

The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission and the New Conservation and Management Measure for Tropical Tunas

Katherine Seto

ANCORS, University of Wollongong, Australia

katyseto@uow.edu.au

Quentin Hanich

ANCORS, University of Wollongong, Australia

hanich@uow.edu.au

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) is home to the world's most productive tuna fisheries, supplying global markets with canned tuna, sashimi, and other tuna products. Industrial catches of skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye, and albacore are collectively worth approximately US\$5.3 Billion per year and account for 56% of the global tuna catch.¹ However, unlike the predominately high seas tuna fisheries in other oceans, WCPO tuna are overwhelmingly fished in waters under national jurisdiction, which are largely owned by a small group of Pacific small island developing States (SIDS).² These tuna fisheries represent the only substantial resource for some Pacific SIDS, particularly the atoll States, and have long been viewed as the primary sector for development opportunity. In some cases, revenue from tuna can contribute up to 75 per cent of government income and support the livelihoods of more than 90 per cent of local households.³ Tuna fisheries are also critically important to some Pacific Island States for local food security and employment in artisanal fisheries.⁴ In the context of climate and other global environmental change, scientists have

1 Peter Williams, Peter Terawasi & Chris Reid, *Overview of tuna fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, including economic conditions* – 2016 1–70 (2017).

2 Quentin Hanich, *Distributing the bigeye conservation burden in the western and central pacific fisheries*, 36 *Marine Policy* 327–332 (2012).

3 Robert E Gillett, *Fisheries in the economies of Pacific Island countries and territories* 1–688 (2016).

4 Johann D Bell et al., *Planning the use of fish for food security in the Pacific*, 33 *Marine Policy* 64–76 (2009).

recommended that Pacific island governments increase local access to tuna fisheries to address looming food security challenges.⁵

While the Pacific SIDS hold sovereign rights over the most productive tropical fishing grounds, most of the catch is taken by vessels owned by companies from developed distant water fishing States: Japan, USA, Taiwan, China, Korea and the European Union. These foreign vessels may either be based in a Pacific Island State (due to licensing or joint venture requirements) or operate from a distant home port.⁶ Conservation is an increasing concern, as some tuna and associated species are threatened by overfishing and overcapacity within the fishing fleets.⁷ In addition, fishing levels often exceed maximum economic yields, impacting significantly on revenue through decreased productivity and profitability.⁸

For the past two years, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) has been negotiating a replacement conservation and management measure to manage the tropical tuna fisheries for skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye tuna stocks. The WCPFC was established by treaty in 2004 with a mandate to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of the WCPFC tropical tuna fisheries.⁹ The WCPFC comprises all of the key coastal and distant water fishing States and meets annually to negotiate and adopt conservation and management measures.¹⁰

5 Johann D Bell et al., *Diversifying the use of tuna to improve food security and public health in Pacific Island countries and territories*, 51 *Marine Policy* 584–591 (2015); Johann D Bell et al., *Effects of climate change on oceanic fisheries in the tropical Pacific: implications for economic development and food security*, 119 *Climatic Change* 199–212 (2016).

6 Elizabeth Havice, *The structure of tuna access agreements in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean Lessons for Vessel Day Scheme planning*, 34 *Marine Policy* 979–987 (2010).

7 Hanich, *supra* note 2; WCPFC, 6–14 August 2014 *Report of the Tenth Regular Session of the Scientific Committee of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission* 1–229 (2014).

8 Tom Kompas, R Quentin Grafton & Tuong Nhu Che, *Bioeconomic losses from overharvesting tuna*, 3 *Conservation Letters* 177–183 (2010).

9 *Convention on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean*, *Convention on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean* 1–40 (2001).

10 Members include: Australia, China, Canada, Cook Islands, European Union, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, France, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Republic of Korea, Republic of Marshall Islands, Nauru, New Zealand, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Chinese Taipei, Tonga, Tuvalu, United States of America, Vanuatu. For participating territories, cooperating non-members, and current information, see <https://www.wcpfc.int/about-wcpfc>.