

SOUTH PACIFIC COMMISSION

NINTH REGIONAL TECHNICAL MEETING ON FISHERIES
(Noumea, New Caledonia, 24 - 28 January 1977)

COUNTRY STATEMENT - GILBERT ISLANDS

1. The Gilbert Islands are situated in the Pacific Ocean, approximately between latitudes 2.75°S and 3.5°N, and longitudes 162.5°E and 177°E. The total land area is 264 square miles, with a territorial sea area of 2,000,000 square miles. The administrative centre is at Bairiki where His Excellency the Governor and the Hon. the Chief Minister reside. The main exports are phosphate and copra, and to add to the social income, a well-organised and professionally trained number of seamen are engaged by well-known shipping companies; the number of Gilbertese seamen at present on the register of the Marine Training School is approximately 942 in employment or on the list of employment.
2. Future prospects for export revenue are now being studied very carefully by the Gilbert Islands Government. One of the most important prospects is the Fishing Industry. So far, a number of small projects have been undertaken, and apart from the UNDP Milk Fish Scheme, no real conclusion was reached in previous experiments. The Fisheries Division has now started the essential collection of data, i.e. fish landings, fishermen counts, consumer statistics and potential market outlets. These investigations are in an advanced stage of recording and will soon be presented for project references.
3. A survey has now begun on the South Tarawa Lagoon Bait and Fish Stocks, and results are already forming patterns on the recording charts. The Lagoon survey is intended to establish two main investigations. The first is the seasonal inward movement of territorial fish and their breeding periods, with all species recorded, and the second is the availability of bait fish (which could be two or three species) and the seasonal movement of milk fish (Chanos chanos).
4. The Fisheries Division now has three expatriate officers on the established strength, and eight junior Gilbertese Fisheries Assistants. Recruiting is being carried out at present and it is hoped to have new Assistants early next year.
5. It has been extremely difficult to fulfil sea fishing operations so far, as the only vessels available have been out of action, undergoing major repairs. It is hoped that our 28-ft. G.R.P. vessel will soon commence bait fish trials, which are now long overdue. The Bait Fish and Comparison Test Fishing Operations are intended to determine the effectiveness of milk fish when chummed to skipjack tuna, with further tests on the combined bait and mother of pearl lures.

6. Transporting and transferring of milk fish from the Ambo Fish Culture ponds to the vessel will soon be carried out. This will be a very important part of the experiment as obviously an efficient system will have to be worked out. At the moment, vessels cannot come close in to the ponds. A number of possibilities are being looked into at present. One of our main difficulties, which is proving to be a considerable set-back, is the availability and consistency of sea transport for any export of fish. At present, we have a one-way sea traffic, calling at the Gilbert Islands and proceeding north, approximately once per month. Improvements are being planned and with such improvements a better fish export could be expected.

7. The UNDP Bait Fish Project, in the capable hands of Dr Gopalakrishnan, is showing good results. It is becoming quite evident that large stocks of milk fish (Chanos chanos) can be captured and cultivated to a very high commercial level, both as a bait fish initially, then to an adult marketable size. The results have been so successful that the second-phase project - which will take in an eighty acre reclamation area of swamp for the final production stage - is already under way.

8. In addition to the UNDP ponds, a vessel is about to be constructed and should be in service to coincide with the Phase 2 Pond Project. This vessel will, after work-up cruises, commence a full-scale 'mini' bait take-off programme. This will determine to what extent the input capture rate must be for a viable commercial bait supply. It will also determine to what extent an adult take-off can be undertaken as a viable project also. The vessel will also be used in determining the availability of skipjack tuna in the Gilbert Islands Group. So far, local catch records show a fairly constant movement of skipjack tuna, as catches have been reasonably constant throughout the year. This, of course, could turn out to be a purely resident stock which would be removed fairly quickly under commercial conditions. Previous investigations have been very limited, owing to lack of trained staff, and no extra projects of any large scale will be undertaken if we cannot have full continuity and follow-up.

9. We have, however, been able to fit in a Bêche-de-mer Project, which has been supervised by our Gilbertese Senior Fisheries Assistant. This officer has recently been fortunate enough to attend a course given by the Fisheries Division in the Solomon Islands. On his return, a drier was built and tested at Betio, before being transported to Maina, forty miles due south of Tarawa, which had been chosen as our project area. The island people had already shown an interest in the catching and processing of Bêche-de-mer, but although we had been producing and exporting a small quantity, its quality and amount was far from satisfactory. In Maiana, the building of home driers was demonstrated at each village centre, together with catching, cleaning, cooking and drying operations. The outcome of this project may take a few months before definite results are shown, but it is gratifying to see that recent deliveries of Bêche-de-mer to Tarawa have been of top quality.

10. A small dried fish and shark fin industry has been under way for some time now. This section of the industry, apart from quality and marketing advice, has been allowed to find its own footing. Even although we give no further assistance to this activity at present, we have every intention of expanding this market.

11. Another scheme which has progressed well, under the supervision of scientists working directly for the Gilbert Islands Development Authority, is the Brine Shrimp Project on Christmas Island. The project has now reached an advanced stage, and it is hoped that samples of the product will be sent to prospective buyers in the near future.
 12. Future projects at present under discussion include the provision of a domestic fishery in Tarawa, to supply fish to an ever-increasing market. This project would entail the building of a Collection, Reception and Distribution Centre, with the necessary cold storage facilities, ice supplies and other amenities for the smooth flow of fish catches. South Tarawa alone yields about 875 tons per year, all consumed by residents. Catches for other islands have not been recorded as yet, but could yield half as much again. There are indications that a viable lobster fishery could be started, but it would be essential to establish regular and reliable oversea communications to allow such a delicate product to be put on to the market.
 13. A Training Programme is in hand for inservice staff and fishermen. Final plans are being processed now and it is hoped to have this extremely important scheme under way by January/February, 1977. The Ministry at present have two Gilbertese Students currently attending a Fishery Diploma Course at the University of the South Pacific in Suva, and they should complete their training by the end of 1977. Further candidates will be selected as they become available.
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