

conference

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LARGE-SCALE PELAGIC DRIFT NET FISHING

1. A great deal of concern has recently been expressed at a number of regional and international fora in the context of sustainable development and environment about the increased use of large-scale pelagic drift nets, particularly in the Pacific Ocean, for catching salmon, squid, tuna and other shoaling species and its effects on the management of resources. As FAO has mandate under its Constitution to promote rational management and development of world fisheries, it shares the concerns of the international community on this issue.

2. Large-scale pelagic drift nets were first introduced into the high seas fishery in the northern Pacific Ocean in the late seventies. They are fishing nets made of a single or of several panels of monofilament (thin and strong synthetic fibres) net webbing suspended vertically in the water by floats at the top of the panels and sinkers at the bottom. The nets are permitted to drift by wind and current and create a webbing curtain with low visibility in which fish are entangled. Presently the pelagic drift nets employed by the high-seas fishing fleets in the Pacific are very large being between 20 and 80 km in length and approximately 15 m in depth. They are hauled on board fishing vessels by hydraulic winches. At the onset of this document, this type of fishing operation should therefore be distinguished from the much smaller traditional gill nets or drift gill nets which have been used for many decades in small-scale fisheries for fishing in the coastal and inshore waters of many coastal countries of the world.

3. This document is prepared in response to the directives of the Twenty-fifth Session of the FAO Conference to provide background information on the development of this fishery and summarize the views and measures propounded at different fora.

Background

4. Since the second world war, rapid advancement has been made in fishing vessel and gear technologies, especially the development of light, durable synthetic fibres for use in the construction of fishing nets, and of navigation and fishing implements. Modern aids to high-seas fishing reduce searching time for fish schools and enable a fleet to locate fish concentrations with some degree of accuracy. This is the case in tuna fisheries where remote sensing now plays an important part and fishing charts, enhanced to show concentrations of chlorophyll/phytoplankton, surface temperatures and thermoclines, can be obtained daily on facsimile receivers on board modern fishing vessels. The result is that the fishing vessels tend to be deployed in the area most likely to give prolific catches and if the fishery is unmanaged, fishing saturation can be expected; the large scale drift net fishery of the South Pacific, and more recently in the Mediterranean, are no exception.

5. Another factor that induced the rapid expansion of the large-scale pelagic drift net fishery is the opening of new markets in the world, particularly in Asia, in response to steadily increasing demands for fish and fish products.

6. However, the large pelagic drift nets in use are not as species-selective as the traditional drifting gill nets and other forms of gill nets in use in small-scale fisheries. This is partly due to the construction of the large pelagic drift net (using strong light twine) and its method of deployment which allows it to "entangle" both target and non-target species, such as marine mammals.

7. The extent to which the low selectivity of the pelagic drift nets, as deployed in the South Pacific since the mid eighties, affects the sustainability of target and non-target species, cannot be readily determined due to the unavailability of scientific data. In this respect there is a need for cooperation between the States whose vessels are engaged in these fisheries on the high seas, as provided for in Article 119 of UNCLOS. Another reason is the fact that most regional fishery bodies, in general, lack trained manpower and financial resources to carry out research. These facts make the comparison of any data collected in the immediate future with present information all the more difficult.

Measures taken to address large pelagic drift net fishing on the high seas

8. With regard to waters under the jurisdiction of coastal States, a few countries have enacted legislation regulating large pelagic drift netting, for example, Australia limits the length of nets, the USA and Canada ban the use of this gear within the waters under their jurisdictions, Norway prohibits any Norwegian fishing vessel to drift-net in the Atlantic Ocean.

9. Within the framework of the International North Pacific Fisheries Commission, Canada, the USA and Japan have agreed to cooperate in an enforcement and monitoring programme to evaluate the impact of pelagic drift net fishing in the North Pacific, including the carrying of observers on board drift-netters and the marking of drift nets with the identity of the owner.

10. In July 1989, the 15 member countries of the South Pacific Forum adopted the "Tarawa Declaration" which calls for a ban on this method of fishing in the whole South Pacific area. These countries agreed to meet in November 1989 to consider a convention banning the use of drift nets by their own nationals on the high seas. In July, the Indian Ocean Marine Affairs (IOMAC) Standing Committee noted that urgent action was called for in this regard. In August, the 21st Regional Technical Meeting on Fisheries of the South Pacific Commission noted with concern that the total catch of albacore tuna by drift-netting had doubled over the last two years and recommended an observer programme to better assess the situation. Concern was also expressed by a working group of the International Commission for the Scientific Exploration of the Mediterranean held in October 1989 which recommended a research programme. The matter was also raised at the 64th Session of the OECD Committee of Fisheries at the end of September. It was also on the agenda of the meeting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government held in Langawi, Malaysia, in October, who commended the Tarawa Declaration and committed themselves to discourage and restrict non-sustainable fishing practices and to seek the ban of pelagic drift net fishing.

