

Regional action to fight illegal tuna fishing in the Pacific

A new data-driven process to further crackdown on illegal tuna fishing in the Pacific will help reduce the loss of local fishing industries.



A recent two-week surveillance operation to detect illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities in the region has confirmed how necessary data collection is to deter and eliminate fish plundering from the world's biggest and most important tuna fishery.

More than 320 vessels were sighted, 206 were boarded and 27 infringements were recorded during the operation last November. "Kurukuru" 2012 was the region's biggest ever surveillance operation and involved 5 maritime patrol aircraft, 12 patrol boats, a frigate and a Coast Guard boat all surveying an area of approximately 30 million square kilometres.

"Controlling illegal fishing in the region is complex," explains Bryan Scott, Fisheries IUU Liaison Officer at SPC. "There are multiple organisations and nations in the Pacific that govern the rules that fishers can fish under, depending on when and where they are. To cross check and analyse a vessel's catch history and other information during the time of a single boat boarding is extremely difficult because it is all paper-based," he explained.

Regional estimates put lost earnings from activities such as under-reporting or misreporting catch sizes at anywhere from millions to over a billion dollars. SPC and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) are working together to put exact figures on these losses by building a comprehensive data network.

The Kurukuru operation helped inform the early stages of a USD 10 million European Union-funded project known as DEVFISH2 (Development of Tuna Fisheries in the Pacific African, Caribbean and Pacific Countries). The project will improve information management and data analysis as a means of providing additional deterrence for illegal fishing.

Hugh Walton, FFA Policy Specialist and Team Leader for the DEVFISH2 project, says the measure of success of these projects is not just about the number of fishing vessels recorded or violations detected. "There needs to be effective deterrence; proper penalties for deliberate misreporting or under-reporting catch sizes, compliance with licence conditions, and the means to enforce license conditions," he said.

SPC ACTIVITIES



Work in the Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre at FFA.

“If vessels get away with offenses, they will continue to offend. But if they, for example, lose their licence or fishing right, the example will ripple out to other operators. Being able to compare datasets will allow us to make more reliable estimates of the extent of under-reporting and misreporting,” Walton added.

SPC and FFA aim to have the improved information management and data screening systems in place over the next 12 months. The future database management system will help authorities quickly and accurately identify inconsistencies between fishing vessel logbooks and data captured from surveillance through the vessel

monitoring system and the reports of at-sea fisheries observers and in-port monitoring of catch landings.

The Kurukuru 2012 surveillance operation was headquartered in Honiara, Solomon Islands at the FFA Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre, and data were collected from aerial, ship and electronic surveillance sources.

The 30 million square kilometres surveyed included the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Australia, New Zealand, France and the United States also provided surveillance support.

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*All images in this article are by Ben Bosschieter,
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Royal Solomon Islands police interviewing vessel crew during a fishing vessel inspection.