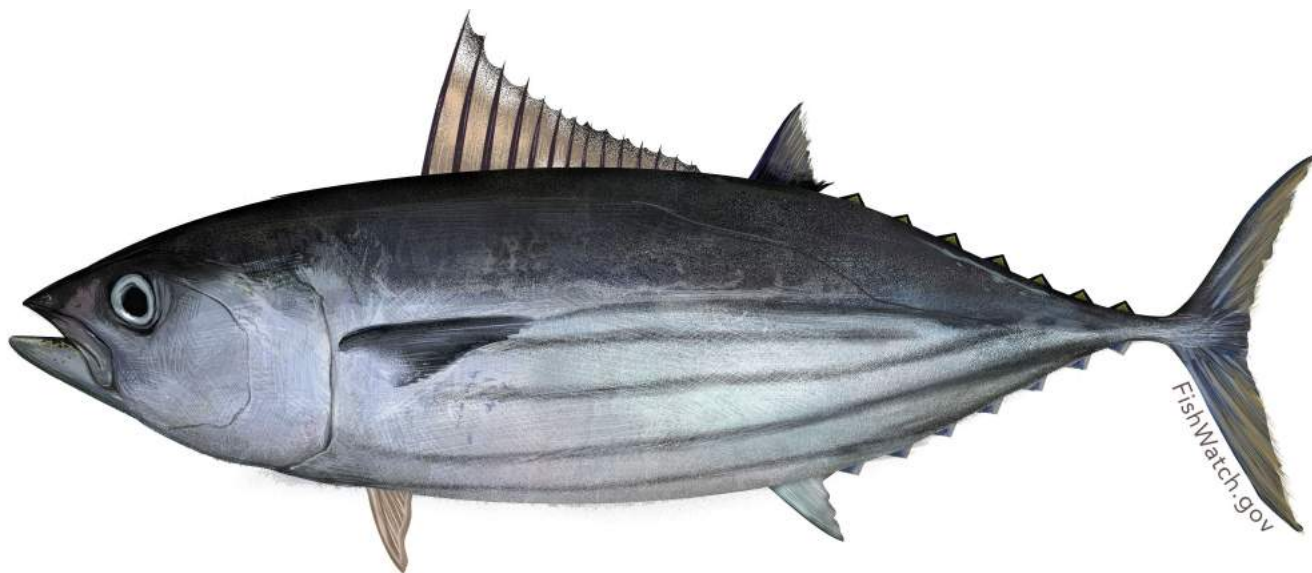


# WCPFC IS PLAYING IN EXTRA TIME; MARKETS WOULD LIKE TO SEE THEM SCORE ON HARVEST STRATEGIES NOW

By Steven Adolf and Héctor Fernández

*The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) is playing in extra time in the match for its future sustainable management of tuna fisheries. If they want to win this game, they must score by fully implementing the Harvest Strategy for skipjack at their next meeting, which convenes this December in the Cook Islands. Failure to do so would be a disappointing and dangerous loss for all stakeholders, including the producing, trading and retail companies in the tuna supply chain, who will see their sustainable sourcing policies threatened from the world's main tuna supply area. Member states, in particular those of the influential Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA), can secure this WCPFC decision as a continuation of their innovative policies on sustainable fisheries in region.*



Production, trade, retail, and the seafood markets, are watching carefully what will be decided on the management of tuna fisheries at the next annual meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) in Rarotonga, capital of the Cook Islands.

