INTERNATIONAL WATERS EXPERIENCE NOTES

Twinning Exchange between the Micronesia Challenge 2030 and BE-CLME+ Projects

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Thomas Nelson, Deputy Chief Fisheries Officer, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security and Rural Development, St. Lucia during the recent twinning exchange between the Micronesia Challenge 2030 (MC 2030) project and the Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities in St. Lucia from January 24–30, 2026. Photo/CRFM

Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities Through Marine Spatial Planning in the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem Plus (BE-CLME+) Project (GEF ID 10211)

Abstract | This experience note documents a twinning exchange between the Micronesia Challenge 2030 (MC 2030) Project and the Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities Through Marine Spatial Planning in the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem Plus (BE-CLME+) Project, bringing together marine resource management practitioners from Palau, Jamaica and Belize, along with Stanford University and the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism. The exchange was conducted across two in-person site visits: Palau (November 16–22, 2025) and St. Lucia (January 24–30, 2026). Participants in the exchange explored shared approaches to marine protected area management, coastal and pelagic fisheries governance, and marine spatial planning across two small-island, large-ocean contexts. Participants from both regions also identified complementary strengths in community-based governance, traditional knowledge integration, and sustainable fisheries practice. The lessons distilled through this exchange contribute to improving the management of living marine resources and are shared here with the broader IW:LEARN community.

GEF IW PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The "BE-CLME+": Promoting National Blue Economy Priorities Through Marine Spatial Planning in the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem Plus Project seeks to promote blue economy development in the CLME+ through marine spatial planning and strengthening of marine protected areas (MPAs), ecosystem approach to fisheries (EAF), and sustainable seafood value chains. The CRFM, an inter-governmental CARICOM agency, is the executing agency for the 4-year BE-CLME+ project, funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), which endorsed the Project in November 2022 and provided a US$6.2 million grant for the project.
The participating countries are Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama, and Saint Lucia, while the partner organizations are the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAF), CRFM, the University of the West Indies Centre for Resource Management and Environmental Studies (UWI-CERMES), University of Florida Sea Grant, which has committed co-financing of approximately US$41.7 million. The CRFM is the executing agency, while FAO and CAF are the GEF co-implementing agencies. These partners will support the governments of the participating countries in implementing the project interventions, from which benefits will be spread across the region. The project's budget includes US$25 million in co-financing from CAF, for lines of credit through national financial institutions to support the development of fisheries value chains.

Photo Credit: CRFM

THE EXPERIENCE

The Issue

Pacific and Caribbean island communities share a paradox familiar to small-island, large-ocean states: responsibility for managing vast and ecologically rich marine territories with comparatively limited populations, staff capacities, and financial resources. In both Micronesia and the Caribbean, local resource management protocols have long operated alongside regional transboundary governance systems — yet opportunities for cross-regional learning between these two geographies have remained rare.

The MC 2030 project, supports Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, Guam, and the Northern Mariana Islands, and the BE-CLME+ project, advances blue economy development across the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem, in particular Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Jamaica, Panama and Saint Lucia. Both projects recognised that their respective communities navigate strikingly similar challenges: balancing livelihoods with conservation, engaging communities in governance, financing protected areas, and integrating traditional knowledge into modern fisheries policy.

Photo Credit: CRFM

Addressing the Issue

To bridge this gap, a structured twinning exchange was designed, bringing together key practitioners from Palau and the Caribbean — selected for their direct roles in national protected area or coastal fisheries management, regional knowledge exchange, and GEF project coordination. Four convenings were held in total: two virtual sessions to prepare for and reflect on the site visits, and two in-person missions — Palau (November 16–22, 2025) and St. Lucia (January 24–30, 2026).

The PA registry, though in its infancy, is already proving useful to Each convening was hosted by the respective national partner and facilitated a structured dialogue on shared lessons. Two representatives from each of Palau and the Caribbean participated, alongside project team members and Stanford University representatives. This included: Dr. Azra Blythe-Mallett, Senior Director Research and Development, Jamaica National Fisheries Authority; Tyrell Reyes, Fisheries Officer, Belize Fisheries; Melvira Kazuma, Palau Protected Area Network Coordinator, Palau Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment - Micronesia; and Daemi Ngirmidol, Acting Chief, Division of Coastal Fisheries, Palau Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment. The teams were led by Dr. Dayne Buddo, Project Manager, BE-CLME+ Project and Eric Hartge, Project Manager, MC 2030 Project.


