

World Tuna Day from a professional and personal perspective¹

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It is a hard job, but all the purse seiner crew I met in the Pacific Islands region were genuinely great people. Image: ©Francisco Blaha

World Tuna Day is observed globally on 2 May every year. It was officially proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly by adopting resolution 71/124 in December 2016. The aim is to spotlight the importance of conservation management and ensure that a system is in place to prevent tuna stocks from becoming unsustainably fished.

And a well-deserved day it is for tuna; a substantial number of nations worldwide depend on tuna for food security and nutrition. At the same time, more than 96 countries have tuna fisheries, and their fishing capacity is constantly growing.

For some areas of the world, the tuna situation is worse than for others. I will focus on the region where I have been working for over 30 years, the Pacific Islands in the western and central Pacific Ocean (WCPO), the source of over 30% of global tuna catches.

The sustainability and economic performance of tuna fisheries in the Pacific Islands is a good story in fisheries, a key area of food production that does not promote many good stories.

For many years now, Pacific Island nations have shown substantial leadership in coastal States' rights and responsibilities. Our region has the strongest unions among coastal countries (countries responsible for the waters where the tuna is fished) anywhere in the world. Exemplary institutions such as the Pacific Islands Fisheries Forum Agency (FFA) are rare, even rarer when one considers that the FFA has been working for over 40 years to support its 17 members in the following critical areas:

- **Compliance and surveillance.** Anyone with a laptop and adequate access through the shared vessels monitoring system can see where over 2500 vessels fishing in the western Pacific are, what they are doing, their licences, their compliance history, their last port of entry, their electronic reporting, solid registers like the FFA Regional Register of Fishing Vessels in good standing (for those that are in compliance with the Harmonized Minimum Terms and Conditions for Access by Fishing Vessels - HMTCs), and so on. FFA also coordinates the four most extensive sea and aerial surveillance operations in the world every year, with the support of assets from the United States, France and Australia to make sure all vessels in the area are authorised (and the system must be efficiently preventing illegal fishing as no illegal vessel has been found in the last five years).
- **Policy and management.** The Pacific has been very supportive in terms of reference points, effort controls, fish aggregating device management, and others. The recent incorporation of standardised port State measures through the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) conservation and management measures, and FFA's port state measures regional framework is a further example of this vision and one I've been working substantially on.

But also, in terms of who, how, when and where vessels can fish, the 17 countries share harmonised minimum terms of condition for those wishing to fish in their waters; these

¹ Adapted from: <http://www.franciscoblaha.info/blog/2021/4/29/world-tuna-day-from-a-professional-and-personal-perspective>

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conditions include the size of the identification markings on the vessels, fishing gear specification, bycatch conditions, and others. And remarkably, this includes fishers' labour rights because a minimum set of requirements – based on the International Labour Organization's Working in Fishing Convention (C188) – has been included as part of the requirements for vessels to be allowed to fish in coastal state waters. This is a momentous event because, as of 1 January 2020, if a vessel does not respect these rights and working conditions as part of its licence, its right to fish can be withdrawn and it will be removed from FFA's list of vessels in good standing, which are all vessels in compliance with FFA's HMTCs.

This is the first time in the world that a direct link between labour standards and the right to fish has been established by a coalition of coastal states!

To add to these harmonised conditions, a subgroup of FFA members, countries that are Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), have created additional conditions for purse-seine vessels and, more recently, longline vessels. These conditions include, among others, the vessel day scheme (an effort management measure, where vessels pay for every day their gear is in the water, even if nothing is being caught), 100% observer coverage on purse-seine vessels, a state-of-the-art information management system, and a prohibition on transshipping to outside ports, all constitute some of the most exigent fisheries access conditions in the world.

Developing fisheries and maximising national fisheries revenues have been the priority of these countries, and these are working. The average value of the annual catch in FFA waters between 2016 and 2018 was USD 2.9 billion, 51% of the average value of the WPCO annual catch of USD 5.7 billion.

