

11th Meeting of the Standing Committee on Tuna and Billfish (SCTB 9)

30 May –6 June 1998,

Ala Moana Hotel, Waikiki, Hawaii.

Country Report:

COOK ISLANDS

BACKGROUND

DWFNS

The tuna fishery within the Cook Islands EEZ or an area approximating it, has historically been exploited by distant water fishing nations (DWFNs). These fleets have included Japanese (1950s to 1990), Korean (1980 – 1992) and Taiwanese (1981-1994) longline vessels targetting predominantly albacore for canning, and tuna blast frozen for the sashimi market in Japan.

Data coverage for this period and from these vessels was generally poor quality and it is therefore difficult to give an accurate figure as to the total catch taken during this time.

US Treaty

More recently US purse seiners, through a multilateral treaty on fisheries, have been licensed to fish in Cook Islands waters. The Treaty allows US vessels access to the Cook Islands EEZ, as part of a multilateral access arrangement between the US and the 16 member countries of the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA). There have been several fishing trips made to the Cook Islands EEZ by these purse seiners since the inception of the Treaty in 1988. However our waters are not considered to be productive grounds for this type of fishery. The total catch therefore only amounts to approximately 1500 metric tonnes for the total licensing period.

Joint Ventures

1994 saw the first joint venture fishing operation based out of Rarotonga. The company operated two longline vessels targeting export quality tuna and swordfish for the fresh chilled and sashimi markets overseas (see figure. 2). Trips were normally one week in duration to coincide with the weekly flights to the U.S markets. Fishing operations were limited to seas around the main island of Rarotonga, as fishing range was constrained by the northbound flight schedule and high cost of fuel.

During 1995 the company also established a pack house with cool store, freezer, and ice making facilities to package and process the fish for airfreight overseas. In 1996 the company also opened a fish shop, which retailed fish to the general public. A second company, also in a joint venture type arrangement, began in 1995, operating a single longliner out of Rarotonga.

However, a poor fishing season in 1996, combined with a relatively high cost of operation and limited fishing range forced these companies to move their operations away from the Cook Islands. The local partner of one particular company, had invested in a small longline vessel, and continued to supply a low volume of fish to the local market. This operation continued into early 1997, when the vessel foundered on the reef encircling the main island of Rarotonga, effectively ending all commercial fishing activity in the Cook Islands up until March of this year.

Fleet Structure

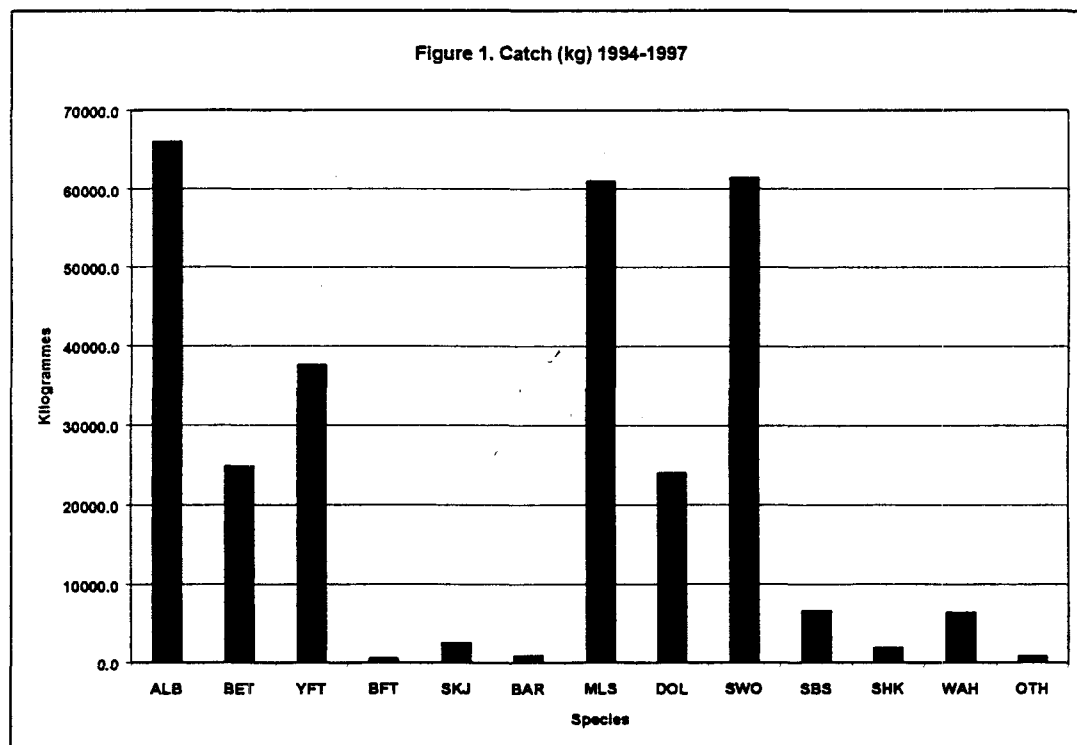
During the 1994 - 95 there were two locally based foreign fishing vessels operating within the Cook Islands EEZ. Both were longliners licensed for one year under a joint venture type arrangement. 1996 saw three new vessels licensed including one locally owned and operated vessel.

