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**Current Status and Future Direction  
of Tuna Fishery Observer Programmes  
in Pacific Island Member Countries and Territories**

Marine Resources Division  
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## **Current Status and Future Direction of Tuna Fishery Observer Programmes in Pacific Island Member Countries and Territories**

1. The tuna fishery observer programmes in the Pacific Island countries and territories are in a state of flux due to recent developments of the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). This paper considers the current status of the observer programmes in the region and the impacts of these developments on their future direction, and asks the following questions — Where do we need to go? Where we have come from? What are the issues? And how do we resolve them?

### **Where do we need to go?**

- We need a lot of fisheries observers up to speed fast.
- We have several Conservation and management Measures (CMMs) within the framework of the WCPFC that require flag states to ensure there is 100% coverage on all actively fishing purse seiners for the two months of FAD closures to be imposed in 2009; and
- We need 100% coverage of all actively fishing purse seiners in 2010.
- We are also working towards 5% coverage of all tuna fishing vessels by 2012.
- The quality of data that observers produce has to meet minimum requirements that the WCPFC demands.

And where do we *want* to go?

- We want our people — our own observers — to be those employed onboard vessels that are fishing in our waters; and
- We want, as much as possible, for our observers to be employed on vessels when they are fishing on the high seas.
- More importantly, we want to be confident that the quality of data that our observers provide meets our domestic and international obligations to ensure sustainable management of our tuna resources.
- We want to achieve all this as cost effectively as possible.

### **Where have we come from?**

#### ***A brief history***

2. Pacific Island observers started out being mostly fisheries personnel with some tertiary fisheries qualifications under their belt. A minimal amount of observer work was carried out as part of their professional development.

3. Most observer work was initially carried out under the auspices of the US Treaty, with an occasional national observer trip carried out as an opportunistic one-off look at a trial fishing operation, often using a foreign biologist. The exception was in FSM, where a more systematic approach to observing was employed, mainly to expose FSM fisheries staff and others to fishing operations in anticipation that industrial tuna fishing would soon be domesticated.
4. Despite that, in those early days the predominant (US Treaty) observer trainees were already professional fisheries staff. A team of professional technicians consisting of SPC/FFA staff and consultants were assembled to provide training. These new observers were supported by professional managers. Even more importantly, they were supported by strong regulatory measures built into Treaties and licensing arrangements, with support from the US National Marine Fisheries Service in the case of the US Treaty.
5. When observer data from these early days were used to demonstrate issues under investigation by scientists, it was regularly challenged and, if not discredited, at times certainly discounted in the final analyses.
6. Despite this skepticism, every year the call for observer data has increased in volume, as both science and compliance authorities recognise that many of their questions can only be answered effectively and economically by having good observer data. We are being asked for greater quantity, greater variety and improved quality of data.
7. FFA and SPC were called upon by national fisheries authorities to help initiate and expand national observer programmes. FFA responded by providing basic observer training; SPC by providing counterpart training and development assistance to newly instigated national programmes. The formula for several years was for FFA and SPC to employ one observer expert each. In each case, the expert had a dual role with the secondary role to be part of the two-person training team that provided basic observer training through regional, sub-regional or national workshops. In FFA's case, the person was the manager of the sub-regional observer programmes that they administer. In SPC's case, the person was the regional port sampling and observer coordinator employed (a) to organise a small observer programme charged with obtaining baseline observer data for all WCPO tuna fishing fleets; (b) to assist members to setup their respective monitoring programmes; and (c) to coordinate the needs of scientists with other monitoring requirements that might be expected to be met by these programmes.
8. In 2002, SPC, in recognising the greater demand for national training, hired a specialist port sampling and observer trainer to take over the SPC side of the FFA/SPC training partnership. The Regional Coordinator was tasked to help setup national programmes and coordinate the development of harmonised strategies for efficient Pacific tuna monitoring that the nature of the fishing and limited monitoring resources demand. At the same time, SPC also employed a Fisheries Monitoring Supervisor, a large part of whose work was to monitor tuna data quality and developing tools to improve the quality of data. Much of this work was with observer data, e.g., identifying issues (some very important) with observer data quality that could compromise confidence in observer data, and also developing debriefing strategies

9. Meanwhile training has continued as ever. The same materials have been presented course after course, in the same time-frame, or at times in a diminished time frame, as increased demands on trainers' time and travel have taken their toll on trainers. *Despite the fact that observer trainees are no longer already trained fisheries staff and despite the fact that the demands for the amount, variety and quality of data have increased dramatically over the years, the training being offered, and the resources with which to provide it, have fundamentally remained unchanged.*