In the same period, the purse-seine fishery contributed, on average, slightly more than 80% (USD 2.4 billion) of the total average catch value in exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of FFA member countries; the average value of the skipjack catch was 60% of the total value of the harvest; yellowfin, big-eye and albacore contributed 29%, 8% and 4%, respectively.

Foreign fleets, which once dominated the harvest sector in FFA EEZs, have seen their share of catch value decline significantly in recent years. In 2010, the share of the catch value taken in FFA member water by their national fleets (i.e. vessels flagged by or chartered to them) was 29%, while in 2018 this share had increased to 48% (Fig. 1).²

The value of access fees paid by foreign vessels to FFA members has continued to increase over recent years, rising from around USD 114 million in 2009 to USD 554 million in 2018.

These license and access fee revenues make an important contribution to FFA members' government finances, representing 25% or more of government revenue (excluding grants) for six FFA members and as much as 85% for one country.

Government revenue from the purse-seine fleet increased by an average of 27% per annum between 2011 and 2015. Growth then slowed, increasing by just 2% in 2016 and 4% in 2017 before rising to 12% in 2018. This growth has been driven by the increase in the value of days under the PNA purse-seine, effort-based vessel day scheme. Prior to 2011, the value of the day was generally less than USD 2000 but this increased rapidly following the introduction of a benchmark price that set an agreed on minimum price.

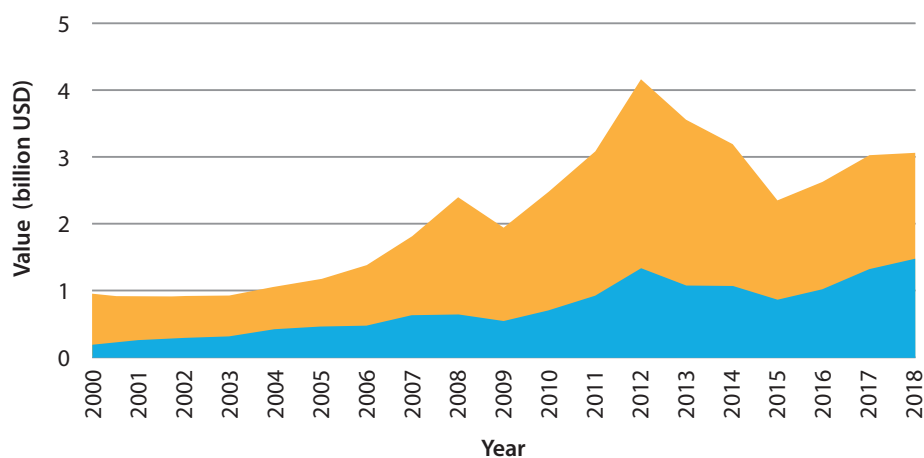


Figure 1. Value of tuna caught in FFA countries' exclusive economic zones (USD billion).³

³ Source: Tuna Economic Indicators 2019 <https://www.ffa.int/system/files/FFA%202019%20Tuna%20Economic%20Indicators%20Brochure%202019.pdf>

