Career paths for tuna fishery observers

The chart below shows the number of observers that have provided data each year through the national and subregional tuna fishery observer programmes of Pacific Island countries and territories. Since 2010, in response to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission’s Conservation and Management Measure 2008–01 — which prescribes 100% observer coverage of purse-seine vessels — the number of active observers has been well over 400 per year.

An increase in active observers has not been the only effect of CMM 2008–01. With triple the number of active observers now, compared with the mid-2000s, there is also a need for more observer trainers who train observers before they become employed. Also needed are observer debriefers who debrief observers after each trip so that the quality of the data collected by the observer can be evaluated.

Who qualifies to become an observer debriefer or an observer trainer? As you might expect, debriefers must first be experienced observers, and trainers must first be experienced debriefers. This is now a potential career path that is available for anybody who is considering becoming an observer.

The prerequisites for becoming an observer, a debriefer or trainer are specified in the Pacific Islands Regional Observer (PIRFO) standards. PIRFO Certification and Training Standards are currently available at http://www.spc.int/Oceanfish/en/certification-and-training-standards.

Becoming a PIRFO Observer

Let’s start at the beginning. The minimum criteria to apply for PIRFO Observer basic training1 are:

- **Education**  Passed Higher Leaving Certificate or equivalent and able to carry out calculations on catch and other fisheries-related statistics.
- **Age**  Minimum of 21 years old and mature enough to converse confidently with fishing vessel officers in difficult circumstances.
- **Health**  Physically and mentally capable of carrying out observer duties, able to pass a seagoing medical clearance certificate issued by an authorised medical practitioner at any time, if required.
- **English**  Able to engage in conversation in clear English.
- **Writing**  Can write comprehensive reports on activities aboard a vessel, in English.
- **Conditions**  Able to go to sea for long periods in foreign and (sometimes) unfriendly environments (sea time can be from 7 to 100 days but is generally from 30 to 60 days on purse-seine vessels and 10 to 30 days on longline vessels).
- **Ethics**  Has a clear police record with a history of strong socially acceptable ethical standards in the areas of honesty and public behaviour.
- **Screening**  Is available for a PIRFO pre-selection screening test.

Before being selected to attend the observer training course, a candidate must first pass a pre-selection test. The test typically includes 19 questions related to basic skills in writing, arithmetic, common sense, and observation skills, followed by a brief essay question to assess

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writing and communication skills. The candidate must achieve at least a 70% overall grade. Experience has shown that candidates that do not pass the pre-selection test rarely pass the observer training course, and because there are limited resources available for observer training, only strong candidates are selected.

Candidates who satisfy all the criteria, and pass the pre-selection test, undergo two or three weeks of basic training in general maritime safety and emergency response, and personal safety with regard to operational hazards onboard fishing vessels. This training includes both basic first aid and radio operations, both of which lead to certificates. If the basic training is successful, candidates are then able to attend the observer training course proper, which usually takes five weeks. Candidates become a certified PIRFO Observer if they can demonstrate proficiency in all the competencies listed in the PIRFO Observer standards. Because an observer works alone at sea, assessments during the training require a high level of performance and candidates are usually required to obtain a grade of at least 80% on each of the tests given.

**Becoming a PIRFO Debriefer**

The criteria for becoming a debriefer are given in “The road to becoming a certified debriefer”. To satisfy the prerequisites, a candidate must:

- be a fully certified PIRFO Observer in one or more of the following gear types: purse-seine, longline, pole-and-line;
- have a minimum sea-time experience of 150 days on a purse-seine vessel or 75 days on a longline vessel, or 40 days on a pole-and-line vessel;
- have collected near perfect data from a minimum of three observer trips on different vessels;
- provide a written recommendation from an Observer Coordinator or an Observer Manager (for which the observer has completed at least three trips on any gear type), stating that the observer has good communication skills, has the motivation to provide good and honest advice to colleagues, and is likely to continue with observer-related work; and
- be able to provide at least one other referee that will confirm that the applicant is of good character and has the communication skills and motivation to provide good and honest advice to colleagues. This other referee could be an Observer Coordinator or Observer Manager from another programme (perhaps regional programme) with which the observer has worked, an observer trainer, some other senior fisheries staff member with which the observer has worked, or similar person.

