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If we want to keep tuna, the world needs to learn how to share

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Abstract
Amid growing demand for seafood, gas and other resources drawn from the world’s oceans, and growing stresses from climate change, we examine some of the challenges and solutions for developing “the blue economy” in smarter, more sustainable ways.

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Amid growing demand for seafood, gas and other resources drawn from the world’s oceans, and growing stresses from climate change, we examine some of the challenges and solutions for developing “the blue economy” in smarter, more sustainable ways.

Fishing for tuna, swordfish, jack mackerel, Patagonian toothfish and many other species happens far out at sea, with fisheries often crossing multiple international boundaries.

It’s a huge global industry, which provides billions of dollars a year in direct and indirect benefits to developed and developing countries, and which supplies the world’s food markets. However, overfishing and weak management are serious threats, estimated to cost the world up to US$50 billion a year in lost benefits.

If we don’t learn to better manage transnational fisheries, we risk the long-term viability of key fisheries, as extraordinary global marine biodiversity is reduced to a shadow of its former health.

Whether you care about being better custodians of the Earth’s oceans, or simply want to be sure that we’ll have plenty of good fish in the sea to catch and eat for generations to come, it’s a huge global challenge.

Fortunately, there are new solutions we should be considering – including lessons from a tuna hotspot in the Pacific.
What we’re doing now is making things worse

Australia and other concerned nations have long warned that current levels of fishing are unsustainable and “leading inexorably to an impending crisis for global marine fisheries.”

Strong international action is required to strengthen fisheries management across multiple boundaries, reduce catches to sustainable levels, and optimise benefits to meet development goals.

But traditional management approaches can be politically contentious, especially because they often require consensus from numerous countries with conflicting interests.
It’s difficult to get multiple countries to agree on restrictions on fishing activities, or controls on fishing methods, or limits to access to fishing grounds or seasons – especially when that may not seem in their short-term national interest. That can be a particular concern for developing states that depend significantly on fisheries, with few other development and resource options.

Existing negotiation and treaty processes fail to successfully resolve the political aspects of conservation negotiations, and consequently, countries often prove unwilling to compromise. Some argue that some form of property or use right must be distributed among participants to deal with overfishing, so that industry and others have the right incentives to fish in ways that ensure long-term sustainability and economic viability.

However, applying rights-based management approaches to international fisheries requires first that everyone involved agrees on national allocations before those fishing rights trickle down to those actually catching the fish. Determining such rights through an explicit allocation process is highly fraught and take years of effort, particularly as allocation decisions generally require consensus.

While the negotiations drag on, overfishing continues – and can be exacerbated in a race-to-fish to support arguments for more generous allocations.

In order to build political support, new benefits are required that balance conservation costs. Conservation proponents point to long-term benefits from conservation reductions, but these are often too distant to motivate narrowly focused governments facing short-term electoral cycles.
Rights-based management proponents will argue incentives and higher economic efficiency, but fail to provide a political pathway to distribute these benefits between States with diverse interests.

Solutions for the trans-boundary open ocean require sustainability, value and certainty – not politics.

Unloading fish in the Pacific. Quentin Hanich, Author provided

**Pacific nations show the value of scarcity**

New markets are required that introduce scarcity values into conservation and turn limits into benefits. International negotiations need to move beyond traditional approaches and adopt innovative measures that create new markets.

A small group of Pacific Island nations are attempting just that, trialling different approaches to managing a crucial part of the world’s tuna supplies.

The Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu are all **Parties to the Nauru Agreement** (PNA), working together to make fishing for tuna in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (shown in the map below) more sustainable.

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean is home to the world’s most productive tuna fisheries, supplying global markets with skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye, and albacore tunas. These were collectively worth approximately US$5.8 billion in 2014 and accounted for 60% of the global tuna catch.

Unfortunately, like many other global fisheries, overfishing is occurring and a political stalemate is undermining conservation.
Pacific Island nations have long been concerned about conservation limits putting a disproportionate burden of conservation action on to small island nations, and unfairly limiting their development aspirations. There was some justification for those concerns.

Previously proposed conservation measures would have directly benefited longstanding distant water fishing fleets, through capacity or catch limits that rewarded historical capacity and catch, while locking out developing nations with no history of overfishing, and potentially no future opportunity. In effect – it would have been the reverse of the polluter pays principle.

The small group of PNA nations control access to the most productive fishing grounds. So they are a crucial voting bloc within the Western and Central Pacific Fishing Commission – an international treaty based organisation with responsibility over the Western and Central Pacific tuna fisheries.

Given that the PNA member nations arguably own and control access to most of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean tuna fishery, any conservation and management response must be fully supported by these countries and explicitly avoid any disproportionate conservation burden.

In recent years, the PNA nations have collectively implemented a Vessel Day Scheme that limited access to their productive fisheries and introduced a scarcity value that has dramatically increased benefits. In effect, they have created a new market for ‘fishing days’ and are now trialling auctioning and pooling of days to maximise their benefits.

Next, these countries will need to bring in tighter limits to reduce catches of bigeye tuna to sustainable levels. One of the key impacts on bigeye tuna is the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs) that are set at sea by large-scale purse seiners (seines are also known dragnets) to target skipjack tuna.
While countries involved with distant water fishing have proposed traditional measures that would apply across-the-board restrictions at high cost to the island states, the PNA members have been trialling satellite-based monitoring of FADs at sea. They are also cooperating to begin charging additional fees for the use of FAD sets within their waters, beginning in 2016.

This will create an incentive for purse seiners to set on free swimming schools and reduce FAD sets, and mitigate conservation costs for Pacific island through the additional financial revenue from the licensing fees.

As the scheme settles in, conservation limits can then be implemented to gradually reduce the number of FADs that can be set. This will increase the scarcity value of the FAD set, while decreasing the catch of bigeye tuna to more sustainable levels, and effectively create a new market for ‘FAD sets’.

Innovative management and market solutions will be critical to the sustainable, profitable and equitable future of the global “blue economy”. In trans-boundary fisheries, the Pacific is setting the agenda.