

MALDIVES SKIPJACK TUNA: HOW A SMALL NATION BECAME A BIG PLAYER IN SUSTAINABLE FISHING

Rachel Leahy

The Maldives pole and line skipjack tuna fishery has been through a remarkable transformation. What was once a small, sail-powered operation is now a global supplier of sustainable tuna. The fishery first achieved certification to the Marine Stewardship Council's Standard for sustainable fishing in 2012. Since then, it has continued to make improvements and drive change across the Indian Ocean – all while retaining its traditional fishing techniques.



Pole and line fishers catching skipjack.

Credit: MIFCO MSC

The Maldives may be best known for honeymoons and luxury huts perched above turquoise waters, but it is the tuna fishery that has sustained the nation for centuries.

For the inhabitants of this isolated string of islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean, fishing sustainably is a necessity, not a choice. Tuna is part of daily life and an essential part of Maldivian culture, forming the basis of many meals and supporting approximately 30 000 livelihoods.

"The Covid situation showed us who we really are," explains Umar Jamaal, President of the Maldives Seafood Processors and Exporters Association, which represents several of the nation's major fishing processors. "The flights stopped, and everyone was laid off from the tourism industry. They returned to fish. There's nothing for us to go back to but fishing."

Traditional methods in a modern age

Skipjack tuna is one of the main species caught in the Maldives – and one of the most popular types of fish consumed worldwide. Tuna has been harvested by Maldivians using the traditional [pole and line technique](#) for generations. Fishers scatter the water with live bait and send the skipjack into a feeding frenzy, where they bite onto hooks and are lifted out of the ocean one at a time.

While there has been little change to this fishing technique, the industry has been transformed over the last fifty years. What was once a sail-powered operation, primarily providing for subsistence fishers, now exports over 50 000 tonnes of sustainably caught skipjack to retailers and restaurants every year.

The Maldivian government took control of the tuna industry in the early 1980s, following a turbulent decade which saw the decline of vital exports to Sri Lanka, and a global crash in tuna prices. The fleet was mechanised and expanded, alongside the development of a domestic processing and canning industry.

Seeking certification

The Maldives began exporting skipjack to European markets in 2008, but to compete with large-scale processors in countries such as Thailand, it was clear that the Maldivian products needed "something special". With consumer demand for sustainably sourced seafood increasing, the decision was made to seek certification to the [Marine Stewardship Council's \(MSC\) Fisheries Standard](#).

The pole and line method is considered to have a low environmental impact. It is a highly selective way to fish with low bycatch rates, and skipjack are targeted at the surface of the water so there are no interactions with the seabed.

However, the fishery had to consider the wider impacts of all its activities before it could achieve MSC certification. To become certified, fisheries must demonstrate to independent, third-party assessors that target stocks are healthy, environmental impacts are minimised, and that effective management measures are in place.

"We thought we would have no problem trying to get certified, but it was not that easy at the beginning. There were lots of things we needed to improve that we had not considered – including where our bait came from," Adnan Ali, former Managing Director of tuna processor Horizon, explains.

A key area of improvement related to the sustainability of the reef fish populations used as bait. As a condition of MSC certification, the fishery was required to show its impact on the bait fish and develop a management plan to ensure the stock was not being overexploited. To achieve this, fishers were trained to gather data on the amount of bait caught, different species and locations, and record interactions with endangered species.



Adnan Ali, former Managing Director of Horizon.

Accessing new markets

Efforts to meet the MSC Fisheries Standard paid off, and in 2012 the Maldives skipjack fishery became the first tuna fishery in the Indian Ocean to achieve MSC certification.

Certification opened the door to international retailers eager to meet the demand for sustainable fish and despite high import tariffs. Maldivian skipjack tuna is now a mainstay in supermarkets across Europe and North America. "MSC certification has been a blessing – it helps us stand out. Without it we'd just be like everyone else", says Jamaal.



Umar Jamaal, President of the Maldives Seafood Exporters and Processors Association (MSPEA).

In May 2023, British supermarket Sainsbury's became the biggest importer of Maldivian tuna globally. This followed [a commitment to sourcing 100% MSC certified pole and line tuna](#) for its own-brand products.