Once observers have met the prerequisites and have been nominated by a national or regional observer programme manager or coordinator, they will begin a three-part Competency Based Training (CBT) programme that combines workshop training, on-the-job experience, and a final assessment.

Once all of the steps have been successfully completed, they are certified as a PIRFO Debriefer.

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Becoming a PIRFO Trainer

The criteria for becoming a trainer are given in “The Road to Becoming a PIRFO Trainer and Assessor”. To satisfy the prerequisites, the candidate must be:

- certified as a PIRFO Debriefer, and have debriefing experience;
- nominated by a recognised PIRFO observer programme; and
- approved by the PIRFO Certification Management Committee as a candidate in the PIRFO Trainer Development Programme (PTDP).

PTDP has two components:

1. Trainee Trainers attend six observer courses as attachments, with each course being about five weeks long. During the attachments, the trainee is progressively exposed to more involvement in observer training.

2. Following the attachments, the trainee is invited to participate in a recognised Train the Trainer workshop.

On satisfactory completion of the six attachments and the Train the Trainer workshop, a trainee is eligible for certification as a PIRFO Trainer. Attachments are only considered satisfactory if the supervising PIRFO Trainer at that training verifies that the candidate has demonstrated the skills expected of them at that stage of the development programme.

Note, however, that a certified PIRFO Trainer is not eligible to supervise PIRFO Basic Training and so cannot deliver a training course alone, but must work under the guidance of a PIRFO Trainer and Assessor. Certified PIRFO Trainers who demonstrate that they have the aptitude, and who wish to upgrade their qualification, must undertake recognised certificate IV level vocational Train the Trainer and Assessor training. A PIRFO Trainer and Assessor can then be employed to oversee and coordinate the organisation and delivery of PIRFO Basic Training.

Additional opportunities

The career path for observers outlined above may also lead to other opportunities. The national and subregional observer programmes employ managers, coordinators and other staff to run those programmes, positions for which senior observers, certified debriefers and observer trainers are well placed to apply. To further their career prospects as managers, they will soon have the opportunity to pursue the PIRFO Frontline Management Certificate, for which the standards are currently being developed.

Observer trainers in a national programme may also have opportunities to conduct training courses in other countries and certified debriefers may be further qualified as Debriefer Assessors who are contracted to conduct on-the-job training of trainee debriefers. Working as an observer can, therefore, be a career in itself or it can be the first step in a career path. Many observers have used their observer experience to launch them into other fisheries-related work, such as fisheries compliance, and there are a growing number of senior fisheries staff and managers whose work as observers in the early parts of their careers has provided a valuable contribution to the knowledge and experience used in their work today.

Stop Press!
On 7 May 2014, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission dispatched circular no. 2014/36, “Potential for the use of Port Coordinators in the WCPO”. The Port Coordinators, which the Commission proposes to establish on a trial basis for two years in five ports — Pohnpei, Majuro, Tarawa or Christmas Island, Rabaul and Honiara — would have data-related responsibilities concerning logsheets, unloadings forms, tag returns and rewards, biological sampling, monitoring of bycatch species, e-reporting, as well as “the placement and debriefing of observers with the national programmes and improving the timeliness and quality of the observer data provided to the WCPFC and SPC”. Port Coordinators will be employed on local salaries, but with observer experience at the debriefer level.

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Regular workshops are organised for PIRFO Observer Trainers to ensure that observers operating under the PIRFO umbrella across the western and central Pacific Ocean receive consistent training. Trainers meet to share their experiences, be introduced to new tasks expected of observers, enhance their training skills, and help develop new and improved PIRFO training tools (image: Jipé Le-Bars).