

Specie Diversification 2: Growth and consolidation of the Yellow-Fin Fishery

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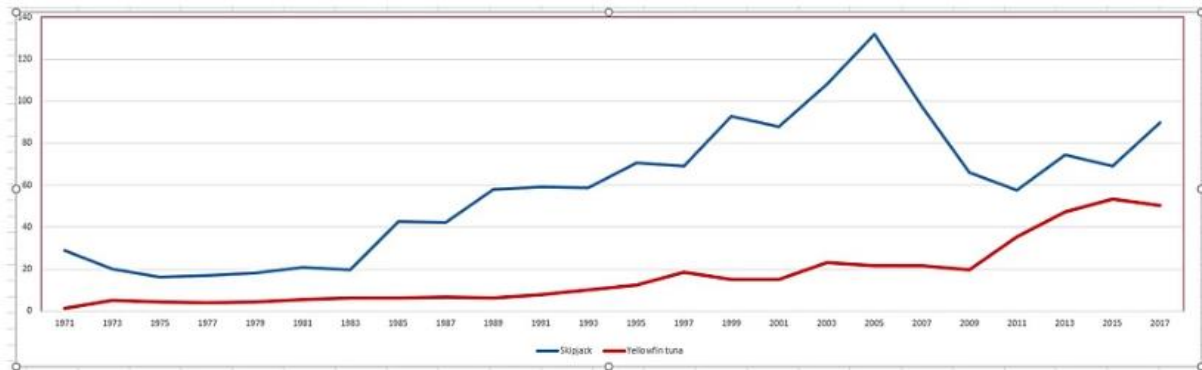
Until the growth of a separate Yellow-Fin fishery, starting from the early 1990's, the Maldivian Fishery Industry was largely a skipjack driven industry. The export and earnings of Yellow Fin as a separate line item was first reported in official statistics at 2.5m Mrf of earnings and listed as Fresh or Chilled Tuna in 1995.

Harvesting Pattern

Traditionally, Yellow Fin was a by-catch of the larger skipjack fishery, which was the main source of protein for Maldivians and the main foreign currency earner of the country until the advent of the tourism industry from the early 1970's.

Landing statistics show that the by-catch of yellow-fin as a % of the larger catch was at an average of 11.73% of the total landings between 1971 to 1995, with percentages varying from 2.74% in 1974 to peaks of 16.1% in 1983. Not being a favoured specie at Maldivian dinner tables then, and not preferred for dry exports, landings of yellow-fin was by accident rather than be design. The arrival of the Japanese to buy and export skipjack in 1972 and the start of the 8mt cannery at Felivaru in 1977, gave a much-needed morale boost to yellow-fin as they were accepted by the canning industry; being preferred by Europeans consumers over Skipjack.

From the early 1990's, there seemed to be a growing realization of the potential of large size yellow-fin as a fresh export, initially to Japan. As Maldivian entrepreneurs started to explore the premium chilled market for yellow-fin, with its higher prices, yellow-fin became a sought after catch. From 1995, yellow fin landings have steadily increased with an average of 21% of harvest during 1975-2017 and an average of 40% during the period of 2014-2017 with a high of 41% in 2015.



Source: Publications of National Bureau of Statistics, Charts: mer.mv

Being caught on hand-line and not pole-and-line, kept in ice boxes from the moment of catch, targeting 35 kg and above for value, the multi-day nature of the fishery and with very different type of bait, inevitably yellow-fin fishery has morphed into a separate activity. While some fisherfolk depart ready for both skipjack and yellow-fin, yellow-fin fishery has developed its own enthusiasts and centers of geographic concentration. In the whole, the advent of the yellow-fin fishery has helped to regenerate the fishing industry and spawned a whole new generation of fisherfolk.

