

The Political Economy of the Western and Central Pacific Tuna Commission: Why Decision-Making Is Slow and Hard

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The management of the Pacific tuna fishery is politically charged with diverse commercial, conservation, and sovereign interests. The fishery's global importance is considerable; the Western and Central Pacific tuna fishery supplies about 30 per cent of world tuna. Reflecting the significance of this resource, almost 500 delegates, observers, and media gathered at Denarau in Fiji for the 13th Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) meeting, 5–9 December 2016. The WCPFC is the peak international body that brings together different stakeholders to agree on conservation and management measures for the highly migratory fish stocks in the WCPFC Convention Area. This is a vast area that stretches far north to the upper reaches of Japan, and far south to the southern end of New Zealand, but does not include the disputed areas of the South China Sea.

A key feature of the WCPFC is the dominant role played by small island developing states (SIDS) with contiguous exclusive economic zones (EEZs) within the WCPFC management area. SIDS are well supported by regional agencies, which play a key role in managing tuna across the region's high seas and EEZs, but not archipelagic waters. The WCPFC's operation and dynamics are different from other regional organisations for tuna fisheries management, which involve larger states and few active regional agencies.

Many Hands on Deck ...

Within the Pacific region, there are established and complex institutional arrangements that affect the development, design, and interplay of management measures by the WCPFC. The surface fishery, predominantly the purse seine fishery, occurs mostly in the EEZs of SIDS, which have developed world-class systems for its management. In contrast, the high seas fishery is mostly fished by longline vessels from the distant water fishing nations and is less well managed. The quality of data from this fishery is poor and the capacity for monitoring high seas fishing limited.

The dynamics surrounding the development of conservation measures by the WCPFC provide an interesting backdrop for discussions on the political economy of the WCPFC process. The interests of the participants may be divided along different categories, including coastal versus fishing states, purse seining versus longlining fisheries, EEZs versus high seas fishing, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA — an association of tuna-rich SIDS) versus others, Asian versus non-Asian, rich versus poor, and powerful versus weak.

The interests of stakeholders are multiple and not always obvious. Many non-government organisations (NGOs) at the December meeting represented different priorities, ranging from sea birds, to industry and recreational fishing. Complicating matters, some NGOs participated in their own right, while others attended as part of national delegations. There was industry representation ranging from traders to boat owners and processors. International financial institutions such as the World Bank also attended. In addition, there were observers from states who are not members of the WCPFC but have diverse commercial and political interests, including El Salvador, Ecuador, Vietnam, Panama, Mexico, Thailand, and even Liberia! Alliances can be complex and fluid.

... With Many Deals to Do

The WCPFC meetings are a technical and political meeting ground. They provide an opportunity to develop conservation and management measures, but also a space for other groups to meet on the side to develop fisheries strategies and positions. It is not unusual to see groupings of NGOs, or industry and NGOs huddled in a corner or coffee shop to discuss the region's fisheries management problems and preferred solutions. It is also not unusual to see corridor discussions among delegates, observers, and NGOs going on at the same time as plenary sessions, reflecting the multilayered and multi-scalar nature of negotiations.

In addition to regional management decision-making, bilateral access negotiations also occur — for example, on the sale of fishing days for the following year. So, a lot more than conservation and management measures are discussed. Some Pacific islands delegations include ministerial representation, adding a political dimension — Asian fishing companies almost trip over themselves to engage ministers from places where their fishing fleets, or other commercial activities, occur.

All of this takes place within the corridors of the WCPFC meetings over one week. Managing the various interests and positions of the different stakeholders falls to the chair, who must juggle different interests and levels of capacity to manage fisheries across the region. In Bali last year, the chair and executive director said ‘failure was not an option’ following the failure of the previous annual session in Samoa to adopt additional conservation measures. Unfortunately, no new measures were agreed at Bali. This year, the chair said in her opening statement that the WCPFC must take ‘small steps’. This is in stark contrast to the previous year’s message; expectations are now being more carefully calibrated.

The Challenge of Trade-Offs and Consensus

Reaching agreement on effective conservation and management measures involves trade-offs between stakeholders. For example, there are trade-offs between the longline fishery and purse seine fishery, and between costs and increased data reporting requirements. Since most fishing occurs in SIDS’ waters, the data collection and reporting requirements impose a huge burden on their limited resources. The adoption of more effective conservation and management measures can be hampered by the realities of the region’s political economy, given the differing political size and power of SIDS. This can be frustrating to NGOs and other observers who may not appreciate the WCPFC’s political dynamics, and want stronger conservation and management measures adopted without appreciating the limited flexibility available given constraining politics, resources, and capacity.

To help advance their joint interests and pool limited resources, SIDS, who make up two-thirds of the WCPFC membership, normally meet a week in advance and develop positions. These positions are translated into talking points and presented as collective positions. This is a structured approach and leaves little room for flexible dialogue, which could help bridge misunderstandings between the different stakeholders during the meetings, but is necessary because of limited SIDS’ technical and analytical capacity.

Shaping the Future

The Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency Secretariat and the PNA Office play an important role in supporting the Pacific island countries during the WCPFC meetings, applying their strong technical expertise. In addition, new technologies help improve communications, with Skype discussion groups providing the focal point to coordinate the interventions among the SIDS. The only disadvantage of this approach is that island delegates can be left exposed when clarification is required to be provided across the floor. It also creates a level of dependency that is probably unhealthy in the long term.

The political economy of the WCPFC shapes the way it operates and the effectiveness of the conservation and management measures it adopts. The need for trade-offs between the various interest groups may be frustrating for some observers, but this approach fits the regional context. It can, however, severely affect the utility, efficacy and effectiveness of the WCPFC. Nevertheless, the WCPFC provides a focal point for discussions and a gathering of all the different stakeholders. Even if progress is being made in ‘small steps’, the situation would be far worse without the WCPFC.

Understanding the political economy of the WCPFC helps us to appreciate the complex backdrop against which it has to operate and against which conservation and management measures are developed by the WCPFC.

Author notes

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