

Healthy or not healthy?

The status of tuna stocks in the western and central Pacific Ocean

In early December, the 21st edition of the Tuna Fisheries Assessment Report (widely known as the “TFAR”) was completed and made available via the Pacific Community’s website.¹ Published annually since 1999 (with the exception of 2007), the TFAR is intended to present a concise, plain-language summary of tuna fisheries in the western and central Pacific Ocean (WCPO). The report presents detailed statistics on catches of the four target tuna species – skipjack (*Katsuwonus pelamis*), yellowfin (*Thunnus albacares*), bigeye (*T. obesus*) and albacore tuna (*T. alalunga*) – by the major gear types used, which include purse-seine, longline, pole-and-line, troll and a variety of artisanal and small-scale gear types. The latest stock assessment and relevant management advice for each of the four tuna species is outlined, and the status of the stocks is summarised. The history of WCPO tuna tagging programmes, including both tagging and recapture locations, is illustrated. Information is presented on associated catch and stock status for important bycatch caught in the same fisheries, including billfish and sharks. Finally, the influence of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is discussed, and the latest ENSO forecast presented.



Some highlights of TFAR no. 21, which summarises the 2020 tuna fisheries, include:

- The three tropical tuna stocks (bigeye, yellowfin, skipjack) are all in a relatively healthy state, classified as not overfished and not experiencing overfishing, with sustainably high catches being taken.
- South Pacific albacore was newly assessed this year; the work was conducted jointly with the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission and, for the first time, covered the albacore stock across the entire Pacific Ocean.
- Encouragingly, a new assessment for blue shark in the southwest Pacific showed that while the assessment had considerable uncertainty, the stock has rebounded, and it is unlikely to be overfished. However, some other species of shark are assessed as being overfished.
- Small Island Developing States continue to increase their participation in the skipjack purse-seine fishery, with more than 50% of purse-seine vessels flagged to, or chartered by, SIDS.
- The climate pattern known as “La Niña” significantly altered fishing patterns in 2020/2021 and is expected to do so again in 2022.

The TFAR is perhaps the most recognizable regular publication from the Pacific Community’s Oceanic Fisheries Programme, and is widely distributed to fisheries departments and libraries around the world. The content of the TFAR has evolved over time but the format has remained relatively constant. Responsibility for assembling the TFAR has also changed hands over the years.

The lead author for TFAR no. 1, as well as nos. 2–4, was John Hampton; subsequent lead authors include Adam Langley (nos. 5–8), Shelton Harley (nos. 9–14), Stephen Brouwer (no. 15–19) and Steven Hare (no. 20 and 21). John Hampton and Peter Williams have been co-authors in all 21 TFARs to date.

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¹ <https://fame1.spc.int/en/component/content/article/251>