

SAFEGUARDING SEAGRASS

Lau Lagoon is the largest seagrass area in Solomon Islands. Dugong, fish and people depend on the seagrass. Support the efforts to save the lagoon: (1) protect dugongs, (2) respect fishing closures, (3) refrain from using trammel nets, (4) safeguard fish spawning aggregations, and (5) properly dispose plastic waste.



10 Many communities in the lagoon are actively managing their fisheries. People place several sticks on the reef or the seagrass bed to signal that fishing in these areas is temporarily prohibited. This is an effective way to conserve marine resources. It is important to support these initiatives to ensure that fisheries in Lau Lagoon meet the needs of the people, now and in the future.



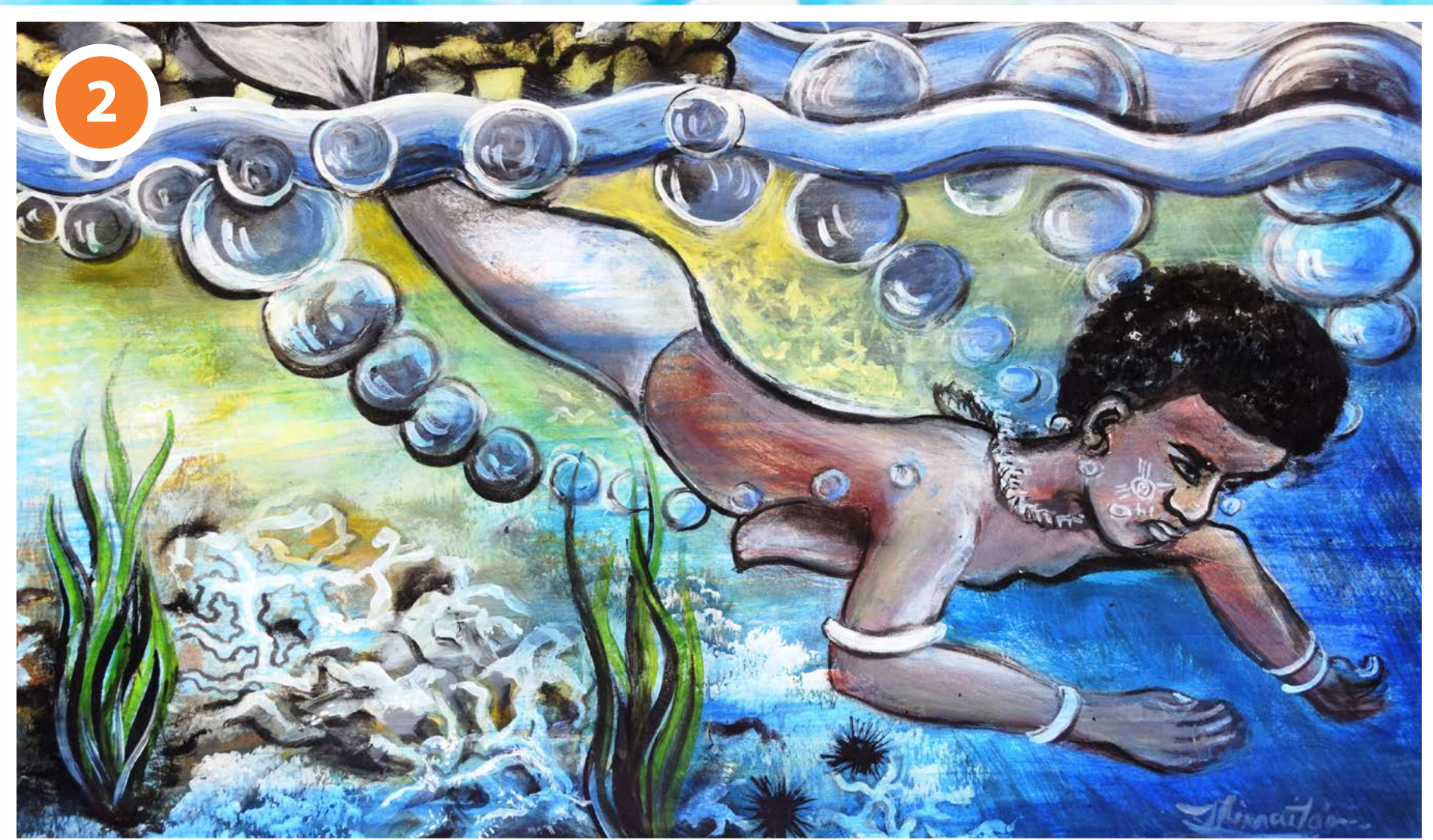
9 Fish plays a central role in the diet, economy and culture of the Lau Lagoon. Since ancient times, the 'saltwater people' have bartered fish for root crops on the markets on the mainland. But, it is much harder for people in the lagoon to find fresh fruits and vegetables. This is a particular concern for the health of women and children.



