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What a tangled net: unravelling the international complications of tuna conservation

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What a tangled net: unravelling the international complications of tuna conservation

Abstract

The eighth meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission concluded in Guam on Friday 30 March 2012. Five hundred delegates from more than 40 countries argued for a week about how to reduce overfishing in the Western and Central Pacific tuna fisheries and sustainably manage the world's largest tuna fisheries.

Scientific assessments clearly recommend urgent action to address overfishing and reduce fishing mortality for bigeye tuna, halt any increases in fishing mortality for yellowfin and probably albacore, reduce fishing mortality of juvenile bigeye and yellowfin, and develop precautionary limits for skipjack. If these actions are not taken the stocks of these species will see further declines for some stocks and potentially see overfishing start to occur for others.

But despite clear advice from the Commission's scientific committee that further measures were required to address overfishing of bigeye tuna, the Commission couldn't agree how members should distribute the "burden of conservation".

Keywords

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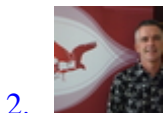
What a tangled net: unravelling the international complications of tuna conservation

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Scientists are clear that tuna catch needs to be cut, but figuring out who will fish less and where is much trickier. AAP

The eighth meeting of the [Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission](#) concluded in Guam on Friday 30 March 2012. Five hundred delegates from more than 40 countries argued for a week about how to reduce overfishing in the Western and Central Pacific tuna fisheries and sustainably manage the world's largest tuna fisheries.

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Tuna don't recognise national boundaries

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean stretches over 10,000 kilometres, from the archipelagos of Southeast Asia to the remote atolls of Kiribati in the Central Pacific. This vast ocean is home to the world's most productive tuna fisheries, supplying global markets with skipjack, bigeye, yellowfin and albacore worth approximately \$4.5 billion. About \$2 billion of this is caught within the waters of Pacific island States and territories.

These tuna fisheries are the only significant renewable resource for many Pacific island states and have long been viewed as the primary development opportunity. Access fees from foreign fishing vessels deliver much-needed financial contributions to governments, while domestically based fishing fleets and support industries and pump hard currency into national economies. In some cases revenue from tuna can contribute up to half of gross domestic product and is a significant component of national economies.



The economies of small island states, like Tonga, can rely heavily on tuna catch. AAP

The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission was established by treaty in 2004 to ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of the WCPO tropical tuna fisheries. The Commission comprises all of the key coastal and distant water fishing states (including Australia). It meets annually to negotiate and adopt conservation and management measures. These bind all members to implement agreed regulations and limits on fishing activities by their registered vessels and in their exclusive economic zones (EEZs).

International cooperation is increasingly required to limit tuna fisheries to sustainable levels and reduce overfishing and destructive practices. Tuna migrate across numerous international boundaries. They need international cooperation to ensure effective management across multiple jurisdictions.

Despite the Commission’s conservation mandate, the members have once again failed to agree on conservation and management measures that are sufficiently strong to meet their own Scientific Committee’s recommendations. This conservation challenge is complicated by the multigear, multispecies and multinational characteristics of the WCPO tropical tuna fisheries.

Someone has to cut back fishing, but who?

For the WCPFC to resolve the threat to bigeye, it must restrict the operation of purse-seine vessels that are targeting and primarily catching highly productive skipjack, which are not currently threatened by overfishing. As part of this fishing operation they also catch juvenile bigeye. The catch is small, but contributing to the bigeye’s decline.

However, purse-seine fleets will receive little or no long-term sustainability benefit or increase in profitability if bigeye stocks rebuild. Longline fleets, on the other hand, will directly benefit from conservation measures that rebuild bigeye stocks and make them more profitable.



Restrictions on skipjack fishing will hit purse-seine fishers hardest. Greenpeace

This creates an inherently difficult and challenging problem. The measures WCPFC comes up with will affect a broad range of fleets and stakeholders. Such conservation and management measures implicitly allocate a “conservation burden” on member states. Each state must apply costs to its fleets through limiting fishing opportunities and regulating their activities. Governments must fund national institutions to implement regulations. And management costs for fleets go up from new licensing arrangements.

