Drift Net Problems Spread to South Pacific

Like video games and hamburgers, drift gill net fishing (drift netting) is becoming commonplace throughout the world. Its latest emergence is in the relatively untouched waters of the South Pacific by Taiwanese and Japanese drift net fleets targeting surface schools of albacore. Concerned fishery officials of several South Pacific island countries met in Suva, Fiji, on November 3 and 4, 1988, to discuss ways to discourage the use of drift nets on the high seas of the South Pacific, according to Dr. George W. Boehlert, Director of the Honolulu Laboratory, NOAA Fisheries—Southwest Region.

"This highly effective fishing technology brings with it considerable controversy and a host of knotty problems for fishermen, marine scientists and government fishery managers," said Dr. Jerry A. Wetherall, an albacore expert and chief of the Honolulu Laboratory's Pelagic Resources Investigation, who attended the meeting. "One of the main problems is that drift nets entangle and kill other marine life occurring in the same area as the target fish species."

"Drift net fishing occurs legally on the high seas, so the South Pacific fishery officials considered means to discourage drift netting in the region by reducing economic incentives," said Wetherall. Albacore are the premium species of tuna for canning and a resource of considerable interest to South Pacific islanders.

Albacore gill netting on the high seas is economically attractive to its proponents because nets 15 miles or more in length stretching from the sea surface to 30 feet can be set in the water at a cost of about 7 to 8 inches wide.

Large albacore have been harvested for 30 years in deep waters of the South Pacific by lines of longline fishing vessels from Japan, Taiwan and Korea operating out of ports in Asia or the South Pacific. Recently, it was discovered that a small area off the coast of the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga and Vanuatu, as well as officials from the South Pacific Commission, the United Nations Development Program and South Pacific island fishing companies, attended the meeting.

The incidental mortality caused by drift net fishing may be substantially greater than the observed catch. Some of the fish and other marine life entangled in the nets drop out during fishing and retrieval of the nets, and an unknown fraction of albacore dropping out die as a result of the encounter. Others suffer cuts and abrasions that reduce their value to troll and longlining fleets, may exceed the maximum sustainable yield of the population.

This situation is complicated by the fact that the actual mortality caused by drift net fishing may be substantially greater than the observed catch. Albacore are affected by encounters with drift nets, reducing the effectiveness of longlining. Another major problem caused by drift nets is the hazard they impose to fishing vessels and fishermen at sea. The nets are operated at night and are set at the water's surface, where they can easily entangle the propellers of vessels. Trolling vessels, and even the drift net vessels themselves, have become disabled by drift nets. Fishermen are endangered when they are forced to dive under the vessel to cut the boat free. During gill netting trials a few years ago in waters north of Australia, two Japanese fishermen drowned in such an effort.

The Suva meeting, which was called by the South Pacific Forum Fisheries Agency, was attended by representatives from American Samoa, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Fiji, French Polynesia, Tonga and Vanuatu, as well as officials from the South Pacific Commission, the United Nations Development Program and South Pacific island fishing companies. Wetherall provided the group with technical information about the albacore resource and fishers.

According to Wetherall, one of the means considered by the South Pacific fishery officials to discourage albacore drift netting was for countries in the region to deny drift net vessels access to their exclusive economic zones or ports for any purpose, such as reprovisioning, refueling or delivery of catches.

"Another measure considered was for officials to persuade the canneries and transshipment facilities to the South Pacific to deal only in albacore caught by trollers and longliners, and not drift netters," said Wetherall.

The use of drift gill nets by foreign vessels has been banned within the 200-mile exclusive economic zone around Hawaii, Guam and American Samoa. The actions taken by the South Pacific island countries add to the growing global resistance to drift net fishing and show that concern about negative effects of drift netting exist even in the remote waters of the South Pacific.

by George W. Boehlert