8 Seagrass is not only important for fishers, but also for farmers. Watermelons are an important agricultural commodity in North Malaita, and the watermelons from Lau are famous for being the sweetest in the country. Farmers collect seagrass on the beach and use it to improve the soil fertility of their gardens. This leads to bigger and sweeter melons.



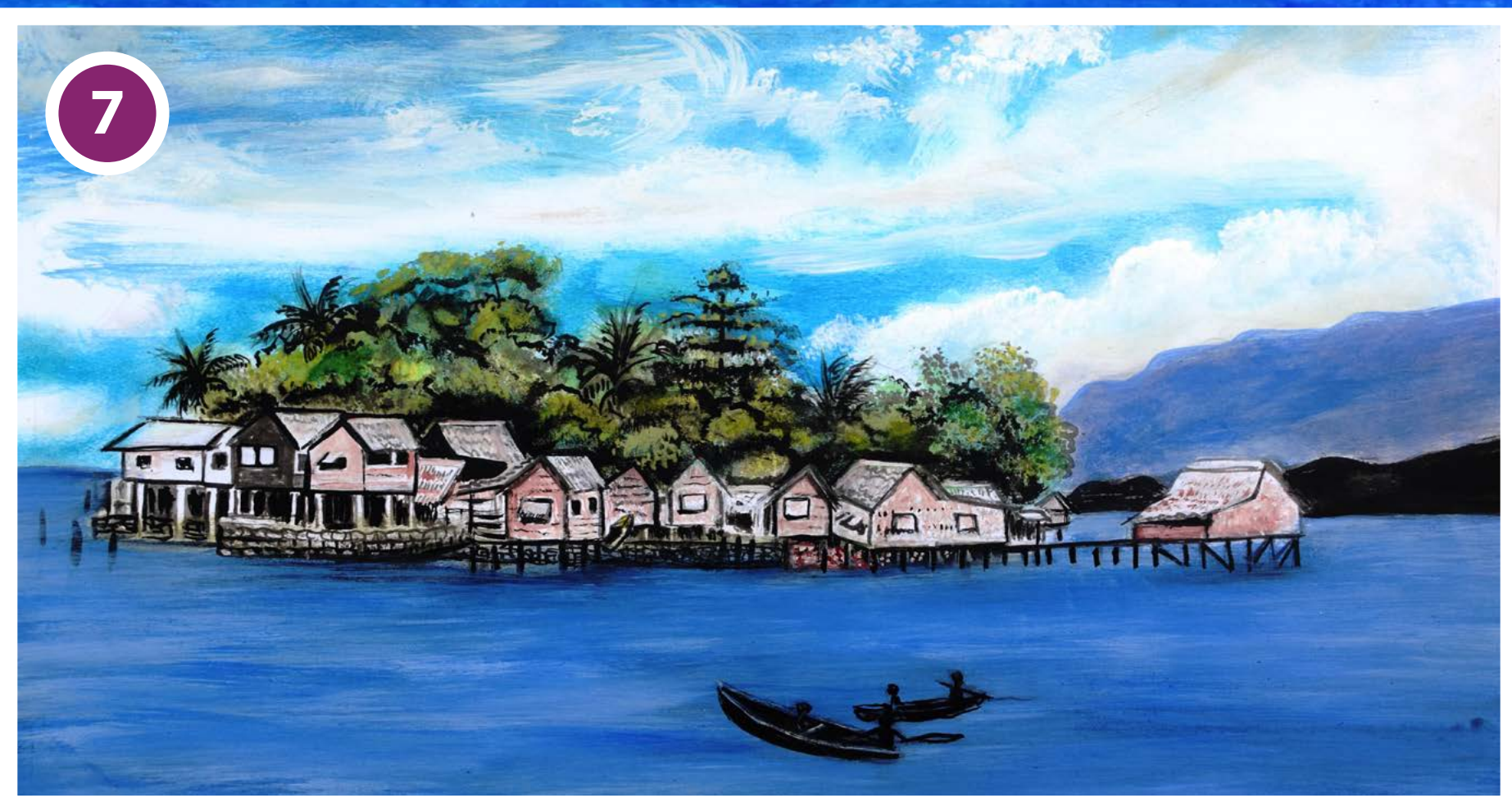
1 The dugong is a large animal that lives in the sea. Dugongs are also sometimes called 'sea-cows', because they mainly eat seagrass. Dugongs can be found in shallow areas near the coast. They can live for more than 50 years. Females give birth in the water, usually to only one calf. The calf stays close to its mother for several years. Because it takes a long time for these animals to raise their calves, hunting has a big impact. In many parts of the country the dugong has disappeared. But this special sea animal still lives in Lau Lagoon.