Conservation and management can reduce benefits for some; limit opportunities for others; and protect or even increase benefits for some participants.

To further complicate matters, conservation and management measures may affect Pacific island developing states that depend on these fisheries and want to develop their benefits. Some will have few other options. They will be hit harder by the conservation burden than states with diverse resources, large institutions and substantial revenue streams from multiple economic activities.

The question of how the conservation burden is distributed is fundamental to conservation and management negotiations.

Should winners bear a bigger burden?

Over the last week, members argued over various alternative proposals for limiting fishing. But they couldn't compromise their interests and agree. Commission members still want to distribute the burden of conservation elsewhere.

For example, the longline fishery will benefit from conservation reductions in bigeye mortality. Should states with significant interests in longline fisheries bear a greater share of the conservation burden than those who won't benefit from reductions in bigeye mortality?



Who can benefit most from these tuna? Greenpeace

Should the Commission value the shared nature of common rights to high seas fisheries less than the exclusive nature of sovereign rights over fisheries within exclusive economic zones (EEZs)? How might these rights be weighed against the absolute sovereignty that coastal states hold over fisheries within their waters? A distant water fishing vessel is highly mobile and can relocate if overfishing in one region reduces a highly migratory stock below profitable levels. But a coastal state is vulnerable to overfishing in neighbouring EEZs and adjacent high seas and cannot move its EEZ to another region if stocks decline below profitable levels.

How should the Commission consider the diversity and choices of food enjoyed by distant markets compared to the limited options available to artisanal communities in coastal developing states? Should a consumer of luxury sashimi in New York or Tokyo be given equal weighting compared to an artisanal community in Kiribati or the Philippines?

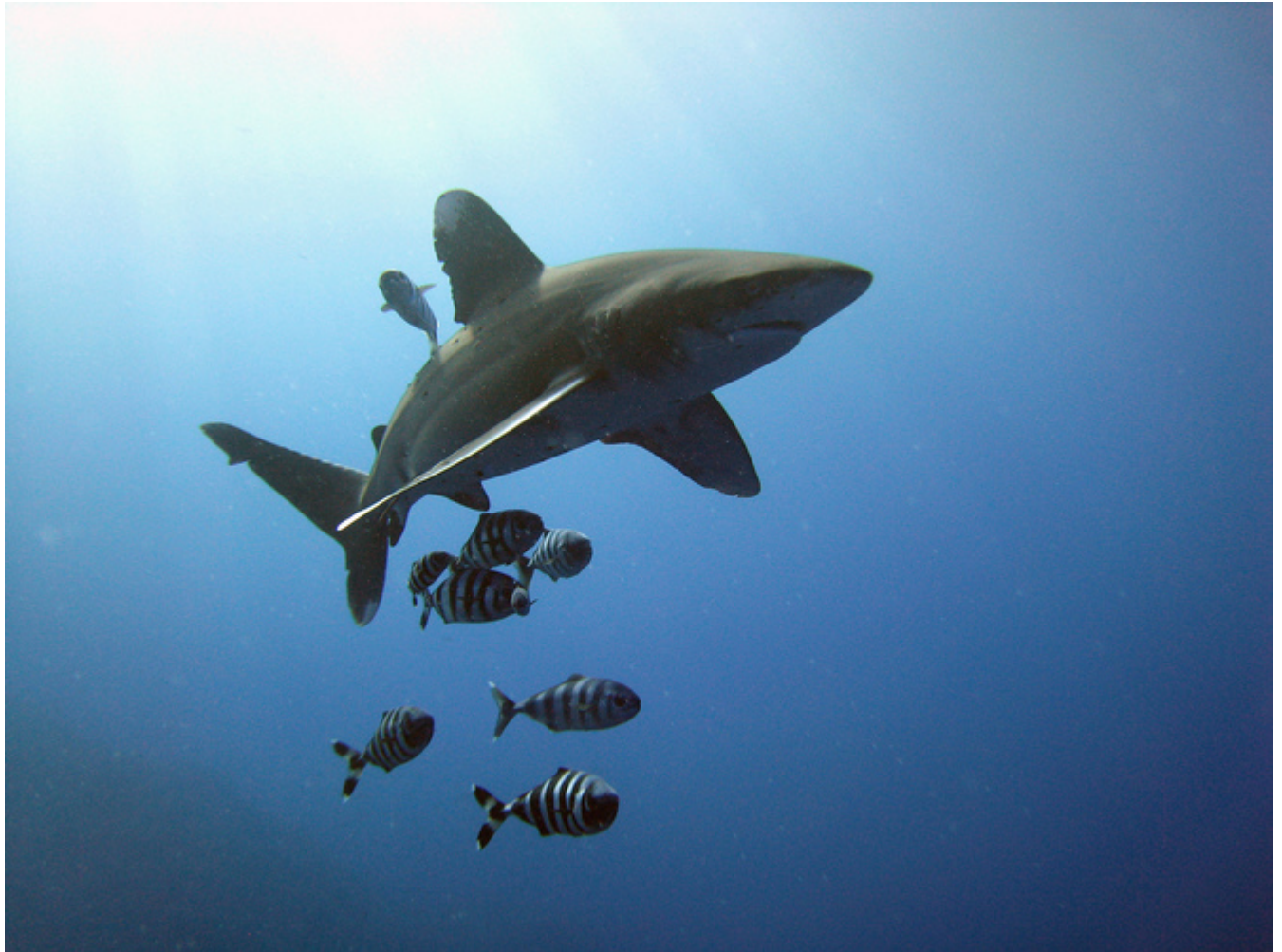
When considering how to reduce effort or catches of fishing fleets, should a historically high level of catch and fishing activity be prioritised, or penalised if it is considered more equitable to share benefits in turn? How should the development aspirations of developing States be recognised in practice?