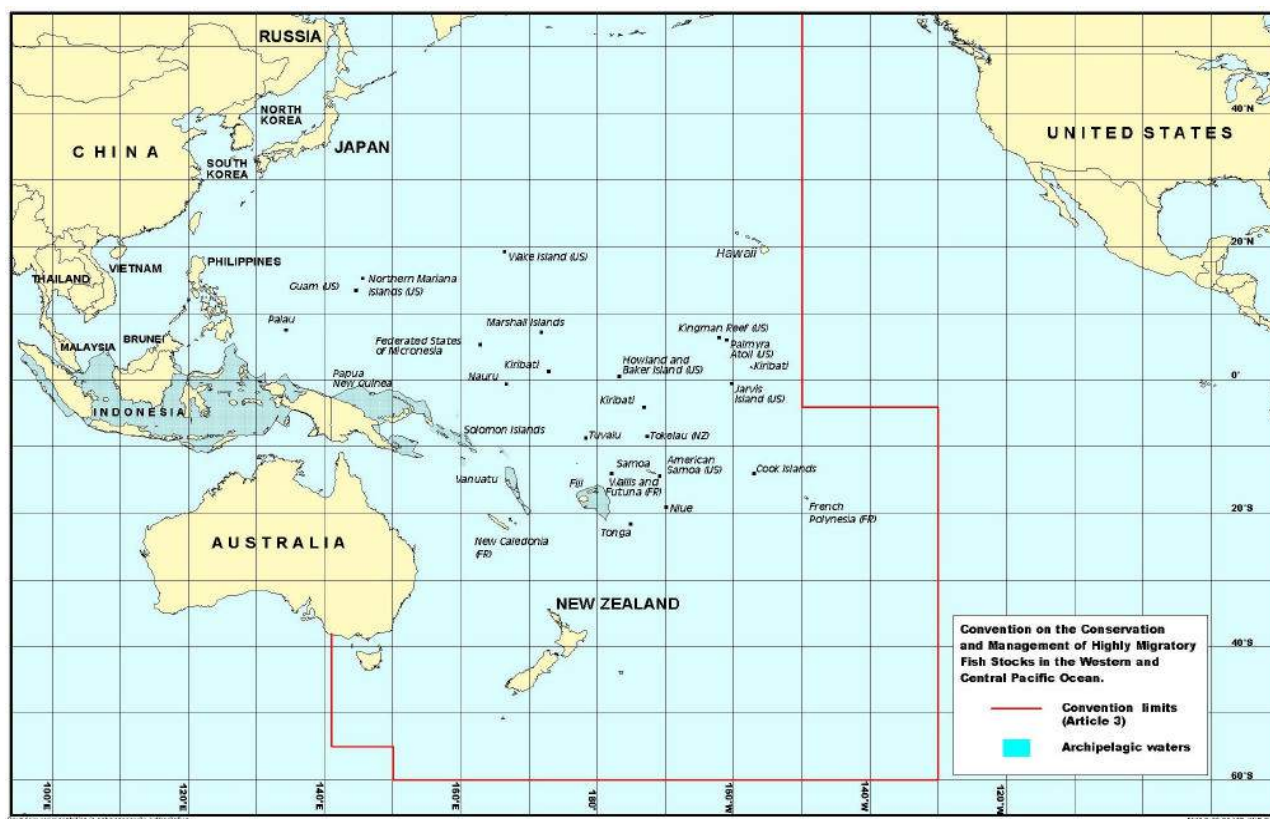
Global tuna markets are worth billions of dollars and the added value generated along the supply chain is several times this primary value of the fishery. The final value in the global consumer market for these species was approximately USD 41 billion for a total catch of 5.5 million metric tonnes in 2018, with the European Union and the United States being the largest individual markets.<sup>1</sup> Hundreds of millions of people rely on the consumption of tropical tuna or tuna-like

species to supplement their diet with marine protein of high nutritional value.

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO), the convention area of the WCPFC, is by far the most important sourcing area for global tuna supply. About 51% of the world production of all tuna is from the WCPO. Provisional catches of skipjack, yellowfin, and bigeye in 2021 were 2 342 000 tonnes; skipjack accounts for 67% of the catches in weight, followed by yellowfin (27%) and bigeye (6%). Purse-seine vessels take 73% of the total catch.<sup>2</sup> Comprising 35% of worldwide tuna landings, WCPO skipjack is the main source of raw material for the global canning industry.

<sup>1</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, *Netting Billions 2020: a global tuna valuation*, October 2020, Washington.

<sup>2</sup> International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, *Status of the World Fisheries for Tuna: March 2023*.



WCPFC convention area.

These facts clearly justify that the European retail and trading companies show a great interest in maintaining the WCPO skipjack stocks on a sustainable level in order to ensure a stable supply in the future. And it follows that the seafood sector has taken up the issue of sustainably managed fisheries with enormous interest. What was once dominated by the interests of the large industrial fishing fleets has changed into a broader consultation in which market stakeholders are increasingly making their voices heard.

