

SKIPJACK FISHERY OF MALDIVES

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In colloquial Dhivehi the word "mas" or fish is understood to mean skipjack tuna or *Katsuwonus pelamis*. This may sound strange to one who has no knowledge of Maldivian fisheries and the fact that fishermen in Maldives catch more skipjack than all other types of fishes combined. In other words that more than 50% of the fish catch comprises of skipjack tuna. Not surprisingly the sea area around Maldives has been established to be one of the most abundant for skipjack in the Indian Ocean.

Skipjack tuna is found in the area all round the year, although there appears monthly fluctuations in catch by the local fisheries. According to some authorities there are two distinct stocks of skipjack in Maldivian sea area. One is a local stock and other a migratory stock. This is reflected in the fact that there is a sudden appearance of large size skipjack with spawns in some months of the year. However, the most common size of skipjack catch in Maldives is that of 2 kg to 3 kg.

The location of fishing grounds vary with the season depending on the prevailing current and temperature of the sea. Generally, the fishing is good along the east coast during the North East Monsoon and on the west coast during the South West Monsoon. However, is not a rule in areas around the channels cutting across Maldives where great daily current changes occur.

The most common method of fishing for skipjack is pole and line fishing with live bait. This method of fishing is carried out from a traditional fishing craft known as "masdhoani". This is an open day boat of size ranging from 25 ft to 45 in length. The hull is built of coconut timber fastened with hard wooden pegs. The keel frames, and gunwale are made of wood locally grown. The Maldivians are acclaimed to be masters in boat building although very crude hand tools are being still used in building the beautiful "masdhoani". The traditional crafts are built for sailing however, with modified sternpost and after part of the craft it has been found suitable to install inboard engines. The programme of mechanization started, only in 1975 has resulted in installing engine in half the registered number of pole and line fishing vessels. The sailing pole and line vessels could not compete with the mechanized vessels and as a result sailing vessels virtually stopped being used in fishing operation. The catch is about 3 times that of a sailing vessel. However, as the operation cost due to the high oil prices does not seem to give the corresponding economic returns.

Pole and Line fishing consists of two distinct steps. The obtaining of enough and suitable live bait and fishing operation on the ground. The fishermen leave the islands early in the morning to obtain bait fish just outside the reef of the islands or from the shallow areas within the atolls. On spotting "patches" of bait

fish a rectangular small mesh net is lowered on the side of the vessel and many or few hauls are made before sufficient bait fish is obtained. This operation could last from one half of an hour to 5 hours depending on availability of bait fish and comprises of sprats Blue and Gold Fusilier, Blue puller or anchovy.

The journey to the fishing ground starts after obtaining the live bait. On arriving at the fishing ground scouting for schools of skipjack starts. A sighting of a bird is always a very welcome sign, as the schools have to be located by sight. On sighting the school of fish, the school is approached and bait fish is tossed on to the sea. The chumming and spraying of water starts and fish are poled on to the fish hole. A barbless locally made hook attached to the end of nylon monofilament twine with other end tied to a bamboo pole completes the fishing gear. The poles of different lengths and hooks of different sizes are used depending on the circumstances. The fishermen in the Republic are excellent at this art of fishing. The speed of poling and the operations are sometimes called "crazy" by some foreigners. The catch could be more than 900 pieces of fish per trip.

The second method of fishing for skipjack in Maldives is that of trolling. The smaller type of craft known as vadudhoni or Trolling vessels are employed in this type of fishing. The mechanization has not yet been extended to this type of vessel. The fishing gear used by this vessel consists of a single nylon monofilament line with lured hook attached to one end. One or more lines are operated. At the end of 1981 there were 970 mechanized, 1061 sailing pole and line fishing crafts and 3364 sailing trolling crafts. However, all these vessels are not employed in fishing though they are registered as "mas" and vadhu dhoani.

The skipjack nowadays is mostly sold in fresh form to fish collecting vessel of three companies stationed at different points in Maldives. The fisherman gets Rufiya 1.50 per kilogramme for fish over 2 kg and Rufiya 1.10 per kg for fish less than 2 kg. The other forms of marketing being boiled dried and smoked (Maldivian Fish) and dry salted. The most convenient and profitable method of marketing has been in fresh form. The skipjack products are being marketed in Japan and Sri Lanka.

The Maldivian Government has been giving a higher priority to the development of fisheries of the country and skipjack and tuna fisheries considered as the "first" fishery of Maldives. Expansion of the pole and line fishing fleet, development of a long range fishing vessels, installation of Fish Aggregating Devices and the training of fishermen in the fishing techniques are being undertaken. Two projects are underway to establish necessary marketing facilities. In addition a more systematic way of collecting data on fisheries for the purpose of management and development of fisheries are being sought.

The skipjack fisheries of Maldives seems to have great potential for development. However, there is much improvement to be made in every aspect of this fishery before skipjack resources could be used to the maximum benefit of the country.
