

New assessments for WCPFC to ponder

The 10th meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Scientific Committee (SC10), was held in Majuro, Marshall Islands, in early August. The meeting considered new information on the regional tuna fishery, the catch of which in 2013 reached approximately 2.6 million tonnes, the second highest ever (Fig. 1), with a landed value of USD 6.2 billion.

A key contribution to the meeting was the presentation by SPC's Oceanic Fisheries Programme (OFP) of new assessments on the status of key regional tuna stocks, including skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye. The assessments show that skipjack and yellowfin tunas remain in a reasonably healthy state, but bigeye tuna, the mainstay of the tropical longline fishery, has now been reduced to less than 20% of its unfished stock size — the size at which the stock would be if fishing had never taken place. The assessments were a major analytical challenge, incorporating over 60 years of fisheries and biological data for an area spanning from Japan to Hawaii in the north, and Tasmania to French Polynesia in the south. Stock assessment scientists at OFP had 40 computers running night and day for three months in order to complete the work.

The reduction of bigeye spawning biomass to below 20% of unfished levels is significant because this is the limit that the WCPFC has decided represents an unacceptable risk to the stock. The WCPFC should now take firm action to reduce catches of bigeye and allow the stock to rebuild. While bigeye tuna is only 6% of the total regional tuna catch, it represents about 12% of the value of the catch. It is an important species for several Pacific Island countries that have longline fisheries in their waters.

For the other tuna species — skipjack and yellowfin — the assessments were considerably brighter. Skipjack, which accounted for 68% of the total tuna catch of 2.6 million tonnes in 2013, is estimated to remain at around 50% of unexploited levels, which is a desirable situation for the stock and the purse-seine fishery, and reflects

the management targets that have been discussed by WCPFC. Yellowfin, which made up 21% of the tuna catch in 2013, has been reduced to about 38% of unexploited levels, still a reasonably comfortable situation for the stock. However, catches for both species are likely at their full potential. With more large purse-seine vessels coming into the fishery, even these fairly healthy stocks may fall to levels that could impact their biological health and the profitability of the fishery unless agreed on limits are adhered to.

In response to the assessments, SC10 made the following key recommendations:

- ✓ Fishing mortality for bigeye tuna should be reduced by 36% from the average levels for 2008–2011, which would return the fishing mortality rate to a level consistent with taking the maximum sustainable yield (MSY);
- ✓ The yellowfin tuna catch should not be increased beyond the 2012 level, and measures should be implemented to maintain current spawning biomass levels until WCPFC can agree on an appropriate target reference point.
- ✓ WCPFC should take action to avoid further increases in fishing mortality for skipjack in order to keep the stock at around current levels, and a target reference point and harvest control rules should be adopted.

In addition, SC10 expressed concern regarding the ongoing unavailability of operational-level logsheet data for key longline fleets fishing in the region, and recommended that all such data, including those for high seas areas, should be made available for future assessments. SPC will be working with the fishing nations concerned to (hopefully) achieve this for assessments of South Pacific albacore and Pacific-wide bigeye tuna, which will be undertaken in 2015.

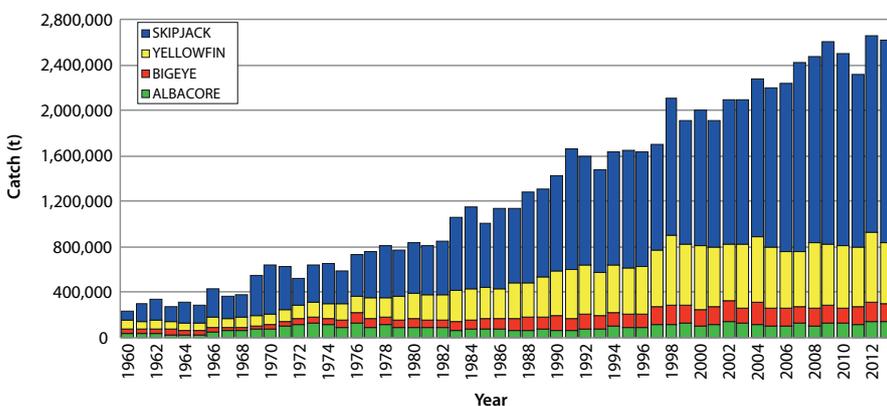


Figure 1. Catch of skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore tunas in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Statistical Area.

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