## Trade and retail are taking responsibility

Trade and retail companies are increasingly taking responsibility for their environmental impacts. For example, the European market has been proactively pursuing Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification for their canned and frozen tuna products over the last fifteen years. In countries like Germany and The Netherlands, MSC-certified products have become the standard on supermarket shelves. Few fisheries have seen such quick expansion of MSC certifications as the WCPO tuna fisheries. After the first certification was assessed by the Pacifical in 2011, currently 26 tuna fisheries followed and got certified, while 16 are under assessment.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Marine Stewardship Council (<https://fisheries.msc.org/en/fisheries/>).

That the certification was not always free from controversy does not alter the fact that sustainable fisheries policies have changed from an option into a necessity: the big trade and retail companies now demand a sustainable product as part of their commercial policies.

Bolton Food, the Food Business Unit of the Bolton Group, leads the European canned tuna market with its brands Rio Mare, Palmera, Saupiquet, Pêcheur de France, Isabel and Cuca in Italy, Germany, France and Spain. Sustainable fishing sourcing policies have become an essential part of the company's strategy which has enabled it to reach 86.5% of the tuna of the group's brands coming from responsibly managed fisheries by 2022. "Bolton Food has the ambition to become the most sustainable tuna company for the world. To this end, we confirm our target of 100% of tuna sourced from MSC or credible and comprehensive FIP certified fisheries by 2024 across the perimeter of our business unit", says Luciano Pirovano, Global Sustainable Development Director, Bolton Group Food Business Unit.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last decade, Bolton has focused on improving the sustainability of its supply chains for both small-scale and

<sup>4</sup> Bolton Group <https://www.boltongroup.net/en/stories>.



The PNA office in Majuro, Marshall Islands.






Regional map showing countries which are members of the PNA.

industrial fisheries. By 2022 it had already achieved nearly 70% of Rio Mare's sourcing from MSC-certified fisheries or credible and integrated Fisheries Improvement Projects (FIPs). The company also actively advocates the adoption of new measures by tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs), including the WCPFC, with the aim of contributing to the recovery of overfished stocks and avoiding overfishing in the future.

## State of the stocks

How sustainable is the main tuna fishery in the Pacific? At first glance, the WCPO population of skipjack is at a healthy level. According to the latest report of the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation<sup>5</sup>, the stock is at safe levels, even though fishing mortality rates have increased significantly since the beginning of industrial tuna fishing. Skipjack is still safely in the green quadrant of the so-called Kobe plot that

<sup>5</sup> International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, Status of the World Fisheries for Tuna: March 2023.

STOCK ABUNDANCE		SSB > SSB <sub>MSY</sub> .
FISHING MORTALITY		F < F <sub>MSY</sub> .
ENVIRONMENT		<p>38% of the catch is made by purse seining on floating objects (including FADs). Several bycatch mitigation measures are in place (turtles, sharks).</p> <p>43% of the catch is made with purse seining on free schools, with little impact on non-target species.</p> <p>8% of the catch is made by pole-and-line fishing, with unknown impacts on baitfish stocks.</p> <p>10% of the catch is made by other gears such as gillnets, with unknown impacts on non-target stocks.</p>

Last date of a change in Color Ratings: None.

Changes from the previous (original) Color Ratings: None.

State of the skipjack stocks

gives indications on the state of the skipjack population, meaning that the stock is neither overfished nor subject to overfishing.

The remarkable conservation initiatives developed by the Island States that joined the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) have undoubtedly contributed to maintaining the skipjack resources in a healthy condition. With its unique and innovative Vessel Day Scheme, which limits the number of fishing days in the vast ocean area that belong to their jurisdiction, the PNA has succeeded to put in place a system that controls overall catches in this globally important sourcing area and created a substantial source of income for the local economies.<sup>6</sup>

But despite these innovative efforts, the trends in skipjack tuna fisheries paint a less rosy picture. While the skipjack tuna

<sup>6</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/05/tuna-fishing-overfishing-conservation-pacific-islands-skipjack-pna/>