### **What are the issues?**

#### ***Upsurge in training demands***

10. Recent decisions emerging from PNA and WCPFC have placed a sudden demand to rapidly increase the numbers of observers required in our region. Early analyses suggest that, in the short term, we need to double the number currently available in the region. Longer term, we will need more, as we meet our needs to cover fleets beyond the purse seiners. In the very short term, we may get away with slightly fewer.
11. It is clear to FFA and SPC staff involved that regional capacity is now insufficient to meet increasing demands for training. Staff were fully employed when the number of training courses per year were three to four. In 2007 and 2008, they were committed to 5 and 8 courses, respectively, and this at a time when dwindling funds meant that these same staff were also being called to assist in other tasks.

#### ***Development of training standards***

12. In late 2007, in an attempt to anticipate an increase in demand for observers, SPC and FFA instigated the development of training standards, long overlooked while training enjoyed the luxury of being consistently presented by an unchanging SPC/FFA team. Once such standards are in place, it becomes easier to outsource training to other institutions, fishery authorities and consultants, who can be audited in the task of training against the approved standards. FFA and SPC are the most likely institutions to carry out this auditing role on behalf of members, but this is a much more appropriate role for their regional observer support staff in this current climate.
13. We were late to this task and, as a result, despite a plan to develop observer competency-based-training (CBT) standards being approved by FFC in 2008, getting the task accomplished has been slowed by attempting to service the increased demand for observers and observer training now. It would have been preferable if CBT development could have been done in a logical fashion, with the development of standards being followed by the development of observer trainers and training institutions, followed by a coordinated plan of training. Instead we have been trying to carry out the three tasks at once.

### ***Fundamental changes to how we carry out training***

14. But there is some light coming out of all this. Here, at the start of 2009, we have an initial set of Observer CBT standards available and the first of our Pacific Island national trainers (three of them) are about ready to go out on their own. However, what has become clear through the development of these standards is that some fundamental adjustments to training must be made:
  - A. There must be vigilance in pre-selection of trainees. This has long been recognised by trainers and, as a result, SPC and FFA have developed minimum health, age, education and ethical requirements for trainees. More recently, pre-training aptitude testing of a potential candidate's ability to handle basic logic problems, and their basic numeric and language skills, have proved extremely effective in filtering candidates, so that time is not wasted by trainers trying to bring up to speed candidates that are never going to make it. Unfortunately, we know from bitter experience that allowing candidates to attend training that have failed or not taken pre-training aptitude testing is a waste of valuable training resources and training opportunities. In a year when it was critical that we produce more observers for use in the region, and training staff were already extremely over-worked, perhaps one-third of trainees failed to graduate because they had not successfully passed through the pre-training testing. This has a double-whammy effect. Not only are places at training that could have been taken up by suitable trainees wasted, but an enormous amount of extra work and time is placed on trainers as they try to make good of a bad situation. Time and effort could have been far more profitably spent working with those candidates that are potentially good observers. *Please support and apply pre-selection testing. It is critical to successful and efficient observer training!*
  - B. The non-generic component of observer basic training needs to be increased from three to four weeks to cater for (a) the fact that trainees are now people of mostly non-fisheries background and (b) there is a far greater variety of skills that observers are now expected to be competent in. An increase in the length of basic training from three to four weeks is required, plus the usual generic training that all sea-going staff require.

### ***Training for 2009***

15. The call for training now remains intense. We can carry out a maximum of six training courses this year. This year's schedule will be discussed further in another paper, but if these courses are fully subscribed — and note that 15 participants is the upper limit of course size and an ideal course size is more like 12 participants — with properly selected trainees, then we can expect close to 90 certified observers to emerge from training in 2009. This is 70 short of the estimated needs to meet recent PNA and WCPFC demands.
16. This puts us in somewhat of a dilemma. An immediate solution that will allow us to produce our extra observers (to the quality we have been striving for) is not apparent. Some actions that have been proposed to possibly help, and the counter-arguments, are worth thinking about:
  - Increasing the number of courses. Staff are already over-worked, but new trainers could help; however, new trainers need time to get up to speed.
  - Shortening courses so that present staff can run more courses. This impacts dramatically on the quality of observer graduates at a time when increasing course length to improve the calibre of observers is being strongly recommended.