Export Earnings

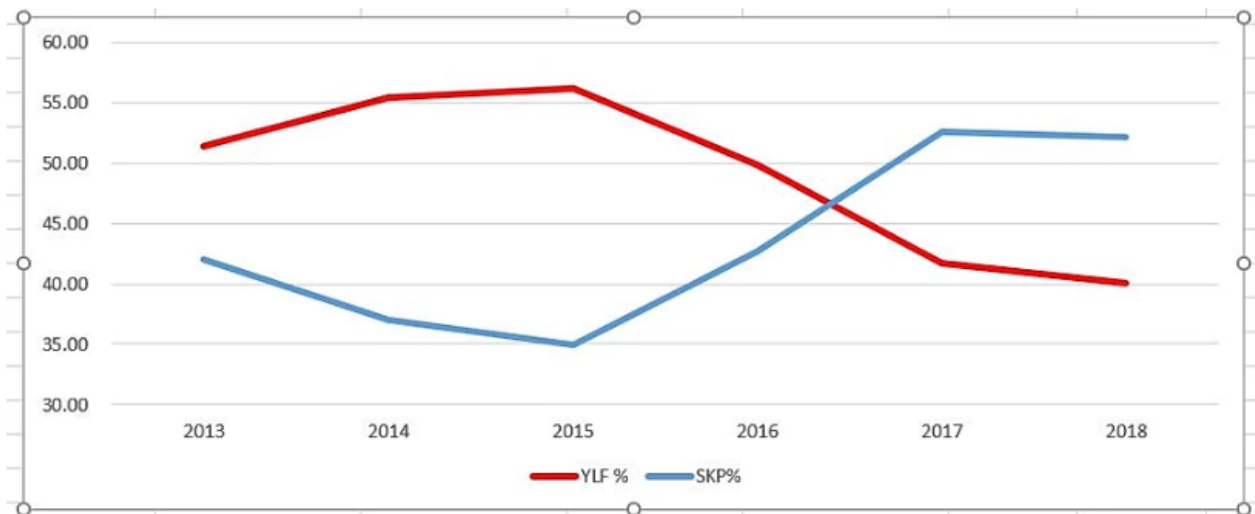
In 1995 when 'Fresh or Chilled Tuna' was added as a separate item in the Export Statistics, the entry came in at just 16.8 mts at a value of 2.5m Mrf, of export earnings; a modest 0.43% of total merchandise export earnings for that year.

From such modest beginnings, earning from Yellow-Fin have grown to 56.21% of total export earnings in 2015 beating earning from skipjack exports by a 472m Mrf for the year. During the 5-year period 2013-2017, earnings of yellow-fin exports accounted to an average of 51.9% of total export earnings.

However, we do not speak of a declining skipjack industry. Seasonal variances, El Nino and La Nina effects, amongst other factors bring changes to the fishing and landing pattern in different years. After increasing to 43% of total landings in 2016, yellow-fin landing has declined slightly in 2017. During 2017, skipjack landings increased from a 5 year average of 74.28 thousand mt landing to a 89.68 thousand landing in 2017.

Reflecting landing increases customs statistics for 2017 and 2018 (only available until November 2018) has shown a resurgence of earnings from skipjack to 51% of total export earnings while Yellow-Fin have declined to 41% of export earnings of total export earnings.

Therefore, today we see two species; skipjack and yellow-fin dominating a vibrant and fishery industry and exchanging pole position only based on seasons, temperature and other relevant factors.



% share of total exports 2013-2018 November. Source Customs, Charts mer.mv

As an island nation, dependent on the bounty of the sea for its nutrition and foreign currency requirements, Maldives was skipjack country going back to its roots. With the advent of the yellow-fin fishery during mid 1990's, a robust and tenacious yellow-fin fishery has now been developed, and the fishery industry, as a whole has become more robust, offering sustainable and steady income to a new generation of Maldivian fisherfolk and entrepreneurs alike.

While harvesting methods by our fisherfolk are sustainable, skipjack and yellow-fin are both distance travelling tuna species, we have no control over the larger stock. They are harvested by large industrial fleets in the Indian Ocean using unsustainable and destructive methods like purse-seining. Even while scientists

today state that both specie are under stress, large scale purse-seine efforts continue in open seas, underlying once again, the importance of further diversification of our fishery industry as told in specie diversification: there's many a slip-twixt successful fishing trials and commercial-viability