

# Next to Slavery

**Workers and crew on board vessels in the Pacific tuna fishery rarely enjoy the right to decent living and working conditions**

Just a few years ago, while undertaking a commissioned desk study on the four major Pacific and Indian Oceans' tuna species, I came across a few reports that mentioned the hiring and situations of fishing vessel crews. One of them was a 2011 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime report by Eve de Coning [de Coning, E, 2011. Transnational organized crime in the Fishing Industry. Focus on: Trafficking in Persons, Smuggling of Migrants, Illicit Drugs Trafficking. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011. United Nations, Vienna.

Seaman, 2010. Letter from Mr Able Seaman, Pacific Islands crew member onboard Alienlandic purse seiner, *Sweep the Ocean*. SPC Fisheries Newsletter #133-September/December 2010. pp 27–28]. Representing sections of Mr Able Seaman's letter here enables a discussion about the situation of crews on commercial tuna vessels in the Pacific Islands region—notwithstanding that the discussion refers to a minority of fleets and senior crews.

- “While being employed by this foreign fishing vessel and fishing in our Pacific waters, I feel that I am actually fishing in foreign waters, not my own Pacific Island waters. This is because foreigners who have been sweeping up the fish across the Pacific ...”

In 2014, 305 purse-seiners and 2,966 longliners were licensed to fish in the Western and Central Pacific Commission Convention Area (WCPFC-CA) [Hurry, G., 2014. The Western and Central Pacific tuna fishery. WCPFC, Pohnpei. <http://devpolicy.org/presentation/2014-Pacific-Update/Day-2/Glenn-Hurry.pdf>]; in addition to them, are a minority of pole-and-line and troll vessels; the harvest from the Convention Area in 2014 was 2,860,648 mt [WCPFC Scientific Committee, 2015].

- “... are labouring Pacific Islander crews almost to slavery in their own backyard and leaving scars that may not ever heal.”

## Manning agencies

State workers at tuna ports in the WCPFC-CA, employees of crew manning agencies and diplomatic missions, and others can testify to

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144 p]that discussed trafficking in persons in the fishing industry. I was 'glued' by the content of that report—perhaps because, as a professional fisheries scientist for more than 40 years in the Asia-Pacific region, I had not before given the scruffy and hardened crews of fishing vessels much of a thought; truly, her report opened my eyes, or started to.

My attempts to find related information on tuna fishing vessel crews generally was unsuccessful except for the several Southeast Asian fleets' 'long-haul' vessel reports that nowadays are becoming widely read. Until, that is, I encountered 'Letter from Mr Able Seaman, Pacific Islands crew member on board Alienlandic purse-seiner, *Sweep the Ocean*' [Sharples, P and Able

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the conditions experienced on vessels by junior crew, which include verbal and physical abuse, beatings, frost-bite from non-supply of adequate equipment, very long work periods (18 hours or more each fishing day) and no days off, poor sleeping areas, non-functional toilets and showers, poor drinking water, inadequate food ('bait fish and boiled rice every day') [High Court of Tuvalu, 2012. *Regina v Kamikamica TVHC 4*; Criminal Case 03 of 2011 (21 January 2012). Judgement. <http://www.paclii.org/tv/cases/TVHC/2012/4.html>—accessed April 2015], inadequate or absent first-aid equipment, and witnessing deaths of fellow crew because of poor health and accidents with fishing gear.

- “Having worked for about 10 years on board various foreign fishing vessels that employ Pacific Islanders as crew, I feel very embarrassed to say that we slave at great risk and uncertainty for just a little cash in return.”

Major fleets working in the Pacific Islands region attempt to reduce operating costs by recruiting crew from low-wage countries [Gillet, R.D and McCoy, M.A, 1997. Employment of Pacific Islanders aboard foreign fishing vessels. Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, FFA Report 97/11; de Coning, E. 2011. Transnational organized crime in the Fishing Industry. Focus on: Trafficking in Persons, Smuggling of Migrants, Illicit Drugs Trafficking. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2011. United Nations, Vienna. 144 p]. The cost of fishing is high in the Pacific (even for tuna), because of several inter-related characteristics—the overall decrease in fish stocks, large fleet sizes (including illegal, unreported and unregulated or IUU vessels), the increasing costs of fuel and bait, access to increasingly regulated markets, and distance.

- “There are many Pacific Islanders who have worked 15 years or more on purse-seiners and longliners, moving from boat to boat, developing skills to become very able seamen but who still labour as deckhands, the lowest rank on board vessels, without promotion

or increase in salary simply because the foreigners use rank to dominate Pacific Island crew. It is unique to find a Pacific Islander that ranks over a foreigner.”