2 Some tribes in Lau Lagoon consider dugongs to be sacred animals. People tell the story of a woman called Faifu, who was badly treated by her mother-in-law. One day, Faifu could no longer bear the insults. She asked her husband and son to meet her after seven days at the seaside, and then jumped into the water. One week later, the father and the young boy waited for Faifu. At noon a dugong surfaced: from now on Faifu would live in the sea. Since then, many people in Lau Lagoon will not hunt or eat dugongs.



3 In the past there were a lot of dugongs in the lagoon. They grazed on the shallow seagrass fields near the shore. With their constant movements and grazing, the dugongs made a deep channel through the seagrass. People used this 'dugong channel' to paddle to the mangroves. But when people killed the dugongs for their meat, the channel filled up with mud. Now, it is difficult for people to reach the mangroves during low tide.



7 Lau Lagoon is famous for its man-made islands. These settlements are built by manually hauling and piling up coral rocks on shallow reefs or in the mangroves, often more than 3 meters high. There are around 55 artificial islands in the lagoon. Over the past century many people have left the artificial islands. They settled on the mainland where access to roads, gardens, markets, schools and freshwater is easier.



6 The 'saltwater people' depend on fish and other marine resources for food and income. But fisheries in the lagoon are under increasing pressure. Overharvesting is threatening important commercial species such as sea cucumber, trochus and hump-head parrotfish. The use of trammel nets, or 'magnet nets', is impacting the rabbitfish and emperor fisheries. And the cutting of mangroves is degrading nursery grounds and exposing the coast to storms. Several communities in Lau Lagoon have taken steps to use their marine resources more wisely. The village of Fumamoto'o, for example, has declared a locally managed marine area.



4 Dugongs, turtles and many other animals depend on seagrass for food and shelter. Seagrass is important because it provides a nursery ground for fish, shells and other marine resources. Also, seagrass keeps the water clean and protects the coast. The *hatamela*, or thumbprint emperor, is an important fish for people in Lau Lagoon. Emperors depend on the seagrass beds in the lagoon, where they eat snails, worms and urchins that live in the sand.



5 Another fish that depends on the seagrass in the lagoon is the *mu'u*, or dusky rabbitfish. It is a tasty fish with few bones. Rabbitfish form large groups to breed. In these so-called 'spawning aggregations', the females release millions of eggs that are fertilized by the males. The fertilized eggs then drift into the ocean. After several months, dense schools of juveniles come back to the lagoon.