

EDITORIAL

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Tuna fishing is vital for the Maldives. Skipjack, yellowfin, little tuna and frigate tuna together make up 90% of our recorded fish catch. These same species provide most of the animal protein in our diets and most of the country's direct export earnings.

As all fishermen know these tuna species are highly migratory. They come and go from day to day and season to season. The tuna tagging program successfully carried out by the Marine Research Section of the Ministry of Fisheries & Agriculture during 1990 has given us the first direct information of the extent and direction of their migrations. While most of the tunas recaptured were caught in Maldivian waters by Maldivian fishermen, a significant proportion were caught in other areas, notably off Sri Lanka and S. India, and by the purse seine fishery in the Western Indian Ocean.

Thus the tuna fisheries of the Maldives cannot be considered in isolation. Maldivian tuna belong to common Indian Ocean stocks. Therefore developments in the Western Indian Ocean purse seine fishery based in Seychelles or the Sri Lankan gillnet fishery can have direct impacts on the Maldivian tuna fishery. It is acknowledged that the two main tuna stocks (skipjack and yellowfin) are large and are still some way from full exploitation. Nevertheless, it is clear that if the current rate of increase of tuna fishing activity in the Indian Ocean continues the stocks of yellowfin and skipjack will be overfished. If this happens it would be a disaster for the Maldives and the other coastal countries of the Indian Ocean.

This longterm threat prompted the countries of the region, with the assistance of FAO and UNDP, to set up the Indo-Pacific Tuna Development and Management Program (IPTP) in Colombo 1982. The aims of the pro-

gramme have been to collect in one central location all available data from the tuna fisheries of the Indian Ocean and South East Asian Region, and to encourage tuna scientists in the regions to conduct work related to tuna stock assessment. This work has been carried out very successfully by IPTP. But now after funding the program for ten years UNDP is looking to phase out its involvement and pass full responsibility for funding to the fishing nations themselves. Maldives was among the very first countries to pledge support. The change in funding policy has provided an opportunity to review the whole organisation, and it has been agreed that IPTP should be replaced by an Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). It is now hoped that IOTC will start functioning in 1994. It will continue to collect data on the tuna fisheries, but will place more emphasis on data analysis and stock assessment.

It was because of the great importance the Government of Maldives places on international tuna research and management, that these issues were raised by the Maldivian delegation to the 26th FAO Conference held in Rome in November 1991. In his speech to the Conference, Hon. Mr. Abbas Ibrahim, Minister of Fisheries and Agriculture, commended FAO on the work carried out by IPTP and stressed the need for its timely replacement by an Indian Ocean Tuna Commission.

This Commission will be of considerable benefit to the Maldives in giving timely advice on the status of Indian Ocean tuna stocks and the effect that fishing in other parts of the Indian Ocean is having on them.

This of course is a key issue for Maldives, which, by itself would never be able to overfish the Indian Ocean tuna stocks. It is the presence of high seas fleets of nations from outside the region that create the threat of overfishing. The Japanese, Taiwanese and Korean longline fleets were the first to enter the Indian Ocean in the 1950's and 1960's. The French and Spanish came later when a large part of their Atlantic purse seine fleets transferred to the Indian Ocean in 1983/1984. The next major development is difficult to predict. How-

ever, many far eastern (particularly Taiwanese) gillnetters have been excluded from the EEZ's of the South Pacific countries and will in addition be forced to reequip following the international ban on large scale high seas drift netting. It is possible that some of these vessels will redeploy to the Indian Ocean.

The need for an international body to monitor the Indian Ocean tuna fisheries, to carry out assessment of tuna stocks, and to make management recommendations for the long term rational utilisation of these stocks, has never been greater. We look forward to the inauguration of the IOTC, and the active participation of Maldives in the new body.