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The exchange was organised around four thematic areas: **Marine Spatial Planning, Marine Protected Areas, Coastal Fisheries, and Pelagic Fisheries** — with each session examining governance, stakeholder engagement, monitoring, financing, and livelihood dimensions across both regions.

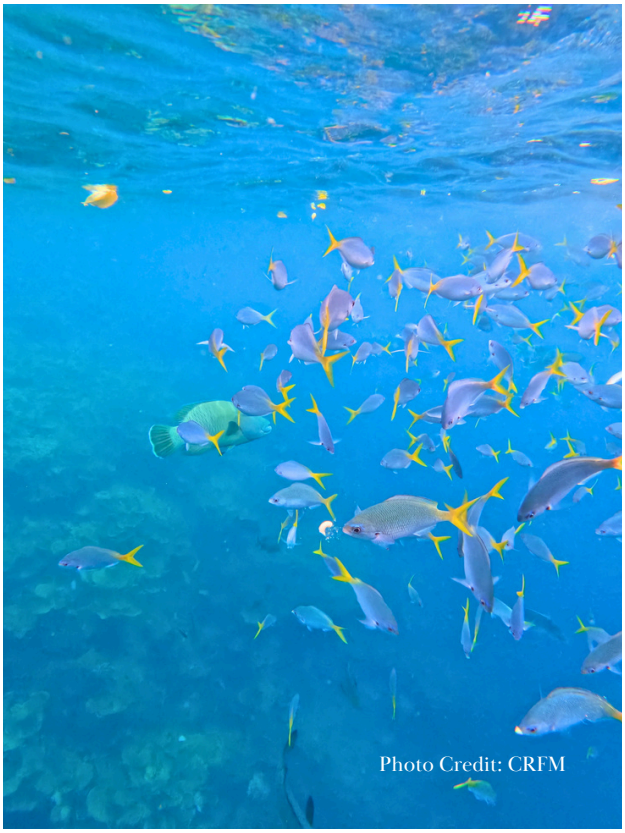
Photo Credit: CRFM

In Palau, host participants shared how traditional management systems have been incorporated into current governance frameworks, how protected area financing has been structured, and how the country is building a marine protected area process aligned with Micronesia Challenge 2030 targets. Palau's approach to expanding fishing activity within its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) as a means of reducing pressure on reef ecosystems was a particular point of learning. By encouraging fishing across a greater portion of the EEZ, Palau has reduced reef overexploitation, facilitated reef restoration, and created the conditions for spillover effects that improve overall catch. Mariculture activities — including sea cucumber farming by women in Ngatpang and giant clam seeding in Melekeok — have further strengthened biodiversity and provided alternative income sources for coastal communities.

In St. Lucia, participants shared how fish sanctuaries are managed through formal government–community partnerships, often involving fishers' cooperatives, community-based organisations, or NGOs. This model blends government technical assistance and funding with grant acquisition by coastal partners, and has demonstrated measurable improvements in fish biomass. These lessons underscored the value of coordination and institutional partnership in a resource-limited setting, and the critical linkages among science, policy, and community action.

Participants' Feedback

"I admire that in St. Lucia. There's a lot of community engagement. Not to say we don't have that in Palau, but the level of community engagement that they're doing has really inspired me as a lesson learned for me. So that when I go back home, I understand now that I have to strengthen my community engagement from the ground level up from the grassroots level more most importantly and to also encourage and strengthen the willingness of our people to own these resources as they should."

Melvira Kazuma, Palau Protected Area Network Coordinator, Palau Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment – Micronesia

What I liked about them and their fisheries is that they have a no waste policy.

Especially in the Pelagic fisheries where everything is used and we hope to get there someday where nothing goes to waste. That is something we need to look into because we could get more byproducts from the species so we can have less waste...”

Azra Blythe-Mallet, Senior Director Research and Development, Jamaica National Fisheries Authority

In Palau, we are very fortunate to have many coastal projects and programs that are aimed at the protecting our marine resources and supporting our communities. Yet behind these efforts lies a persistent challenge. Under the Palau Marine Sanctuary Act, the officers do not have the authority to issue fines for violations.

