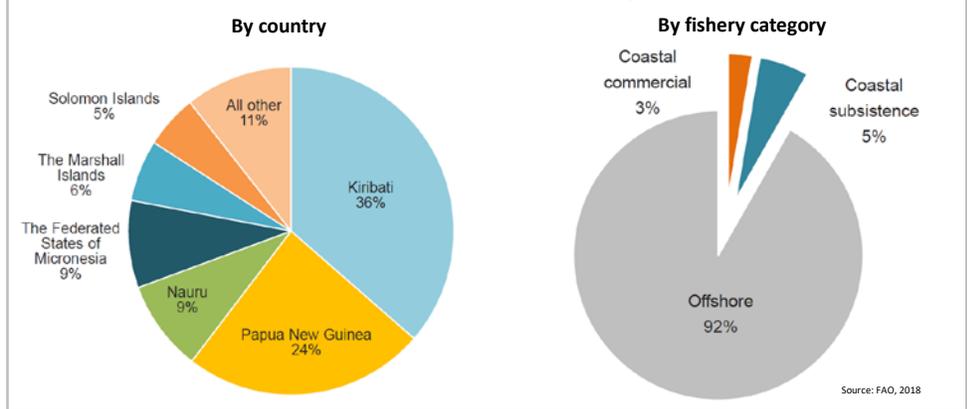


In the Pacific Islands, seafood sits at the crux of economic development, food security, and culture—making responsible growth imperative. Seafood is their number-one source of protein, contributes up to 29% of GDP, and is an important sector for employment. In 2014 the region produced 2 million metric tons of seafood worth US\$3.2 billion¹, 92% of which derives from tuna, billfish, and other offshore fisheries², with the remainder coming from artisanal coastal fisheries and only 7% from a nascent aquaculture sector.¹ The Pacific is a unique geography, made up of 22 countries with a combined population of approximately 10 million people scattered over 25,000 islands across an area equivalent to 15% of the globe’s surface, most of which is ocean.

While idyllic for tourists, the Pacific Islands present seafood producers with some inherent challenges. The remoteness of the islands and dispersion of resources and infrastructure increases time to market and drives up input costs such as fuel, electricity, and materials. The small and dispersed populations make it difficult to realize economies of scale reliant on local labor or markets. And the vast ocean territories and large number of independent small nations make it difficult to administer, monitor, and enforce regulatory compliance. However, resources are relatively abundant and varied, and the islanders need jobs, so opportunities to create businesses that do well and do good are plentiful.

The Pacific Islands are working to balance growth of their seafood trade with food security, conservation goals, and tourism needs. Natural limits and conservation policies are expected to continue to curb wild-catch volumes. As a result, Pacific Island countries (PICs) are focusing on improving value per pound in order to grow their seafood trade, rather than pursuing pure volume growth. They are also cautious about implementing measures to improve food security. Paradoxically, local populations in the Pacific Islands often don’t have access to local seafood, as fishing rights are sold to foreign fleets that operate completely offshore. These fleets process products at sea or overseas, and local landings and distribution are lacking, creating food security and public health issues as islanders’ diets move away from traditional fresh food to more processed, unhealthy options. The overarching challenge remains: finding ways to grow and accrue both the economic and social benefit of national fisheries for Pacific Islanders.

Pacific Island Marine Fisheries Production by Volume (2014)



Areas of Opportunity and Growth

Keeping value in the Pacific Islands

In order to bring more economic and social benefits from fisheries to the Pacific Islands, policy-makers are focusing on increasing revenue from access rights to tuna. The PNA (Parties to the Nauru Agreement) greatly increased revenue by moving to a Vessel Day scheme, and now will make a second move toward catch-volume-based schemes while also improving monitoring and compliance. Increasingly, regulations and incentives are being put in place to bring more value-added activities to the PICs, such as attaching local processing stipulations onto the sale of fishing rights. Additionally, some regions will seek to improve trade value through marketing and country-of-origin labeling.

Infrastructure: The foundation for growth

For PICs, infrastructure investment is the starting point for increasing economic and social benefits from seafood. Currently, the lack of suitable port infrastructure and landing slots is restricting PICs’ ability to land and domestically process and sell their seafood. And while PICs are relatively close to important Asian, Australian, and American markets, a lack of shipping (air and sea) capacity and frequency can drive up time to market for their seafood products. That, combined with a lack of suitable cold storage, limits the PICs’ ability to sell higher-value formats such as fresh, live, or ULT-frozen.

Improving local access while reducing waste

The need for improved trade balances from seafood must be carefully balanced with the need to give local PIC populations better access to their primary source of protein. Local micro-canning is a potential solution that can improve food security, bring jobs to the islands, and reduce food waste (there is local demand for non-white-meat tuna). Moreover, affordable ways to improve local cold-chain distribution are needed to bring fish from remote or rural areas to urban population centers without sacrificing quality.

Aquaculture comes to the Pacific

Considering their access to a vast ocean and coastal area, the development of a local mariculture industry is an obvious route for the Pacific Islands to advance seafood trade, employment, and food security. While PICs may struggle to compete internationally with Southeast Asia in large commodity markets (tilapia, shrimp, catfish), they could succeed in building export markets for high-value native species with niche appeal. Restorative aquaculture (seaweed, bivalves, pearls), in particular, promises to deliver a win-win for economic, social, and conservation objectives.

Sources:

1. R. D. Gillett, “Fisheries in the Economies of Pacific Island Countries and Territories,” Pacific Community (2016).
2. R. D. Gillett and M. I. Tauati, “Fisheries of the Pacific Islands: Regional and national information,” FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper No. 625 (Apia, FAO, 2018).

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