- Raising the number of participants per course. This is not ideal as it will impact on the quality of training being provided; however, in a perfect world, with perfectly selected trainees, this could merit some attention. Note, though, that it would only be small gains at the risk of negatively impacting training quality.
- Produce a second level of observer that requires less training, but whose data would be used in a more limited way. This seems the most practical solution, but meets with stoic resistance from a variety of angles. The appropriate recognition for observers, both for the quality of work they produce and subsequently the remuneration they receive, will require a more complex observer certification scheme and administrative workload, items that are not easily achieved in an already under-resourced environment.

### *Two types or levels of observer*

17. The dilemma for us is ‘numbers’ versus ‘quality’ of our observers, and we seek a solution to achieve one without compromising the other.
18. One possibility is to have a second level of observer that is responsible only for fisheries monitoring related to WCPFC management measures, perhaps called a “Fisheries Monitor”. In contrast, a traditional observer, trained to collect all types of observer data, would be called a “Fisheries Observer”.
19. What is not so well understood, at the time of writing, is how the minimum data fields to be collected by observers, which the WCPFC has recently agreed to, should be interpreted. At the time of the discussions on the data fields, there was general understanding that there was an overall target coverage for observers of just 5%. It is only since these minimum data fields were established that further CMMs have been agreed to that demand 100% observer coverage for purse seine vessels. Is it then reasonable to impose the complete minimum set of data fields upon observers that are required only for monitoring certain CMMs? Perhaps this would be a sensible use of observers, but in the short term, it would be much more practical to provide a shorter training regime to “Fisheries Monitors”, with fewer skills, who could then monitor CMMs until such time as they can be upgraded to “Fisheries Observers” and collect the full set of data.
20. “Fisheries Monitors” would provide an ideal pool from which to select suitable candidates for up-skilling to “Fisheries Observers”, with a good deal more confidence that the right people were being trained for the job.

### *Important ! Observer programme support mechanisms !*

21. We have been focusing thus far on how we are going to achieve the numbers of observers, but we are overlooking some vitally important aspects of running observer programmes.
22. There is much more to observer programmes than just “observers” and little point to having observers unless (a) they can be effectively placed on boats, (b) their data can be effectively controlled for quality and (c) their data can be processed and disseminated.

23. An observer programme must therefore have a management and support framework that will *arrange placements of observers* on vessels and maintain data quality through *the debriefing of observers* after each trip. It must also have the capacity to process and disseminate the data in a timely manner. Whether these activities are carried out directly by national observer programmes or by third parties (such as private observer providers or regional organisations), the mechanisms must be in place before the newly trained observers hit the ground. Otherwise, *all our training is a waste...* as it has often been in the past because these mechanisms have not been in place.

#### **How do we resolve them?**

24. Only through regional cooperation... for which the Pacific is famous. And which has resulted in a network of harmonised observer programmes, observer protocols and forms, and observer training that has allowed the region to develop an effective operation at minimal cost. Perhaps this has been a handicap, in that the true costs of running observer programmes are not readily apparent. We have no fat to trim in our system.
25. With the likelihood of the WCPFC Regional Observer Programme (ROP) just around the corner, however, some of our usual cooperation has dissipated as members scramble to put together a team that might be utilised by the ROP. As it turns out, the ROP is not much more than the combined strength of the national and sub-regional observer programmes that we currently operate, and it is important to recognise the strength that has come out of our harmonised approach.
26. The following are a list of points, suggestions and expert opinions that Heads of Fisheries are asked to consider:
- In the short term, Pacific Island Countries need to share observer work and observers, instead of competing, perhaps through the use of a central registry administered and managed by FFA.
  - The quality of observer data has to take priority over the quantity of observers. To facilitate the quality of observer data, we have to focus on the training of observers and observer debriefers.
  - Well laid out and detailed competency-based-training (CBT) standards serve to audit training quality and allow training to extend beyond being the exclusive domain of FFA and SPC. Observer work lends itself ideally to CBT training, once the CBT structure is in place.
  - To meet all the requirements currently being asked of observers, increasing at every WCPFC meeting, we are going to need to extend the course by a week.
  - We need more trainers (and we are working on that), but require the funds to train trainers.
  - Sub-regional courses, training fewer observers at a time, for more countries, building numbers in-country incrementally, will be more expensive in the short term, but much more cost-effective in the long-term.
  - Observer data must stand up to scrutiny by scientists, from industry, be used with confidence by surveillance and compliance staff, and be dependable in court, if necessary. So do not skimp on the selection of trainees.
  - *Fisheries managers must start recognising these needs and investing appropriately.*
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