

ORIGINAL : ENGLISH

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

TWENTIETH REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 1 - 5 August 1988)

COUNTRY STATEMENT - NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

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Background

The U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) has experienced rapid growth since it established political union with the United States in 1976. Rapid growth in Tourism, the CNMI's leading industry, paralleled with the present economic boom is gradually changing the pace of commercial fisheries development as well as the local and federal governments perception of the need to develop this industry.

Japanese tourists, the majority of the Northern Marianas visitors (75% of the approximately 190,000 visitors that visited the Northern Marianas in 1987 are Japanese) are partly responsible for the gradual growth in this industry. The demand for seafood, caused by the increasing influx of Japanese tourists, is opening a bright market for locally caught fishes.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife of the Department of Natural Resources, is the agency of the Northern Marianas Government mandated by law to protect, conserve, manage, and develop the fish and wildlife resources. The fish and Game Regulations promulgated under the same law that created the Division, was set up for the purpose of fulfilling these responsibilities. The Division is presently involved with projects aimed at meeting its goals in Research/Surveys, Infrastructure Developments, and other fisheries developments. This report covers only projects or activities carried out in the past four years (from 1984 to present).

Research/Surveys

Baseline information are needed in order to wisely manage and develop the Northern Marianas fisheries resources. Research and surveys are imperative for the establishment of baseline data.

The Dingell-Johnson (DJ) Sportfish Restoration Program, a federally funded program, began soon after the establishment of the Division. As of 1984, five studies were incorporated as part of the Division's DJ projects. A more detailed five year research progress report (Fiscal Year 1982 to 1987), covering the five studies, has been prepared and submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The research projects are briefly discussed in the following:

Offshore Investigations of Pelagic and Bottom Fish: Trolling, bottom-fish and akule (Selar cremenophthalmus) surveys are ongoing. With the exception of the akule survey, which did not begin until 1987, the rest were started before 1984. A checklist of the CNMI fishes is being updated each year. Collection, preservation, and cataloging of fish specimens are also ongoing.

Nearshore Reef Fish Population Study: Nearshore Reef fish population surveys through the use of permanent transects of 100 meters long are conducted quarterly in five stations in the CNMI.

Information acquired from these transect observations will assist the Division in analysing fish population trends and in making future management decisions.

Technical Assistance: The Division provides mitigation inputs to projects impacting the marine and coastal resources. Since the inception of the program, a total of 67 projects, including several major hotel developments, were reviewed and commented on.

Data Collection: The Creel Sampling (Baseline Data Collection) part of this program began in 1984 and runs to present. The objective of this study is to gather statistical information on local fishery production and to determine the effort involved in harvesting the fish resources in the CNMI.

Habitat Enhancement and Improvement of Access to Fishing Ground: The Northern Marianas is unfortunate in that it is located in a typhoon belt area. Efforts to enhance fish habitats and improve access to fishing grounds are affected by this situation. In October 1986, a fabricated nun bouy FAD was deployed west of Saipan only to be broken off three months later when Super Typhoon Kim swept through the Marianas in December 1986. Another fabricated bouy made out of telephone poles and deployed off Rota lasted only 9 months when typhoon Roy hit the Marianas in January, 1988. A third nun bouy FAD, deployed west of Saipan to replace the lost bouy still remains as of this writing (July, 1988). The bouy has been in the water for 9 months. Plans are presently being drawn up for the acquisition of 10 more FADs.

Infrastructure Developments

To cope with the increasing number of commercial fishermen and to improve accessibility to fishing grounds, the Division is forced to look for funding sources to improve its inadequate infrastructures. Funding for the following infrastructure development projects are approved and the projects are either in the planning stages, ongoing, or accomplished:

Launching Ramps: Accesssibility to fishing grounds was greatly improved when five launching ramps, for the first time, were constructed in the Northern Marianas.