11. With respect to drift netting in the North Pacific the USA and Japan reached an agreement on 23 June 1989, and an agreement between the USA and the Republic of Korea was concluded on 8 September 1989. Furthermore, the American Institute in Taiwan (Province of China) (representing US interests) reached a drift net agreement with the authorities there on 25 August 1989.

12. Finally, the question is presently being discussed in the Second Commission of the UN General Assembly under item 82 "Development and international economic cooperation: environment". Two draft resolutions were introduced on 6 November (one by Japan and one by Australia, Canada, Fiji, Mauritania, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, USA, Vanuatu, Zaire).

Involvement of FAO until now

(a) Committee on Fisheries (COFI)

13. At its Seventeenth Session in May 1987, COFI already discussed one aspect of the problem when considering, upon request of a delegation, the question of the protection of living resources from entanglement in fishing nets and debris.

(b) The FAO Council

14. The matter was briefly touched upon by the Council at its Ninety-fifth Session in June 1989. The report of this Session of the Council states: "with regard to the impact on the conservation of resources of certain types of fishing gear such as drift nets, a suggestion was made for FAO to lend its efforts to find a solution to these problems". As a result of this suggestion, FAO has made provision for a systematic collection of scientific, technical, economic and legal data on this issue.

15. At the Ninety-sixth Session of the Council, one delegation referred to this issue and expressed the wish that FAO could respond flexibly to the possible requests from the Member States concerned.

(c) Indian Ocean Fishery Commission (IOFC)

16. At the Ninth Session of the Indian Ocean Fishery Commission held in Seychelles in October 1989, a delegation drew attention to the growing problem of large drift nets of up to 80 km in length in the South Pacific. It pointed out that it was likely that drift netting would shift into the Indian Ocean and could pose a serious hazard to the stocks of albacore and southern bluefin tuna of the Eastern Indian Ocean. Another delegate mentioned that the drift net fishery itself is not necessarily an unregulated or indiscriminate fishing method if properly managed and this issue should be examined from the scientific viewpoint on the effect of the driftnet fishery on the tuna stocks.

17. Several delegations, noting the extent and nature of the problem, called for a distinction to be made between properly managed small-scale fishery employing small-sized gill nets and the industrial large-scale fishery that deployed very long drift nets.

18. The Commission, while acknowledging that a poorly managed drift net fishery could present a serious hazard to living resources, felt that the real effects of drift nets on tuna stocks required a more thorough scientific investigation in order to evaluate all the possible implications. The Commission requested that the effect of drift netting on fish stocks be considered at the next session, in June 1990, of its Committee on the Management of Indian Ocean Tuna based on available information provided by the Secretariat and the Expert Consultation that will precede the session.

(d) General Fisheries Council for the Mediterranean (GFCM)

19. At the request of the Chairman of the General Fisheries Council for the Mediterranean (GFCM), the question will also be on the agenda of the forthcoming meeting of the Executive Committee of this body expected to be held in Rome in January 1990 and on the agenda of the GFCM Sixth Technical Consultation on Stock Assessment in the Balearic and Gulf of Lions Statistical Divisions to be held in the first half of 1990.

(e) FAO Preparatory Meeting for Expert Consultation on Interactions in the Pacific Ocean Tuna Fisheries

20. The above meeting held recently in Noumea, New Caledonia, provided additional information on the extent of scientific data and expertise available in the region on tuna fisheries. While this meeting was only preparatory to a full meeting scheduled for October 1990, it did provide summary overviews of the state of the various tuna stocks in the Pacific Ocean. With regard to albacore tuna, the species predominantly taken by the pelagic drift net fishery, it concluded that there was indeed reason for concern over both the North and South Pacific stocks but that there was an urgent need for more data from all the albacore fisheries, especially on the catch and size composition of the fish caught.

Conclusion

21. As mentioned above, FAO, being the competent body for the management and development of world fisheries within the United Nations system, has already taken steps in this matter. Furthermore, FAO proposes to organize, at the end of 1990, a technical meeting on the management and legal aspects of large scale pelagic drift net fishing. The services of the Organization are available to address this issue should the Conference wish to provide direction to the work in this respect.