

Exploratory squid fishing in New Caledonia: nothing rough about these diamonds!



William Sokimi holds one of the very first diamond squid caught in New Caledonia waters (image: Manu Ducrocq).

In August 2012, for the purposes of diversifying coastal fishery activities, the SPC Nearshore Fisheries Development Section, in conjunction with the New Caledonia Merchant Navy and Sea Fishery Department (SMMPM) and the ZoNéCo Programme, using funding from the French Development Agency (AFD), carried out a deep-sea fishing trip in waters off New Caledonia. The aim of the trip was to confirm the presence of commercially viable “giant” squid stocks and also to identify possible alternative coastal marine resource development opportunities.

Initially scheduled for the 2011 cool season, this project had been postponed for lack of funding. AFD’s financial support and the availability of the SMMPM’s research vessel *Amborella* made the idea viable, as did the presence of Masterfisherman Ryoichi Kawasaki from Okinawa, where this resource has been commercially exploited since the late 1980s (from 15 tonnes in 1989 to more than 2000 tonnes today). Together with SPC Fisheries Development Officer William Sokimi, the *Amborella* crew conducted two consecutive fishing trips between 21 and 31 August 2012, over a total of eight fishing days, setting vertical drifting lines 500 m in length, each fitted with four jigs, at depths of 1500 to 2000 m. The results far exceeded our hopes, because no less than 70 squid, amounting to a total weight of 785 kg (average weight 11.2 kg), were caught! Two species of commercially exploitable “giant” squid therefore occur in New Caledonia and apparently in major quantities: the

diamond squid (*Thysanoteuthis rhombus*) — or *sei-icko*, as it is known in Okinawa, where it is exported to the main islands of Japan to be consumed raw as sashimi or sushi — (35 specimens caught, with an average weight of 18 kg) and another species, the neon flying squid (*Ommastrephes bartramii*), smaller in size and with lower commercial value (35 specimens caught, average weight 4.6 kg). The most impressive catch, a superb diamond squid, weighed 21 kg and had a mantle length of 88 cm. This fishing trip, out beyond the southern and western lagoons of New Caledonia, therefore confirmed the presence of a commercially valuable giant squid resource, which is as yet totally unexploited.

Even if the price paid for diamond squid to Japanese fishers appears not to be high enough to consider exporting it from the Pacific Islands to Japan, it does seem quite feasible to develop this resource as part of efforts

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to diversify coastal fishing, by targeting local markets and restaurants. This was the goal that the ZoNéCo Programme had already adopted for next year by commissioning a study to further capitalise on the results of the 2012 fishing expedition. The goal will be to conduct a more detailed evaluation of the presence of offshore squid in the New Caledonian EEZ (several fishing trips would be carried out around the main island, but also around the Loyalty Islands). At the same time as the resource assessment work, a small number of coastal fishers will be trained in fishing techniques and on-board catch processing and the local market will be tested for commercial potential.



The diamond squid's (left) mantle length can reach 100 cm; the mantle length of the neon flying squid (right) doesn't exceed 45 cm (images: Manu Ducrocq).

Contrary to most cephalopods, the diamond squid has the special characteristic of living as a couple. This therefore is a fragile resource liable to shrink rapidly if overfished. The development of a management plan for this resource will therefore be the final stage before beginning commercial exploitation of diamond squid in New Caledonia. Through our contacts in Okinawa, SPC will facilitate the implementation of the economic zone project for New Caledonia. It will also be available to conduct experimental squid fishing trips in other countries of the region.

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A typical squid fishing boat from Okinawa (image: M. Blanc) and the lures and light used on each dropline (image: W. Sokimi).



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