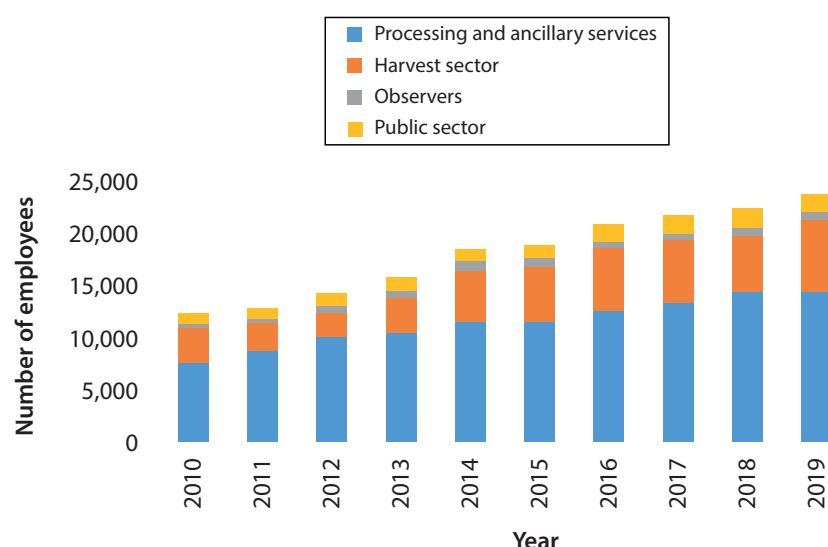


Figure 2. Employment related to tuna fisheries in FFA member countries.⁴

This benchmark price was set at USD 5000 in 2011, which then increased to USD 6000 in 2014 and to USD 8000 in 2015, where it currently stands. Vessel day scheme days in 2018 sold between USD 9000 and 14,000 per day.

Total employment related to tuna fisheries in FFA member countries for 2018 is estimated at around 22,350, an increase of 3% from 2017. Since 2010, there has been consistent growth in employment numbers. The onshore processing sector makes the largest contribution to employment, with about 65% of total employment related to tuna fisheries coming from this sector. Total employment in the onshore pro-

cessing sector in 2018 was estimated at 14,497, an increase of 7% from 2017. The harvest, observers and public sectors contribute around 25%, 4% and 7% of total employment, respectively. The majority of those employed in the processing sector are employed in Papua New Guinea, which accounts for about 60% of all processing works. Around 16% of processing employment is in Solomon Islands, 15% in Fiji and 3% in the Marshall Islands. Among processing workers, an estimated 10,800, or 75%, are women while an estimated 3600 are men. Significant growth in employment was also observed in the public sector, with numbers increasing to around 1568, over 60% higher than five years ago.

⁴ Source: Tuna Economic Indicators 2019 <https://www.ffa.int/system/files/FFA%202019%20Tuna%20Economic%20Indicators%20Brochure%202019.pdf>

Marshall Islands fisheries officers inspect an average of 450 fishing vessels in Majuro Lagoon every year. Image: ©Francisco Blaha



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And all this has been achieved while maintaining the stock at sustainable levels as evaluated by arguably the best tuna and stock assessment scientists in the world, such in the Oceanic Fisheries Programme of the Pacific Community (SPC) headquarters in New Caledonia, and confirmed by the peer review process. All four main WCPO tuna stocks (albacore, bigeye, skipjack and yellowfin) are deemed to be “biologically healthy” in that they are not overfished nor is overfishing occurring (Fig. 3).⁵

A great four-minute video⁶ explains how tuna governance works in the western and central Pacific, and this governance is probably one of the reasons why our sustainability record is different from other ocean basins.

Yet this is not to say that it is perfect; the region has seen a changed perception of the stock provided by the 2019 assessment, and discussions on the appropriate target reference point (TRP) value for skipjack tuna continue. The albacore stock is expected to continue to decline below its TRP of 56% of unexploited biomass if recent high catch levels continue, and there are significant concerns about the low catch rates in longline fisheries targeting albacore, and

the economic benefits that these fisheries generate. Therefore, FFA countries push for stronger conservation and management measures at the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, the management body that brings together the region’s coastal states and distant-water fishing nations (DWFNs).

Substantial challenges remain, such as: 1) increasing fishing effort, and transshipment and labour issues in the high seas, where flag states have sole responsibility; 2) the impact of “fishing effort creep” through new technologies such as fish aggregation devices equipped with echo sounders, able to transmit via satellite not only the positions of the devices, but also the volumes and species composition of fish below; and 3) the impact of climate change. Yet, the Pacific Islands region has some of the best people in the world dealing with these issues. As an example, in 2016, FFA countries were the first to identify underreporting and misreporting as the main elements of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, as well as quantifying the subsequent loss of revenue to coastal countries, estimated to be around USD 160 million, well below previous estimates. The 2021 update of this work is underway and is showing promising results.

