

COASTAL FISHERIES OF THE SOUTH PACIFIC ISLANDS¹

by

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Abstract

A review is presented of coastal fisheries in the South Pacific, including descriptions of fisheries, catch composition, catch rates and fisheries biology studies conducted on target stocks. The most widely targeted coastal fish stocks are reef fish and coastal pelagic fishes. Small pelagic resources are important for subsistence and small scale commercial fisheries. Previously, small pelagic resources were important as a source of live bait for pole-and-line tuna fishing, but this method is declining and only one large baitfishery is left in the region in the Solomon Islands. The pole-and-line baitfisheries represent the only large scale industrial scale fisheries to have operated in the coral reef lagoons of the Pacific. Estuarine resources are of major importance only in the large islands of Melanesia but are the staple diet of a relatively large fraction of the total South Pacific population. Deep slope fish stocks form the basis of only two commercial fisheries in the region and expansion of deep slope fishing comparable to the 1970s and 1980s is unlikely to occur again. Commercial fisheries development is currently orientated towards small and medium scale longline fisheries for offshore pelagic resources, where high value tunas and billfish are caught for export markets.

The total coastal fisheries production from the region amounts to just over 100,000 t/yr, worth a nominal \$US 262,000,000. About 80 per cent of this production is from subsistence fishing. Just under half the total annual commercial catch comes from fishing on coral reefs, which includes a small tonnage of deep slope species. Invertebrates are the most valuable inshore fisheries resources and these include sea-cucumbers, and the molluscs, trochus and pearl oyster. Lobsters and mangrove crabs form the basis of small scale commercial fisheries as also do penaeid prawns except in Papua New Guinea where they are caught in large quantities through trawling. Mariculture of prawns is becoming increasingly popular in the region and is a major industry in New Caledonia. The greatest influence of coastal fisheries in the Pacific during the next century is likely to come from Southeast and Northeast Asia, where the demand for high value coastal fishes and invertebrates has led to large scale depletions and motivated fisheries entrepreneurs to seek stocks in the neighbouring South Pacific.

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