Cegu Valley Farm

Cegu Valley Farm is located in the province of Macuata on Vanua Levu. It is a 32-acre property, where permaculture techniques are used to sustainably farm the land. Bees are kept to support pollination and to provide an additional source of revenue. The farm has provided informal bee-keeping training and hosts an overseas university group.

# Agritourism proposition

The farm has hosted university study abroad groups and has hosted groups through Bridge the Gap who work with a local community. They are located close to Nukubati Private Island Resort and Palm Lees Resort, and are 30-minutes from Labasa by car. They offer unique educational, hands-on experiences on a model farm practising permaculture. By formalising their farm visits, they can strengthen connections with the local tourism market to provide an additional revenue stream to support the farm’s activities and training programme.

# Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

Cegu Valley Farm, like other businesses during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, had their farm operations severely impacted. This included them not being able to sell their sheep and goats, which were their main farm income. In addition, a university student group from the USA, who they hosted annually, was unable to stay for three years due to the border closures and travel uncertainties.

The scaled down farm activities resulted in the owners not being able to afford additional help, even on reduced hours. This saw all four adult members of the family sharing extra workload to maintain the farm. Plans to improve infrastructure for dormitory accommodation were put on hold.

# Agritourism Support Programme

## Support requested

Cegu Valley Farm requested support to engage a consultant to connect them to existing support networks and help them navigate the regulatory environment, with the aim of ensuring their agrotourism venture is fully compliant. They requested support to improve the quality of their farm tour experiences, and appropriately price the experiences to match their quality, and requested support to improve their tourism network and understanding of how the sector operates. Additionally, they asked for support to refresh their website, training in how to maintain it, and advice on including an on-line payment gateway.

## Successes

* The farm was supported to develop six experience products, which can be tied together in a day trip package to offer tourists.
* They identified two key markets for their experiences, namely Savusavu tour operators and the existing University connections overseas.
* The farm owners developed an understanding of how to fully establish their agritourism business and the regulatory agencies they needed to engage with, alongside the confidence to do so.
* They undertook a risk assessment for the site, and undertook measures to reduce risk, alongside receiving advice on appropriate insurance options.
* Materials were purchased for signage and for two small footbridges.
* Trees were purchased from a private supplier alongside a large number of native forest trees from the Forestry department, which were planted.
* The farm invested additional funds to develop their facilities to enable their dormitory to be used for training, to extend it with the addition of a veranda, and to improve toilet facilities. Farm funds were also used to co-finance hiring an excavator to clear trial paths and waterways.

## Lessons learned

A key lesson identified was the time investment required. As an added activity to their normal farm work, it was not easy to find the time to progress the agritourism work. Similarly, the cost of becoming fully compliant was greater than anticipated, and with existing funds they could not pursue compliance and meet the ongoing operational needs of the farm. The process for becoming compliant needed to be sequenced carefully with starting tours to reduce the lag between investment and additional income.

Another important lesson was understanding the demands of the tourism market, in terms of both tailoring experiences depending on the weather and season, and the infrastructure that is required to support experiences, such as appropriate toilet facilities, and a dining area to make the most of the farm-to-table product.

## Community impacts

### Economic impacts

The farm is not market ready, and needs to invest time and resources in compliance and infrastructure, before the agritourism experiences will provide an income. Nearby resorts are keen to send guests once the tours start. The farm is providing local beekeeper training courses twice per month, with up to 24 trainees in a month, which has provided additional revenue.

### Social impacts

The farm’s working unit is more organised and enjoys a better sense of direction. They are thinking more about hazards around the farm and safety which is helping them be better operators. They are now planning to open a souvenir shop that will give local artists an opportunity to sell handcrafts. They have taken on an extra employee part time, and once the agritourism business is operational they plan to engage a second part time employee. Employees who are engaged in farm work and landscaping activities, will be trained up to work with visitors as guides.

### Environmental impacts

Due to the new planting the farm is looking more attractive, and they are working towards planting a small forest composed of indigenous timber and fruit species. They are more committed to composting and mulching, erosion control and reducing pollution than previously.

# Future steps

The farm experience tours are planned to launch in September. Their aim is to be well known within the Vanua Levu tourism sector and be specifically known as a model for sustainable agritourism. Within five years they aim for their agritourism business to be:

* Fully operational, with 2 tours per week of 10-12 tourists between May and November (the dry season).
* Selling local handicrafts and value-added farm produce from a small souvenir shop.
* Providing lunches in an open air dining hall with a view of the sea and surrounding farmland.
* Providing overnight accommodation for visitors through AirBnB.
* Networked with resorts and other agritourism businesses on Vanua Levu.
* Introducing full day tours in partnership with two other farms nearby.

| Cegu Valley Farm was supported through the PARDI2 Fiji Agritourism Support Programme. The programme provided existing agritourism experience operators and agribusinesses with technical support and mentoring to be market ready for the domestic market initially, as COVID restrictions ease, and for the international market eventually. Five enterprises were selected by an expert panel. Each enterprise received a small grant to further support market readiness.  |
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