



## A short list of possible COVID-19 impacts on tuna fisheries in the Pacific Islands Region

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Slota Fajte, boarding officer in Rabaul, Papua New Guinea, working under the “new normal”. (image: Francisco Blaha)

The first question that comes to mind when asked about the impacts of COVID-19 on tuna fisheries is: Where to start? We have not had anything at this level ever before.

To me, the tuna fisheries world is not too different from tuna fishing boats. Yet, fishing operations are very choreographed, there are many specific manoeuvring routines around each fishing day that need to be strictly followed for things to work, everyone has a job to do in sequential order and that job has to be done right, all the while being aware of the weather, swell, gear design, manoeuvring mistakes, and other factors. Most times, things work out all right, but sometimes they do not and need to be fixed.

Because COVID19 came quite fast, there were no manoeuvring routines and a lot had to be improvised, and while many things will turn out okay, some things will not.

As on a boat, we have the bridge operations, deck operations, engine and refrigeration operations, and each of them is, to a certain extent, a different world. Still, they interact with each other. In the tuna fishery, I see and operate in four different worlds: 1) the office and policy section, 2) the boats themselves, 3) the wharf, and 4) the factories and markets. (There is also the political and diplomatic world, but that arena is way above my head). So I will discuss these four worlds.

### Office

The office and policy world is made up of a series of annual meetings on various topics around the regional organisations: the Forum Fisheries Agency, the Pacific Community, Parties to the Nauru Agreement, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and others. It is in these meetings that policies are formulated, advice is provided and discussed, and scenarios evaluated. All of this takes place along culturally established sit-down meetings, negotiating agreements, face-to-face discussions, and trust-based consensus building; and being the Pacific, all is well framed by sharing food, drinks and stories.

With COVID-19, that well-oiled routine that had been built up for many years, disappeared. The travel ban took all that away and now meetings are “virtual” only. The simple fact is that we all had to learn a new way of doing things without much preparation and very varying quality of internet service, which makes some of these meetings very frustrating.

I am sure that while some advances will be made, the region will struggle to agree on some negotiations on contentious matters. And the reality is that we do not know when this will change. Many countries have closed their borders, and the regional travel hubs we need to go to in order to attend meetings (e.g. Nadi, Auckland, Brisbane and Honolulu) are far from being accessible.

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## Fishing vessels

### *Longliners*

The freezer longliners can also be subdivided between those that have ultra-low temperature freezing capability at  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and those that have  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  freezing capacity, with the former commanding a premium price, and the fresh small-scale longliners, all of which mainly supply Japan's sashimi market.

All that went downhill fast, as fresh fish uses, in most cases, excess capacity on commercial flights. So, unless charter flights or designated cargo planes are picking up the fish, or there are airlines that make cargo flights and not just passenger flights, that segment of the industry is the hardest hit. While this segment is small in volume, it is significant in value, and unfortunately it is one of the few that have Pacific Island domestic investments.

Because 80% of the sashimi market in Japan consists of frozen tuna, the rest of the operators are directing their efforts to the frozen markets as long as carriers and containers will keep operating. But  $-60^{\circ}\text{C}$  and  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  ultra-low temperature containers are expensive and require excellent logistics to be mobilised, and that capacity is not available in all ports.

The bulk of the frozen catch (70–80%) imported into Japan is sold outside the auction system to trading companies and processors. China and South Korea have considerable sashimi-grade processing capability, with much of their frozen processed product also exported to Japan.

Furthermore, Japan was storing a lot of frozen tuna for the Olympics that were to start in July. With the games being delayed by a year, prices will go down because the expected demand is not there. Importers will need to “do the math” on how much will it cost to keep the fish frozen for another year. I cannot see the sector recovering soon.

### *Purse seiners*

One assumes that with frozen fish, there is little impact on fisheries operations, vessels come to port only to unload and transship, and there are many measures to limit human interaction. Most of the resupply of food and fuel to purse-seiner vessels is done from carriers and bunkers with very limited contact between crews. Stopping fishing was not an option because, as we will discuss further below, demand has soared.

