



Department of Pacific Affairs

The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency: 40 Years of Successful Regional Cooperation

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Introduction

The fortieth anniversary of the Pacific Islands Forum's most successful initiative went unnoticed by Forum leaders at their meeting in Tuvalu in early August. The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) turned 40 on 8 August, a milestone in regional fisheries cooperation. Fisheries is a standing agenda item at the annual Forum leaders' meeting, reflecting its economic importance to Pacific Island countries (PICs). The FFA is the focal point for the coordination of fisheries policies, and supported the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA)¹ until the PNA established a secretariat in 2010. The FFA laid the initial foundations for PICs to exercise their fishing rights, thereby creating the environment that has allowed PNA members to assert their rights through the Vessel Day Scheme (VDS) and dramatically increase revenue from their tuna in the past five years. The establishment of the PNA office in 2010 has tested the utility of the FFA, and questions are being asked if it is still an effective forum for the coordination of policies to manage the region's tropical tuna fisheries.

The Forum Fisheries Agency

The FFA was established in 1979 — at the same time as 200-mile exclusive economic zones (EEZs) were being introduced in the 1970s. With most PICs becoming independent in the 1970s, the notions of economic independence and extended maritime zones became intertwined. The establishment of EEZs gave PICs custodianship over the world's largest tuna stocks, but also created enormous challenges as PICs were in no position to monitor their EEZs. The PICs did not have experience negotiating access agreements with distant water fishing nations (DWFNs).

The PICs have the richest tuna grounds in the world. The total catch of tuna in 2018 for the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) was estimated at 2,716,396 metric tonnes (mt) representing 81 per cent of the total Pacific Ocean catch of 3,373,512 mt, and 55 per cent of the global tuna catch (Williams and Reid 2018).

The FFA's coordination of policies and its successes

With tuna being a migratory resource, it has been essential that PICs coordinate their policies regarding fisheries. Many of the FFA's initiatives have shaped international fisheries management. The FFA developed harmonised minimum terms and conditions of access for DWFNs, as controlling access and monitoring fishing vessels in PICs' respective waters is fundamental to effective fisheries management. A regional surveillance platform for a vessel monitoring system that entailed having fishing vessels send out positional data in near real-time was also put in place, supported by surface and aerial surveillance programs. These initiatives were unprecedented. Innovative non-conventional means of enforcement were also set up. A register containing detailed information about fishing vessels was established in 1982, whereby fishing vessels must be in good standing on the register before they could be licensed by a PIC. If a vessel commits an offence, it can have its licence suspended by all PICs if its good standing is withdrawn. This is a powerful, low-cost, but highly effective tool.

The establishment of the FFA was not without controversy. The United States (US) refused to accept PICs' sovereign rights over tuna, which led to confrontation. The PICs responded by negotiating a multilateral fishing access agreement with the US. In return, the US set aside the question of rights over tuna. The Treaty on Fisheries between the Governments of Certain Pacific Island States and the United States (which came into force in 1988) set the benchmark for compliance by fishing vessels in the region and had many novel features, including a well-developed cooperative enforcement program. The treaty helped chart a new direction in fisheries, despite the introduction of the VDS, which has diminished the treaty's utility in recent years.

The FFA has helped reshape international fisheries and the relationships between PICs and DWFNs. For example, the Wellington Convention was negotiated to prohibit the use of long driftnets, stopping the use of non-discriminate long lines; the Niue Treaty on Fisheries Cooperation and Law Enforcement allows the sharing of physical assets for enforcement; and the Federated States of Micronesia Arrangement for Regional

Access and the Palau Arrangement for the Management of the Western Pacific Purse Seine Fishery, which both apply to the PNA, were initially coordinated and developed by the FFA. The FFA was also initially responsible for the administration of the VDS, which has transformed the relationship between the PICs and DWFNs.

Perhaps the FFA's biggest influence has been in helping to improve economic returns to PICs from their tuna fisheries. While the PNA has been the driving force behind the increase in the value of the economic returns in recent years, it would not be where it is without the support of the FFA. There continues to be significant growth in the proportion of the value of the catch taken in PICs' waters by their national fleets — rising from 31 per cent in 2013 to 45 per cent in 2017 (FFA 2019) — mainly due to increased participation in the purse seine fishery. Government revenue from licensing fees has also reached record levels, around US\$535 million in 2017 and on track to achieve the 2020 goal of a 25 per cent increase on 2015 levels (from US\$465 to US\$585 million). Contributions to GDP from the harvest sector across PICs in 2017 are estimated at record levels — over US\$400 million for the first time — due to good prices and record catches by domestic and locally based vessels (ibid.).

Australia and New Zealand are major contributors to the FFA and provide the main funding support for the program that has improved the coordination of policies and economic returns from the tuna fishery. In terms of Australia's and New Zealand's foreign policy priorities, the FFA provides an important platform for building a peaceful and secure region and in that context, the FFA's future is arguably assured, notwithstanding questions about its future utility and role in the region.

Conclusion

The establishment of the new PNA office has arguably reduced the role of the FFA in the management of the PICs' tropical tuna fisheries. Although the PNA is now administrator of the VDS and has developed its own world-class fisheries information management system, the FFA still provides the only focal point for coordination of fisheries policies in the region. There is therefore a complementary role for the FFA in supporting the new PNA office; after all, the PNA members are also members of the FFA. As a sign of improved relations between the FFA and the PNA, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed on 8 February 2019. The MOU underscores the PNA and FFA's common goals of promoting sustainable management of the tuna fishery resources in the region and advancing the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly SDG 14: to conserve and sustainably use the oceans to meet their obligations for conservation and management of transboundary oceanic fisheries.

The FFA coordinates the contribution of PICs in their

negotiations with DWFNs in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission. The strength of the FFA lies in the robust regional governance buffer it provides for PICs tuna fisheries; its influence and greatest effectiveness has been in the coordination of monitoring, control and surveillance of what is a vast ocean area, as well as in the development of strong fishing rights that have empowered PICs. PICs are infinitely more economically secure because of the FFA. It is no doubt the singular most successful achievement of the Pacific Islands Forum and a testament to the value of regional cooperation to the people of the Pacific.

Notes on authors

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Endnotes

1. The PNA member countries are the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu. Tokelau is an observer with the PNA.

References

- FFA (Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency) 2019. Implementation of the Road Map — Tuna Fisheries, Report to the 16th Annual Forum Fisheries Ministerial Meeting. Working Paper FFCMIN16-WP2. Pohnpei, 18–19 June.
- Williams, P. and C. Reid 2018. Overview of Tuna Fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, including Economic Conditions, 2018. WCPFC-SC15-2019/GN WP-1. Paper prepared for the 15th regular session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission Scientific Committee. Pohnpei, 18–19 June.