⁵ Source: SPC. 2020. The western and central Pacific tuna fishery: 2019 overview and status of stocks. <https://fame1.spc.int/en/component/content/article/251>

⁶ <https://youtu.be/X6rzc4WNSvU>

Leakage of tuna from transshipment has massive impact on food security on many ports in the Pacific (Tarawa, Kiribati). Image: © Francisco Blaha



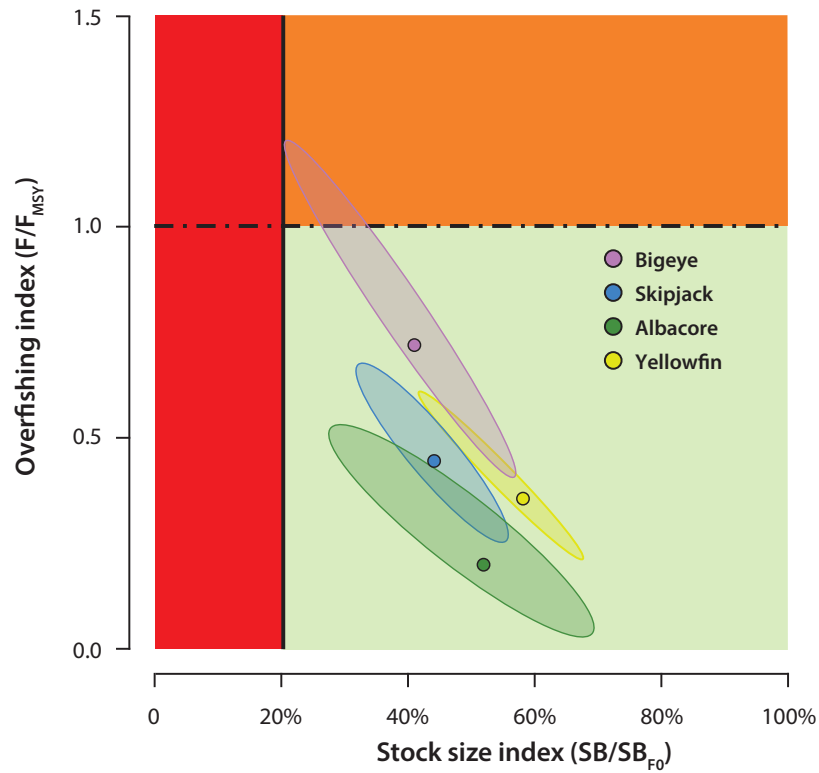


Figure 3. Majuro plot stock status summary for the four WCPO target tuna stocks.