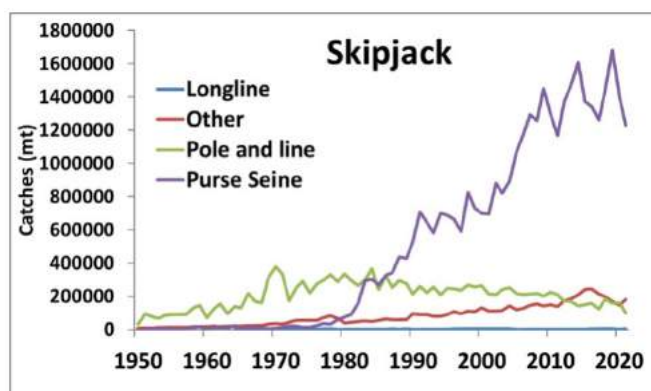


Figure WCP0-7. Catches of skipjack tuna in the WCPO from 1950 to 2021, by gear type

Source: International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, Status of the World Fisheries for Tuna: March 2023.

population is still currently at a healthy level, it has depleted over time. There is much cause for concern, even in the rich fishing grounds of the WCPO. Climate change is now notably affecting the sea surface temperature of the WCPO, with a rise of 0.26 degrees above the anomaly temperature<sup>7</sup>. Early research seemed to point to a sharp decline of skipjack catch in 2020, with a notable drop in the size of the individuals caught.<sup>8</sup> The impact of the fisheries itself also takes its toll. Market players cannot afford to continue to look away from these uncertainties, which could well fundamentally alter the supply of tuna in the not-too-distant future. More than ever, trade and distribution need an effective and modern management system to ensure that stocks are maintained at a sustainable level that allows stable exploitation of the fishing grounds over time. The good news is that such a management system already exists: harvest strategies.

## Harvest strategies

Basically, harvest strategies<sup>9</sup> define the rules for fishing tuna to a set of predetermined objectives related to conservation status, catch levels and fishery dynamics. All of the tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) like the WCPFC are developing, or have developed, harvest strategies for their critical stocks. Harvest strategies replace time-consuming and sometimes painstakingly difficult political negotiations over catch levels with proactive, science-based rules that are automatically triggered by indicators of population status. Harvest strategies make fisheries management much more effective and transparent and the supply to markets more predictable.

<sup>7</sup> The Ecosystem and Climate Indicator report card from SC19, 2023, WCPFC-TCC19-2023-IP121.

<sup>8</sup> International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, Status of the World Fisheries for Tuna: March 2023.

<sup>9</sup> See [harveststrategies.org](https://www.harveststrategies.org) for details

Progress in developing and implementing harvest strategies in the world's tuna fisheries has been relatively slow: only eight out of the twenty-three stocks of major commercial tunas in the world have harvest strategies in place. However, development progress is increasing, and another five harvest strategies are expected to be adopted by the tRFMOs by the end of 2024.<sup>10</sup> The process is a complex one, with a highly technical scientific basis and sometimes challenging negotiations about objectives among scientists, managers, and other stakeholders. It should be emphasised that, in our view, the fact that meetings of RFMO scientific committees and commissions are held only once a year is not conducive to rapid progress in the adoption of these initiatives either.

According to The Ocean Foundation International Fisheries Conservation Project Director Shana Miller, global consensus is building around the viability of harvest strategies for fisheries management. Importantly, retail and tuna suppliers are increasingly vocal<sup>11</sup> in asking for the implementation of harvest strategies in RFMOs. In the long-term, the supply is at stake, but even in the shorter term, failing to introduce harvest strategies can threaten the MSC certifications of the tuna products in which trade and retail have invested heavily. Depending on the situation, fisheries have 5 to 10 years to demonstrate full implementation of harvest strategies to secure MSC certification. If the management procedures in the WCPFC are not fully in place, fisheries will be at risk of getting their MSC certification suspended. Thus, harvest strategies became a necessary condition for the market to keep the MSC-certified tuna product on the shelves.

## Point of concern at the WCPFC

This point is of concern at the WCPFC. Last year, at the annual meeting in Vietnam, the WCPFC adopted a modernised management plan for the WCPO skipjack fishery. This was an urgent matter in the uprun to the meeting; there was some concern that skipjack fisheries would already lose their MSC certification if a harvest strategy were not adopted.