Navigational Aids: There is presently money appropriated by the local Legislature to install navigational aids e.g. lightings and channel markers and to dredge Sugar Dock in Saipan. This action is being accomplished to improve navigation at Sugar Dock, a heavily used dock by fishermen, at night. The project will commence this year.

Sheltered Mooring Docks: The Commonwealth Ports Authority constructed one small boat marina each for Rota and Tinian. The Division's request for funding of Saipan's 50 boat marina at Smiling Cove was approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The sheltered marina, the first of its

kind in the CNMI, will greatly reduce damages to boats during bad weather and typhoons. Construction will commence this year.

Fisheries Complex: The largest Fisheries Complex in the CNMI was constructed by the local government to assist in the Commonwealth's fisheries development in 1981. The Complex has been in operation since then.

New Office Building: The Division of Fish and Wildlife, for the first time, will have a permanent office building. Construction of a new and more spacious office is ongoing and should be completed this month (July). The Division's present office is overcrowded and is located inside a butler warehouse at the CNMI's busiest Sea-Port.

Fisheries Development

Other projects aimed at developing the CNMI fishery are listed as follows:

Fish Aggregation Devices: The local Government appropriated money for the purchase of 10 more FADs to be deployed this year. The project is ongoing and should be accomplished this year or early next year. Unlike previous FADs, the 10 new FADs will conform to the SPC recommended design.

Giant Clams: A Division personnel attended the Giant Clam Mariculture training at the Micronesian Mariculture Demonstration Center (MMDC) in Koror, Palau in August, 1986. One thousand 18 month old giant clam seedlings, Tridacna derasa, were reintroduced into the CNMI waters as part of MMDC's PFDF project, in October, 1986. Heavy predation by snails, mostly Cymatium muricinum and Dropella rugosa, destroyed most of the seedlings and super typhoon Kim, in December, 1986 destroyed the few that remained. In an effort to reestablish Tridacna derasa into the CNMI, five hundred 3-year old clams were purchased from MMDC in December 1987/January, 1988 and brought to the Northern Marianas. As of this writing, the clams are doing well.

Fish Weir: After nearly 20 years of stagnation, fish weirs are again permitted in Northern Marianas waters. Eight permanent fish weir sites are opened for bidding. The first permit was issued on April, this year.

Ika Shibi Investigation: The Division's Ika Shibi investigation proposal to PFDF was approved. The project will commence as soon as a qualified Ika Shibi fisherman from Hawaii is identified to carry out the project.

Other Fishery Development Projects: The Division submitted proposals to PFDF requesting funds for Bottom Longline Investigation, Sportfish Assessment/Charter Boat and Smoked fish projects. These projects are under review and the Division

should know of their status soon.

The South Pacific Commission will be sending a Master Fisherman to the Northern Marianas in September of this year. The Master Fisherman will conduct bottom-fishing training for local fishermen. Potential bottom-fishing grounds will also be explored and identified.

Present Status of Fishery

The fishing industry in the Northern Marianas is still at its infancy but is gradually developing. It may be described as Artisanal (Small scale commercial production/Landed fish sold locally); Subsistence (Landed fish for self consumption with occasional sale of surplus catch); and Part Time Commercial (Fish part time and sell catch locally). Charter boat fishery has recently been introduced into the Northern Marianas. This fishery is gaining popularity among local boat owners and is gradually developing as well.

The number of commercial, part-time, and charter boats are increasing. In 1984, 223 boats were registered in the CNMI. At present, the Division recorded over 300 boats. Forty four boats are involved with full-time small scale commercial fishing. Trolling, with occasional bottomfishing and spearfishing, dominates this category. Approximately 200 are part-time commercial boats and at least 20 are involved in the Charter Boat business. The majority of these boats are in the 14-24 foot range and are mostly made of fiberglass.

Fish landed by local fishermen are sold locally at fish markets or the numerous hotels on island. Exports of fish products have not been established in the CNMI yet. Imports of fresh frozen fish from neighboring islands, however, are substantial. The largest fish market on Saipan imports approximately 2,000 pounds of frozen fish from Truk and Palau per week.