I think this limitation often leaves officers navigating difficult situations with limited enforcement tools while changing the law may be the most effective long-term solutions it is a slow process. I joined this exchange hoping to learn how others face similar realities and how they work creatively with the existing systems to encourage compliance and stewardship.”

Daemi Ngirmidol, Acting Chief, Division of Coastal Fisheries, Palau Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Environment.

Looking at here, the reef is beautiful - but other than that, what actually amazed me as well was that the approach to fisheries management.

What I noticed here is the ownership of the marine resource — that is something that is well structured here. It's well within the local and people who use the resource; they take that ownership, and that is something that it's not really common within the Caribbean region and more specifically, Belize itself.”

Tyrell Reyes, Fisheries Officer, Belize Fisheries

Results and Learning

The twinning exchange generated a rich body of comparative lessons across both geographies. The key findings are summarised below:

Ecosystem-based Fisheries and Reef Conservation - Palau

Palau's experience demonstrates that expanding responsible fishing across the EEZ, rather than concentrating effort on reef areas, can simultaneously support livelihoods and conservation. The benefits observed include reduced pressure on reef ecosystems, accelerated reef restoration, improved biodiversity, and increased catch through ecological spillover effects. Reef-adjacent ecotourism has also expanded as reef health has improved — reinforcing the economic case for conservation.

Women's Participation and Inclusive Governance

A cross-cutting lesson from Palau was the critical and often underrecognised role of women in fisheries. Women have been central to mariculture enterprises — including sea cucumber farming and giant clam restoration — demonstrating that inclusive governance is not only equitable but productive. The participation of women in these activities has also strengthened community ownership of conservation outcomes.

Zero Waste and Value-Added Practice

Palau's approach to fisheries waste reflects a cultural commitment to resource stewardship: all parts of harvested animals are utilised, and value-added processing maximises economic returns from each catch. This practice reduces waste, increases earnings for fishing households, and reflects a broader ethic of respect for marine resources rooted in indigenous knowledge.

Traditional Knowledge and Bottom-Up Governance

Both regions affirmed the importance of indigenous and traditional knowledge in driving fisheries policy and preserving cultural heritage. A bottom-up approach to governance — where communities shape the rules and priorities of resource management rather than receiving them from above — was identified as essential for long-term compliance and stewardship. This resonates strongly with the Reimaanlok framework in the Marshall Islands and with Jamaica's community-partnership model for fish sanctuaries.

Science–Policy–Community Linkages — Jamaica/St. Lucia

The Caribbean experience highlighted how structured partnerships between government agencies and coastal communities can create durable management arrangements even under resource constraints. Fish sanctuaries in Jamaica have shown measurable recovery in fish biomass, providing empirical support for the model. The lesson for both regions is that sustained monitoring and transparent communication of results strengthens both scientific credibility and community confidence in management institutions.

Shared Lessons for the Broader IW:LEARN Community

Across both site visits, participants identified that the following conditions are critical for effective locally led marine resource management in small-island, large-ocean states:

- Strong community leadership anchored in traditional governance structures
- Formal recognition of women as resource managers and economic actors in fisheries
- Integration of indigenous knowledge into national policy frameworks
- Transparent monitoring and communication of conservation outcomes
- Diversified financing models combining government support, grant funding, and community enterprise
- Regional coordination mechanisms that translate local action into multi-jurisdictional and global conservation targets

Photo Credit: CRFM

KEYWORDS

Micronesia; St. Lucia; Caribbean; resource management; protected area; responsible fishing

PHOTOS

Page 4: Participants visiting the capitol grounds in Ngerulmud, Palau.
Page 7: Participants Daemi Ngirmidol and Tyrell Reyes reflecting on and discussing resource management experiences after a visit to Kayangel Atoll in northern Palau.
Page 10: Azra Blythe-Mallet, Senior Director Research and Development, Jamaica National Fisheries Authority speaks at Orchid Garden Centre :

REFERENCES

Dr. Dayne Buddo and Eric Hartge."Caribbean & Micronesia Twinning Exchange 2025-26"

For more information about the Micronesia Challenge, please visit:
https://www.mc2030.org/

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