The Commission did not transparently discuss these questions. It didn't study the interests of its members, or the impact of proposed measures on these interests. Instead, the Commission addressed deeply political and economic arguments solely within a conservation science framework. This scientific framework inevitably became politicised as members proposed conservation arguments for measures that best protected their own interests, and refuted conservation arguments for measures that compromise them.

Agreement on a ten-month extension to existing measures was only reached at the end of the meeting after members agreed to weaken provisions prohibiting fishing in high seas "pockets" east of the Philippines and defined limits for the currently healthy skipjack.

Sharks: the industry's innocent bystanders

In recent years, WCPFC Members have been considering an increasing amount of [information about the sharks](#) that are taken along with tuna in the region's fisheries. Shark populations are precarious because most sharks grow slowly and produce few young. There are few fishing limits, and poor accounting of catches.



Oceanic whitetip sharks were the biggest beneficiaries of the meeting. Michael Ashton

Purse seines are [intentionally set on whale sharks](#) to catch the tuna that gather around them. Scientists estimate that 75 of the slow-moving filter feeders were [killed in the region's purse seine fishery](#) in 2009 and 2010. Australia proposed a ban on this practice, but didn't succeed. Opposition has been led by Japan, which has also resisted similar measures for cetaceans (dolphins and whales). Australia did get agreement to end deliberate purse seine setting on cetaceans, but progress for whale sharks was stalled until December.

The WCPFC has adopted a shark research plan, and has designated eight "key" shark species (two species of makos, three species of threshers, plus oceanic whitetip, blue, and silky sharks).

The oceanic whitetip shark was the subject of most decisive action of the week. Steep population declines led to a prohibition on retention, transshipment, storage, and landing of oceanic whitetip sharks. This should reduce mortality by up to 76%. It is the first species-specific shark measure adopted by the WCPFC.

In recent years the global community has taken a close interest in how these regional tuna management bodies are performing against the responsibilities they have been challenged with, a little like how we review the performance of banks entrusted with our savings. The lack of significant progress this last week won't have engendered a feeling of comfort in the

global community that their tuna resources are being looked after as responsibly as they should be.

This article was co-authored by Sonja Fordham, President of [Shark Advocates International](#) (SAI), a project of The Ocean Foundation established to advance sound policies for sharks and rays. Based on two decades of shark conservation achievement, SAI works to secure science-based limits on shark fishing and trade, protection for endangered species, and stronger bans on finning.