Eventually, the WCPFC adopted a management procedure, but it was at best only in name a harvest strategy. By making the measures non-binding, the ruling could not claim to be mandatory in character. After getting the management measure in place, some of the country representatives asked for more time to get used to the new system before having to be bound by it. Unfortunately, a voluntary harvest strategy is not a harvest strategy at all, thus losing the main advantages

<sup>10</sup> [www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/2022-brought-harvest-strategies-to-the-forefront-of-tuna-rfmos](https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/2022-brought-harvest-strategies-to-the-forefront-of-tuna-rfmos)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/112-retailers-tuna-suppliers-urge-wcpfc-to-adopt-tuna-harvest-strategies>

of the system, such as predictability and transparency of the catches and jeopardising the projected positive impacts on the stock and fishery. “While it is a step in the right direction, it is disheartening that members have not made the agreement binding”, Glen Holmes, Senior Officer International Fisheries at The Pew Charitable Trusts commented.<sup>12</sup>

## Subtle form of greenwashing

By making the harvest strategy a mere factor in the fishing effort limitation debate – rather than the determining factor, as a harvest strategy should be – the WCPFC runs the real risk of heading down a slippery slope towards a subtle form of greenwashing. Under the banner of sustainability, the measure never forces anything, dictated action can be ignored, and the Member States can lull themselves into a false sense of security about their MSC certification, erroneously thinking that their certification conditions have been met.

In October 2022, right before the WCPFC meeting, the MSC released a revised standard 3.0. As a result, fisheries that were certified prior to the launch of the new standard have five years to modernise their fisheries management practices to be in line with the new requirements if they want to maintain certification. That gave the fisheries “breathing room”, according to Victor Restrepo, Vice President for science at the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation (ISSF). The skipjack fisheries can take comfort in the knowledge that their certification status will be set for the next five years. But this does not mean that they can leave the decision endlessly pending. Restrepo: “We must urge these fisheries, however, to maintain the intensity of their commitment to harvest strategies for the long-term sustainable management of all Pacific Ocean tuna stocks. Five years seems ample time by most standards. But it is scarce time by RFMO pace, especially considering the amount of technical and scientific work that remains for most WCPO tuna stocks when it comes to harvest strategies.”

Last August, the Scientific Committee of the WCPFC reviewed the management procedure for skipjack to determine

management for 2024-26, and all was working smoothly. The status of the skipjack stock is within sufficient levels, so the management procedure would set the fishing conditions unchanged from the baseline level of fishing effort. The recommendation of the scientists left no doubt: the Member States of the WCPFC should implement the outcomes of the management procedure with no delay in 2024.

## Historical moment

This is where we now stand. With the management of tropical tunas again on the agenda, the 2023 WCPFC annual meeting this December can become the historical moment that a management procedure for skipjack becomes a reality in the WCPO.

The alternative paints a bleak picture. Failing to decide on this issue could render the management procedure ineffectual and allow protracted and potentially politicised negotiations that leave the long-term health of the species at risk to continue. It can threaten MSC certification in the longer run. And we are talking about extra time in the end game for sustainability. Not scoring now, will leave the decisions for the WCPFC to be made in future, in much more turbulent waters, when the risk of declining stocks and smaller catches will make consensus negotiations much more politicised and difficult, if not impossible.

We need another ambitious step in the sustainable management of tuna in the region. For the PNA nations this will be a management measure that can only enforce their existing system of managing their fisheries and certainly will not undermine it. Once again it should be acknowledged that the PNA efforts have made an essential contribution to the fisheries management in the region, but that does not exclude a necessary next step of the management on a regional level. The WCPFC took a landmark decision last year to modernise the management of the fisheries by adopting a harvest strategy, or management procedure, for skipjack. Full implementation of the harvest strategy would serve all stakeholders involved. We certainly hope that the WCPFC will set the harvest strategy as the crowning achievement of the innovative sustainable policy work that has characterised the skipjack tuna fisheries in the region. 🐟

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/about/news-room/press-releases-and-statements/2022/12/03/pew-commends-skipjack-tuna--landmark-policy-but-calls-non-binding-plan-disheartening>).



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