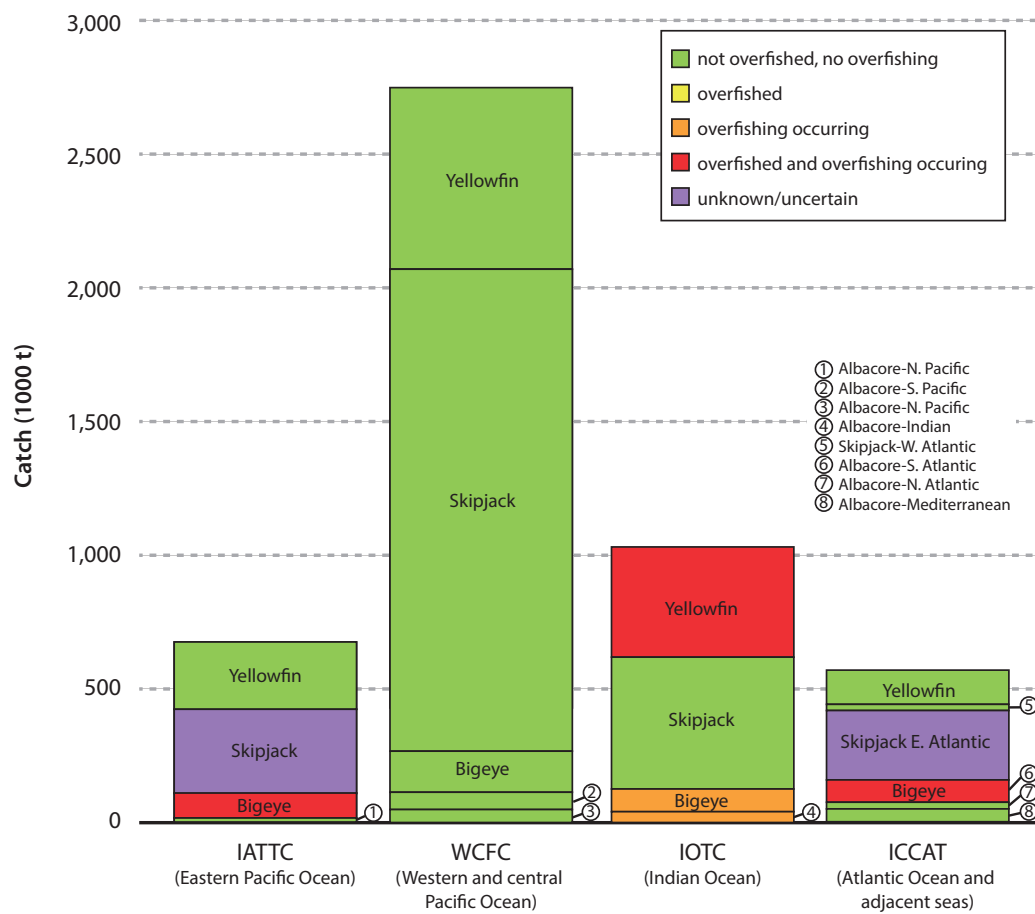


Figure 4. Comparison of stock status for the same four tuna species in the four major ocean basins.⁷

⁷ Source: SPC. 2020. The western and central Pacific tuna fishery: 2019 overview and status of stocks. <https://fame1.spc.int/en/component/content/article/251>

So yes, tuna is fundamental for the Pacific region, and Pacific Island countries are managing their fisheries sustainably because they are capable and understand better than anyone else the implications of failure.

And this is a critically important issue as competing interests impact on the sustainability of tuna. There is a fundamental (and perhaps insurmountable) difference between these interests, as my Nauruan friend and colleague Monte Depaune made clear to me: “For non-Pacific Islands and distant-water fishing nations, the issue of tuna sustainability is one of long-term financial benefit. However, for Pacific Island countries, it is also an identity and food security issue, one that distant-water fishing nations have less trouble with, as they can leave... but Pacific Island countries cannot.”

Pacific leaders (despite their cultural differences) have always understood that unity and collaboration are the best approaches against the divide and conquer strategies they

sometimes face. While there is little they can do in terms of managing the high seas, they are themselves “Large Oceanic Nations” instead of “Small Island States”, and in their waters, they have the last word.

Figure 4 compares the sustainability of the four main tuna stocks in the four major ocean basins of the world; the WCPO is the proud green tower, and this is really good news, which should be known!

In the fisheries world, the power shift is moving to the ones “with the fish” from the ones “with the boats”, even if the latter are richer and more influential. Without the strong cooperation and cultural linkages among Pacific Island coastal states that I have been honoured to witness and learn from, I doubt there would be a healthy tuna fishery such as the one they now have. I am incredibly proud to be trusted by my hosts in the region and to be a small part of the massive team that has achieved that.

Beau Bigler, Marshall Islands fisheries officer, inspecting a vessel's activities in accordance with the Marshall Islands Marine Resources Authority's Port State measures procedures. Unloading is only authorised after compliance with licensing conditions has been proven. Image: ©Francisco Blaha

