

## **Public Consultations on Proposed Marine Protected Areas**

On the 29th of October, 2020, the Graduate Diploma of Legal Practice students of University of Fiji attended their first Public Consultation; specifically, on the Proposed Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) conducted by the Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Fisheries in which the graduates were able to study the draft maps presented.

These massive areas have already been declared an Environmental (Preservation and Protection) Zone with legislation in place to protect their natural resources which include strict controls over fishing, pollution (air, land and water), damage to the environment, and the killing, harming or collecting of animals.

The graduates were asked to equally divide themselves amongst eight groups for a more intimate consultation session. In this session, the graduates were exposed to specialists who had in depth knowledge on the project at hand.

Present at the table were also parties that had interests that might possibly have been affected by the proposed MPAs, and ordinary citizens that left the consultation overwhelmed with the information shared. The information that was sent to them was to be passed to colleagues within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office or the facilitator to analyse responses to this consultation, and published in a summary of responses received for the consultation.

The group session allowed the graduates to learn on a more one-to-one level from the project team members and even from their colleagues who joined them around the table. The students were also able to have an interactive session where robust group discussions took place.

One of the graduates managed to stun the group, including the specialists present, with her question. The student was aware of a fisheries treaty that Fiji currently has with the United States of America in which the United States is allowed to fish within Fiji's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and thus posed the question as to whether the proposed MPAs would affect the agreement between the two states. Her group members were astonished as the issue of treaties with other states had not been a factor that was taken into consideration when choosing the proposed MPAs. The proposal to make 14 marine protected areas cover the 30% promised by Fiji was put under great scrutiny.

The groups, each having about three to four graduates in one group, were taken to study, observe and analyze each map which contained various data collected for each habitat and organism intended to be protected under the proposed MPAs. In the end, feedback was provided. The scholars did not hold back in satisfying their curiosity in the feedback session. Interactive and intensive back and forth continued for some time, indicating the fascination this subject held for the GDLP students. The GDLP Programme Coordinator is Ms Mai'moa KoilaKabu of the JDP School of Law.