There are maritime training institutes in Kiribati, Tuvalu and Fiji, and graduates are engaged by both the merchant marine and fishing industries. Even so, largely their qualifications are not considered when adjudicating salaries; the wages of primarily unskilled workers remain constant. Moreover, junior crew engaged by contract from countries neighbouring the Pacific (including Indonesia and the Philippines) are often placed in debt because the cost of their securing passports—and even travel to take up their contracts—are deducted from their promised wages. “Another aspect is safety. Recently, news has circulated among Pacific Island crewmen on board foreign fishing vessels about two Pohnpeian crewmen that went missing from a Alienlandiclongliner in Papua New Guinea’s East New Britain Province.”

A few reports reach concerned ears in Fiji [Fiji Times on-line, 26 May 2014. ‘Set adrift in dinghy’; Fiji Times on-line, 10 March 2014. ‘Lost at sea’] but others circulate in the Pacific [There are reports of fisheries observers (who are known, and tracked) having been ‘lost’ overboard. They include Charles Lasisi and

NOA MOKO



Fishing vessels at Suva harbour, Fiji. The wages of primarily unskilled workers remain constant, and they are often in debt

Wesley Talia (Papua New Guinea) and Keith Davis (USA)]. There are murders, fights and deaths stemming from exhaustion, poor conditions, harsh treatment and long periods at sea. Safety-at-sea practice is low and awareness is not handled correctly; the fishing vessels of some fleets would not pass accepted maritime safety certificates.

- “We work in a situation where one lives under strict orders and should the orders be disobeyed or hindered, the penalties are harsh. Anything can happen to us out here and nobody will be able to tell what really happened.”

Whereas the deployment of fisheries observers and the duration of their voyages are recorded, much less is known about junior crew (names, vessels, voyage length), especially as trans-shipping of crew is not uncommon—due to crewing demands and breakdowns, for example). An often-reported and evidenced example of abuse was that of an Indonesian crewman who was presented to the Immigration Department in the Marshall Islands to show the scars on his body inflicted by the dog of the master of his vessel.


- “My final wish is that our Pacific Island countrymen recognize that being crew on board foreign fishing vessels is a difficult lifestyle. More strongly, they must realize that such employment is next to slavery. All we want is to work and provide for our families the best way we can; however, to risk our lives for meagre wages is not what we had in mind. I kindly ask that our governments’ appropriate authorities closely monitor the activities of the licensed fishing vessels and whatever circumstances may arise in the fishing grounds. We would rather struggle for the benefit of our own people and our nations rather than work as slaves to others who treat us like dirt in our own territory.”

Two major challenges to securing safe and correctly-remunerated conditions in the Pacific tuna fishery, are management of recruiting agents (notably, in Asian countries) and

accountability of vessel masters. Non-realization of contracted wages and other conditions are frequently laid at the feet of recruiting agents—often, we receive reports of repatriated crew ultimately discovering that they worked for 18–24 months ‘for free’ because of agents’ manipulation of contracts or ‘disappearing’, and masters’ imposition of arbitrary fines aboard ship.

We state that there are three major components in a sustainable and sound tuna fishing industry: the resource, the vessels and the crew. Unfortunately, this third component is too often neglected whereas without crew, neither the resource could be caught nor the vessels operate. At the very least, all seafarers (which include junior crew) [With acknowledgement to VGroup Limited, [www.vships.com](http://www.vships.com)] deserve

- the right to a safe and secure workplace that complies with safety standards,
- the right to fair terms of employment,
- the right to decent living and working conditions on board,
- the right to health protection, welfare measures and other forms of social protection,
- a workplace free of discrimination of any kind, and
- wage payments and allotments paid in a timely fashion and payments verified.

The governments of the Pacific Islands countries benefit greatly from the Pacific tuna stocks but along with the benefits, come responsibilities and reputation. It is encouraging to record that Pacific governments are beginning to recognize this. 

#### For more

[maritime-executive.com/article/under-reporting-of-slavery-and-abuse-in-pacific-fisheries](http://maritime-executive.com/article/under-reporting-of-slavery-and-abuse-in-pacific-fisheries)

#### **Under-Reporting of Slavery and Abuse in Pacific Fisheries**

[pacificdialogue.com.fj/images/pdf/2015\\_Tuna\\_forum.pdf](http://pacificdialogue.com.fj/images/pdf/2015_Tuna_forum.pdf)

#### **Crew conditions on fishing vessels in the Pacific Islands region**