But then there is also a more complex issue: purse seiners require 100% observer coverage and that is not happening these days. Ideally, one could have asked the vessels to not change crew for two weeks before coming to port and only take observers from the four main ports in the regions that are all COVID-19 free (i.e. the Federated States of

Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands and Tuvalu) and then return to the same port. Even though those countries have closed their borders and no flights are serving them, one could have recirculated the observers from those ports only, but that option was not pursued.

This has had various impacts. The first is that there are around 600 active observers in the region that are now out of work and income. This also extends to the transshipment monitors that are generally on-board during transshipments, and this is a harsh reality for observers in many countries in the region as it is their main source of income.

The second impact is that the lack of monitoring by observers will impact not only the issue of compliance, but also the already low flow of data from biological sampling done onboard that is used for fisheries science purposes.

This brings us to the third impact: the verifiability of some of the requirements for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification of purse-seine fleets in the Pacific. For example, MSC certification requires a separation in onboard storage of fish that were caught while associated with a fish aggregation device (FAD), and non-FAD associated fish. This is verified by observers in some MSC units of certification. It seems that certification will continue for all fleets, based on the chain of custody requirements that come along with the fishery certification, but with no (or very limited) external oversight by observers or monitors during transshipment. This, of course, is not ideal as all information is now taken on face value only.

Of course, this also is going to intersect with compliance issues from July onwards when the FAD-associated fishing closure starts for three months. While it should be possible to assess whether a fishing set was FAD associated or not by using the vessel monitoring system (VMS) to analyse manoeuvring movements or by analysing the catch composition during offloading, the dissuasive effect of having an observer onboard cannot be replicated.

A further interesting plot here is the current availability of cheap fuel. Usually FAD-free fishing implies a huge fuel bill, as fishermen must find and chase fish, instead of just going straight to the next FAD sonar buoy, which tells fishermen exactly how many fish are below the surface. So, in principle, this should facilitate FAD-free fish and more risk-taking by vessels in finding schools; yet without observers, it will be much harder to monitor and verify.

In port, the situation is not any easier. The distribution of transshipments in the region moved from the traditional model of convenience and services, to one where ports have undergone different degrees of shutdown or temporary measures in the last two months or so. Each port has its own ways of dealing with vessels, which impacts port operations. Those involved in the logistics of landing and transshipments need to follow the port situation on a day-to-day basis, waiting for





Fishers are well aware that there will always be a sunny day, even after the most violent of storms. Majuro, Marshall Islands. (image: Francisco Blaha)

news that a particular carrier may enter a specific port and try continuing transshipment as normal. Hence, the whole process is quite inefficient, and inefficiencies mean higher costs in tuna. Industry would have welcomed a more standardised approach among the main transshipment countries as they are all PNA and FFA members.

On the fisheries and boarding officer side, the whole process of incoming clearance for vessels has gotten substantially more complex, particularly for countries such as the Marshall Islands that are applying Port State Measures best practices, which include pre-arrival intelligence analysis. For example, if a purse seiner wants to come into port, it has to track and report its fishing routes back to 1 January. If the vessel bunkered or came alongside any other vessel during the trip before entering port, it has to track the routes of those vessels back to 1 January. And if compliance issues are found during pre-arrival analysis, the whole dynamic of inspection on board changes as a boarding officer will need to get to the bridge or engine room to collect evidence, under really logistically complex situations.

And, because all human contact must be avoided, who will be interrogated for evidence?

This is better exemplified by the words of one of my colleagues:

The biggest worry is that there are no fisheries officers physically present in the entire fisheries operation anymore. A vessel can literally catch 1000 species of interest, not report them, transship them to a carrier and it will all go unseen, very, very easily (not that this happens usually). As a boarding officer as well, it feels really weird not showing a presence by going on these vessels and just checking them. Yet, they are fishing in our waters and transshipping in our lagoon. I understand the situation and the importance of the economic benefit to our country by allowing the operation to continue as best as we can, but as a boarding officer it's like an itch on your back you can't reach.