Continuous improvements

The skipjack fishery has now been MSC-certified for over 12 years and continues to make improvements, including new measures to record and monitor catch data.

The introduction of the 'Keyolhu' fisheries information system allows data to be recorded and analysed across both the tuna fishery and processing facilities. This includes catch data, vessel registration, fishing and processing licences, and the issuing of catch certificates required for all exports.



Pole and line vessel.

Credit: MIFCO MSC



Pole and line fishers offloading catch while holding an MSC ecolabel.

Credit: MIFCO MSC

In 2022, an e-logbook was integrated into the 'Keyolhu' system, with use becoming mandatory across the fishery in 2025. The new e-logbook aims to improve the collection of fishery data by allowing catch and processing data to be recorded and submitted in real-time.

The fishery is currently working to improve on-board monitoring and observer coverage. An electronic monitoring system was introduced in

2019; however, budgetary constraints have meant that the system cannot yet be deployed across the whole fleet. The fishery is now exploring ways to implement a practical and cost-effective monitoring system, including the use of AI.

Further improvements to the management of the bait fishery are also underway. This includes a collaboration between the fishery, the [Maldivian Ministry of Fisheries and Ocean Resources](#), and the [Japan International Cooperation Agency \(JICA\)](#). This project is focusing on reducing post-harvest losses of baitfish by improving on-board facilities and handling techniques.

Indian Ocean advocates

Despite its small size, the Maldives has not been afraid to speak up on the international stage and demand progress in sustainable fishing.

Skipjack are targeted by multiple nations, so the long-term health of the stock depends on good fisheries management throughout the region. Management of the skipjack stock is overseen by the [Indian Ocean Tuna Commission \(IOTC\)](#), but until recently the organisation has struggled to implement stock-wide measures to ensure that skipjack are not overfished. *“Tuna are highly migratory, so we cannot claim it is our stock,”* Ali explains. *“Unless we all agree, it’s very difficult to sustain the stock. The Maldives can’t do it alone”.*

Although a total catch limit for skipjack was introduced in 2018, there was no mechanism to allocate catch – and no agreement between States on how the catch should be shared. As a result, the catch limit was consistently exceeded.

With the long-term health of the skipjack stock jeopardised and the fishery’s MSC certification at risk, the Maldivian government took on an integral role in the push for progress. This involved co-sponsoring a proposal, which included a state-of-the-art mechanism for setting the total allowable catch. While this proposal was adopted by the IOTC in 2024, the Maldives continued to advocate for urgency in the allocation of catch throughout the region.

The efforts from the Maldives and other IOTC members proved successful and the [much-needed agreement was reached in April 2025](#), setting out each State’s allocation of the total skipjack catch.

Facing the future

The global fishing industry currently faces many threats, from climate change and overfishing, to economic and political volatility. However, the Maldives’ longstanding determination to manage the skipjack fishery sustainably and drive change on an international scale shows there is hope for the future.

“We want the Maldives to set the benchmark for sustainable tuna fishing”, says Jamaal. *“I am confident we can achieve this by investing in our fishers and their communities, and encouraging cooperation across the region – all while remaining true to our traditional and sustainable fishing practices.”* 🐟



About the Marine Stewardship Council

The [Marine Stewardship Council \(MSC\)](#) is an international non-profit organisation that uses its fisheries certification program and ecolabel to recognise sustainable fishing practices and incentivise improvements.

The [MSC Fisheries Standard](#) is the leading international benchmark for sustainable fishing and is used to assess whether a fishery is well-managed and environmentally sustainable. Assessments are voluntary and are carried out by accredited third-party assessors.

To achieve MSC certification, fisheries must meet the requirements of the Standard. This includes demonstrating that stocks are being fished at sustainable levels, impacts on habitats and ecosystems are minimised, and that an effective management system is in place.

Products from certified fisheries can be sold with the MSC ecolabel if they have passed through a supply chain certified to the [MSC Chain of Custody Standard](#). This assures retailers and consumers that seafood with the MSC ecolabel has been sourced from a fishery certified as sustainable.

Find out more: [msc.org](https://www.msc.org)



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