries and Territories (PICTs) have some of the highest rates of obesity and diabetes in the world. Childhood obesity is a growing problem in Pacific island countries and has risks for the long-term health and development of children. A lack of data, especially in younger children can hinder efforts to effectively target prevention efforts.

Research has demonstrated a strong link between sugar-sweetened beverage (SSB) consumption and subsequent risk of overweight, obesity, dental caries (decay) and type II diabetes. As more and more young people are obese, they find it more difficult to climb the palms to harvest young coconuts. The price of young coconut to drink is increasing and their availability is decreasing, further reinforcing the consumption of soda in a vicious circle.

In 2000, during a survey in the Cook Islands, we succeeded with considerable difficulty in locating a rare palm from the 'Sweet husk' type named there *niu mangaro*. The survey was conducted in conjunction with a government agricultural officer. He took a tender coconut and started to chew the sweet husk. Then he stopped saying: 'I do not want people here to see me eating *niu mangaro*, because they will say I am a poor man'. The consumption of traditional varieties may be perceived as socially stigmatizing, even by an agricultural officer supposed to be aware of the value of biodiversity.

On the other hand, the consumption of imported food is considered as a mark of modernity and wealth. For instance, in Pohnpei, it is more prestigious to offer imported foodstuffs to visiting guests (e.g., rice and coca cola rather than taro and drinking coconut). Such behaviour also occurs in some in western countries, such as for instance in Paris, where French hosts often invite guests to restaurant serving foreign food instead of local.

For economic reasons, in the event of serious damage to cash crops, the government often plans official assistance. Food assistance is for convenience and opportunity often of rice, flour, sugar, canned meat etc., thus confirming the devaluation and decline of customary foods.

Who is to blame for obesity? Policy makers, the food industry, or individuals? A research survey conducted by two food economists revealed that most people believe individuals are to blame for their own obesity - not restaurants, grocery stores, farmers, food fad effects. or government policies. In our expert view, the opinion of people about obesity is, at least partially, a psychological conditioning. The first cause of obesity might be a genetic burden. In the past many of our ancestors died of hunger. Most of those who survived had a metabolism

that stores fat for survival in times of starvation, and they transmitted this characteristic to their descendants. The second cause is very probably a set of social burdens, including food fad effects, eating habits induced by advertising, and the 'ocean of food' permanently available, as described by Richard Beyer.

Mitigation and adaptation

Nutritional risks and dietary risks are two distinct concepts that do not depend solely on the availability of food. Nutritional status results from interactions between food consumption, lifestyle, infectious environment, and pathological history of the individual. Unlike dietary risks, nutritional risks are unevenly distributed according to age groups. They mainly affect children under six years of age and especially the age group of 12 to 36 months.

In recent years, sustainability of both tourism and agriculture have been linked to the development of 'alternative' food networks and a renewed enthusiasm for food products that are perceived to be traditional and local. Local foods are conceptualised as 'authentic' products that symbolise the local traditional heritage. Youth are more focused on modernity; we must therefore encourage them to perceive the use of local products as modern.

Family food traditions should be passed down and developed along with social and technological progress to retain ethnic cultural identity. The crucial role of women in this process is to be recognized and awarded.

Respect for tradition can foster economic competitiveness. For instance, the Samoan *niu afa* variety, which was until recently in danger of extinction, could generate a lucrative 'niche' market. Samoan communities in Australia and elsewhere will prefer to buy products made from this variety. Making better use of their heritage varieties, Samoan farmers and small producers of virgin coconut oil could increase their incomes and improve their livelihoods.

Actions to undertake

Promote coconut as functional food and beverage. Improved understanding of the relationship between nutrition and health results in the development of the new concept of functional foods. Those are defined as any food that has a positive impact on an individual's health, physical performance, or state of mind, in addition to its nutritious value. This practical and new approach may achieve optimal health status by promoting the state of well-being and possibly reducing the risk of disease.

Festive and ceremonial traditional events, purchasing food ingredients, regular cooking and consuming practices are some of the behaviours identified to help introduce and pass on traditional food knowledge to the younger generations.

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