## Factories and market

People panic, and rush to buy shelf stable food, and tuna is a tested and trusted choice. I have heard that shelves of tuna cans and pouches in the developed world are being emptied fast. This, of course, means that demand rises, and brands put out more orders.

To me, the fragile point in the value chain is processing. Processing tuna is really labour intensive, and requires many people to process tuna, which is the reason why canning countries are mostly in countries with cheap labour, such as Thailand, Ecuador and Viet Nam. Even in developed countries that have the most automatised production lines (e.g. Italy, Spain, France) quite a few well-trained people are still required to run those fancy machines.

Processing, therefore, is pushed for products. On the other side, factories are a really wet environment, and while personal hygiene has improved a lot in the last few decades, I see two problems arising that will impact production:

- The requirement of personal distancing of 1–2 meters between people in the workplace. Processing lines are normally elbow to elbow, so if there are fewer people, there will be less production.
- Some people working in processing will get sick and put in quarantine or self-isolation. And people that have been working close to them will have to be isolated as well. Absenteeism will increase, and if there are fewer people working, that too means less production.

And, as the tuna value chain is not really tuned, more fish will be caught and waiting to be processed than can be processed. So, cold rooms will be full, carriers will not be able to unload and free up space, and vessels will be full and waiting at transshipment ports, as happened in May 2019 when 32 purse seiners were waiting to transship in Majuro. Prices will go down and fishers will get paid less.

For factories in the region, the situation is a bit different as they are located in countries where there has been no declared COVID-19 cases so far, except for Papua New Guinea. Yet, they have increased distancing and in-and-out of the country controls, which in turn affects production.

According to the information I could collect from various sources for April 2020, the land-based tuna industry situation was as follows. Very few consignments came out of Samoa. In Kiribati, the local company operated at around 50% capacity, with frozen products only, and it planned to further reduce its operations if the lockdown continues. Papua New Guinea was back to about 80% capacity. Solomon Islands has scaled down on the number of employees, continues to process and export to the European Union, but has reduced its production by 50%. In Fiji, companies based on yellowfin tuna longlining were barely operating, while

those concentrated on frozen albacore loins (Viti Foods and Pafco) were experiencing an increased demand for their products and were operating six days per week.

The challenge is the lack of raw materials and the big question is whether we are going to get back to normal, and if so, when.

A further area of complications is documentation as many markets require paper originals of Bills of Lading, Health and Catch certificates and other business documents. As there are no or very few flights, courier companies are not operating and those documents cannot leave. Yet, on the market side, import clearing officers (that already have difficulties knowing where some Pacific countries are), seem not to believe that some Pacific Island countries are literally closed to all flights.

Yet, as they say, from crisis opportunities arise, and we have learned the following.

1. While sometimes frustrating, technology has enabled us to have meetings and discussions globally without the need for creating greater carbon footprints. And, we have learned about what constitutes “essential” travel.
2. Improved communication is needed. The fishing business revolves around the regional fisheries management organisations and their frameworks, and in times of a crisis, it shows the inefficiencies that may be improved between all members (e.g. establishing practical requirements on observer coverage, port entries and transshipments).
3. Medical support and infrastructure in the Pacific Islands must be improved. Key to port restrictions was the fact that several Pacific Island countries simply did not have the resources or available medical facilities, to deal with a single case of COVID-19. Therefore, these countries had to take drastic measures against vessels entering their ports, even though these vessels are the basis of their national income.

In conclusion, we are not discussing what is impacted or not, we are discussing the differential extent of the impact in the different areas. Furthermore, people are trying to assess (with very limited tools) the impacts on the areas we cannot really see yet.

If it helps as anecdotal evidence, I have never in my life finished so many meetings (albeit all online) with the words: “Well... let’s see what happens” ... and that cannot be good in the long term.