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OBSERVER PROGRAMMES

In spite of the low priority of the co-ordination of observer programmes in the total work of the Tuna Programme (priority 11 out of 13), considerable effort has been expended on this item. Following on from discussions at the Fourteenth Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries, Tuna Programme staff have carried out the second of two lengthy trips on Japanese purse-seine vessels, the later trip on a 116-tonne group seiner. Reports from both trips have been submitted to the government sponsoring the observer cruises and, subject to clearance, will be made available throughout the region.

There are as yet very few national observer programmes within the region and the benefits expected from establishing such programmes vary throughout the region. Further input from countries is necessary for the operation of observer programmes to cover the whole region. Involvement of a regional organisation, assumed at this time to be the South Pacific Commission, would also be required to ensure that programmes are regionally co-ordinated. The present low priority of this item has made it impossible to fund a specific position of observer programme co-ordinator, particularly as total Tuna Programme funding is still in doubt.

As guidelines for further consideration by fisheries officers, the case for establishment of national observer programmes within developing Island states is summarised as follows:

1. Cross-checking of data submitted by distant-water fishing nations under licensing agreement.

There is often uncertainty in data declared by distant-water fishing nations due to problems in interpreting the requirements of the coastal state. For example, there have been language problems in interpreting the logbook formats and there is still uncertainty about how to declare discards and how to measure average weights.

2. Development of methods for improving accuracy of the data.

Probably the best example at the moment is the need to develop a sampling system to estimate the occurrence of juvenile yellowfin and juvenile bigeye tuna in purse-seine catches.

3. Surveillance.

Useful for monitoring activities of vessels on which observers are placed and for gathering general intelligence on the fleet.

4. Increasing the understanding of the general operation of foreign vessels.

This is a much underrated aspect of observer programmes. It is of particular importance in countries where nationals do not have in-depth experience with the type of fishing being carried out.

5. Collection of biological data.

This is normally a priority item when data is needed for specific, short-term projects.

Issues which relate to the activities of the Tuna and Billfish Assessment Programme or any regional resource evaluation efforts are:

1. Improving the understanding of the precise activities on board different types of vessels.
2. Evaluation of the accuracy with which logbook forms are completed by individual vessels.
3. Identification of problems or inadequacies with the present logbook forms or with the procedures used by fishermen to complete them.
4. The operation of sampling programmes. Such programmes would at present be of great value in helping to differentiate between juvenile yellowfin and bigeye tuna in purse-seine catches, including the investigation of the accuracy of previous declarations, and in defining size frequencies for dominant species in the catches by major gear types.
5. Investigation of the quantity and precise species composition of "trash fish" catches by the various types of vessels.