Table 1. Licensed vessels during the period 1994 - 1997

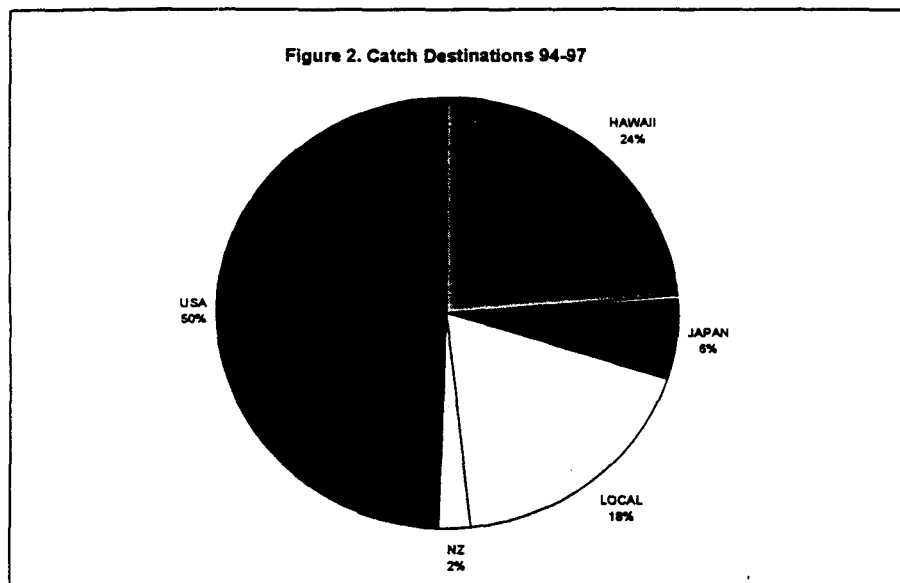
BOATS LICENSED DURING 1994:		
Name	Type	GRT
Southern Progress	Longliner	109
BOATS LICENSED DURING 1995:		
Name	Type	GRT
Southern Progress	Longliner	109
Kona Wind	Longliner	181
BOATS LICENSED DURING 1996:		
Name	Type	GRT
Suzanne 'M'	Longliner	109
Edna Kate	Longliner	100
Far Quest	Longliner	30.3
BOATS LICENSED DURING 1997:		
Name	Type	GRT
Far Quest	Longliner	30.3

Total Catch By Species 1994-1997

The total catch taken between 1994 – 1997 was estimated to be approximately 300 metric tonnes. This figure was calculated using the transshipment data, which had 100% coverage and is considered to be more accurate than the logsheet data.



Final Market Destination Of Catch



CURRENT SITUATION

Policy Statement

The Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) has recently formulated a comprehensive policy paper for the offshore fisheries sector. The policy paper maps out a future development scenario for the offshore fisheries sector, concentrating primarily on the longline fishery targeting tuna and associated bycatch. In particular, the offshore fisheries policy document is expected to have the following uses:

- To act as a guide for action by MMR – as such it will be an input into a corporate plan to be prepared by the Ministry,
- To act as guide for other government departments in their dealings with offshore fisheries such that there is a consistency of purpose and direction within government regarding offshore development;
- To inform other countries in the region of our policy with respect to offshore fisheries in our EEZ; and
- To inform would-be investors of the Government's policy, strategy and role for development of the sub-sector

The policy is in line with the Government's extensive and ongoing economic reform programme, which clearly states that economic growth will be private sector led.

As part of a peer review process, the policy discussion paper was circulated for comment to relevant regional organisations, the private sector, and related government agencies.

Resource Assessment

The resource assessment, and the potential for various fisheries detailed within the policy paper relied heavily on the SPC National Fisheries Assessment. This document was completed and provided to MMR by Mr Keith Bigelow on behalf of SPC in 1997.

The National Fisheries Assessment conservatively estimates the total allowable (TAC) for longlining in the Cook Islands EEZ at 6,000 metric tonnes (mt) per year for all species.

For exploitation by locally based fleets, SPC suggests that the EEZ can usefully be considered as a northern and southern zone. The estimated TAC and species breakdown by zone are presented in the table below:

Species	Northern EEZ (mt)	Southern EEZ (mt)
Albacore	1,260 (35%)	720 (30%)
Yellowfin	720 (20%)	480 (20%)
Bigeye	900 (25%)	240 (10%)
By-catch	720 (20%)	960 (40%)
Total	3,600 (100%)	2,400 (100%)

The potential size of tuna stocks and the estimated TAC for vessels operating within the Cook Islands EEZ, was thus used as a guideline to establish policy on the management of the resource, and also to establish its potential worth to the Cook Islands.

Bilateral Access

1998 has seen renewed interest by the Taiwan Deepsea Boatowners Association to resume fishing operations in the Cook Islands EEZ. Negotiations for fisheries access with Taiwan are continuing.

The Ministry of Marine Resources has concluded an access agreement with a company based in American Samoa allowing four Korean longliners to conduct fishing operations in the EEZ. These boats have been fishing in the EEZ since March and the catch data is presented elsewhere in this report (see table 2.). The fishing activities of this company has generated considerable interest by other companies based in American Samoa and abroad, and it is anticipated that a further four foreign longliners will be licensed in fish in the Cook Islands EEZ within a month.

In addition, two local companies have invested in this sector and are expected to commence fishing operations later this year or early 1999.

Table 2. Catch statistics for 1998, Foreign Vessels

ALB/kg	BET/kg	YFT/kg	MAR/kg	OTH/kg	TOTAL/kg	TOTAL/Days	Ave. Per Day
203230	34535	37790	4660	300	280515	190	1476.4

Future Considerations

It is anticipated that the high level of catch reporting will continue, and taken in consideration with the data from past joint venture operations will provide an increasingly clearer picture as to the status of the resource in the Cook Islands. This will in turn provide MMR with a more clear guideline in terms of management of the fishery, as well as maximising the revenue gained from the tuna resource.