



SUCCESS STORY

She's Her Own Boss

Tourism and marine conservation in a Milne Bay village



Isabel O'Connor is the owner and operator of the ecotourism lodge in Divinai village in Milne Bay. She is implementing marine conservation with CI.

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“Even though I am starting small, I believe my work contributes to the whole picture of what everyone is doing in the Coral Triangle. Environment is very important, and I want to contribute to sustaining and preserving it. If we lose it, it is gone.”

— Isabel O'Connor, Divinai Lodge Owner

Isabel O'Connor wanted to start a small lodge on her family's land in Divinai, a community less than an hour east of the Milne Bay provincial capital of Alotau in Papua New Guinea. She noticed that the beach in front of her land was eroding at a rapid rate, the water was dirty, the reef was deteriorated, and the fish were scarce.

When she heard about the success of the communities on Nuakata and other nearby islands in addressing similar issues as part of the Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security (CTI-CFF), she went to the Conservation International (CI) office in town to find out more. CI is a partner in USAID's Coral Triangle Support Partnership (CTSP).

Soon, with CI and CTSP support, she traveled to the capital city of Port Moresby for a Learning and Training Network (LTN) workshop on Community Managed Marine Areas. LTN is a national program that is an outgrowth of the country's National Plan of Action created as part of Papua New Guinea's participation in the six-nation CTI-CFF.

Back home, Isabel is applying the lessons she learned at the workshop, developing her lodge business and working to protect the marine resources around her village. Isabel, who earned a diploma in Tourism &

Hospitality from Divine Word University in Madang, has built an attractive three-bedroom lodge and set up a marketing system with hotels and tourist agencies in Alotau. At the same time, she has contracted to take full control of the marine resources on nearby Gahilame Island, and she's brought CI and CTSP in to do baseline surveys of reef and fish and to help her set up a monitoring program. "CI gave me a snorkel and flippers, and I go out there by the beach, I find interesting things," she said.

Isabel has even convinced the local government to add a conservation position to its development committee, which she hopes will help build local support for marine resource management. Most recently, Isabel has asked CI staff to teach her how to conduct workshops to increase understanding of marine resource conservation in the three villages in her area, and she is planning a visit to Nuakata Island to learn first-hand from what they are doing to manage their coastal resources. "I want to go there and see exactly what they have done, interview them," she said.

"Even though I am starting small, I believe my work contributes to the whole picture of what everyone is doing in the Coral Triangle," she added. "Environment is very important, and I want to contribute to sustaining and conserving it. If we lose it, it is all gone." She understands the issues and is excited about her role in addressing them locally and the positive effect her work will have on her livelihood, earned through resource-based ecotourism. *Conservation International is the lead implementing partner for CTSP and the USCTI Support Program in Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea.*