



INFOFISH speaks to ...

FRANCISCO BLAHA

From commercial fisherman in Argentina to internationally recognised fisheries institutional adviser, capacity builder, supporter of fishers' rights and an all-round passionate proponent of equality and equity in fishing.

On 25 November, you were the Moderator for an INFOFISH-organised webinar 'Tuna Fisheries in the Pacific Amidst COVID-19' – thank you for doing such a great job in creating a warm and lively discourse amongst the speakers, which included frontliners in the industry. Would you like to highlight some of the points raised in that webinar, for the benefit of readers who may not have been able to participate?

That was a great opportunity that INFOFISH provided us, and a great opportunity for my Pacific Island colleagues to be delivering their own messages. Among the many issues raised, the one that struck me the most was the social impact COVID has had. I always insist that "Fisheries is People" and this situation has hit the local industries and economies much harder than the Distant Water Fishing Nations that fish in the Pacific.

The devastation caused in the longline industry that focuses on fresh (chilled) tuna for sashimi is sobering. While this segment is small in volume, it is significant in value, and unfortunately is one of the few that have purely Pacific Island domestic investment and employs the biggest number of locals. As fish is sent fresh via airfreight using in most cases, excess capacity on commercial flights, the abrupt ending of tourism has hit some of the islands very hard; jobs have collapsed, and so did this segment of the industry.

The extensive use of around 600 observers in the over 2000 annual deployments we had came to an almost full stop, so they, and the monitors who are generally on-board during transshipment, are now out of work and income. This is a harsh reality for observers in many countries in the region as it is their main source of income, the observer programme having inserted over US\$4 million directly into Pacific Island societies. Furthermore, we are not sure how many may have found other sources of work and may not return to observer duties when boarding resumes. Obviously this is a worry, not just from the observers' employment perspective, but also considering the level of uncertainty that the lack of data for this year

(and perhaps years to come) brings to fisheries science and management decisions.

Yet I guess the message that impacted me the most was just the human side of this pandemic; everyone referred to their struggles around work, health, travels, and so on. Everyone acknowledged too, how tough it is for the crew of fishing vessels who cannot even stretch their legs on the wharves for now almost one year, cannot see their families and embrace loved ones. So, while a lot of focus has been on the logistics, supply, demand and corporate difficulties of COVID-19 in the tuna industry, for me the biggest impact is again on the people at the frontline - fishers, local fishing companies and operational officers.

One of the big problems of this pandemic in the Pacific (and elsewhere) is that fisheries observers are not stationed on vessels. An added problem is the relatively weak internet connectivity in the region. Are there any alternate ways in which harvests in the Pacific have been tracked and traced during this period?

Well, these are big and separated problems. The observers issue is one we can hopefully deal with as soon as flights resume and vaccines become available; yet it is one that affects mostly the purse seiner (PS) fleet in the WCPO (massive in volume but small in the number of vessels).

For the longline (LL) fleet, the usual level of coverage was only 5%, so the lack of observers does not affect it too much. Yet the LL fishery is the biggest one in terms of fleet size; furthermore it is the one which identifies as having the highest incidence of underreporting or misreporting. This is particularly true for the high seas fisheries, which normally is the one with the lesser number of observers. And while in principle the WCPFC CMM 2009-06 Regulation discourages transshipments at sea, it has an 'impracticability' exemption... yet how impracticability is determined, is not defined or explored. As a consequence, the number of at-sea longline

transhipments within the WCPFC area increased by 165% in five years, from 554 in 2014 to 1472 in 2019 and as 2 November 2020, 61% of vessels on record were authorised to tranship in the high seas by their Flag States.

All these transhipments are authorised based on the ‘impracticability’ of going to port but there is no oversight on how that decision is reached by the Flag States involved. In descending order, these vessels are flagged to Taiwan, China, Vanuatu and Republic of Korea, as well as (also in descending order) carriers are flagged to Taiwan, Panama, Korea, Liberia, China and Vanuatu. With this in consideration, the issue of not having observers has impacted more the observers themselves, rather than the actual fisheries. In fact, some units of certification for ecolabels that rely on observers’ oversight have continued even with no observers on board, so that says a lot.

If we had a functioning Catch Documentation Scheme (CDS) across all the fishing nations, an integrated Electronic Monitoring System (EMS) and an integrated electronic reporting system on top of our already very comprehensive Vessel Monitoring System (VMS, it would be fantastic; but if Flag States would just comply with the commitments they made and live up to the expectations of their best performance, that would be a great start!

In terms of the internet, it is getting better, fibre optic cable is arriving at many of the Islands States so it is a matter of time.

☛ You’ve been instrumental in assisting a number of Pacific Island countries in getting their yellow cards lifted, the latest being Kiribati albeit being the longest process. Can you share with readers a glimpse of what has been involved in this process with the countries? What has been the real challenge?

☛ I would never say I was instrumental!! The officers in all the yellow-carded countries I was fortunate to work with are the instrumental ones, I was just lucky to walk a small part of the road with them and share some lessons learned, but that is all. There were two common components in the EU expectations of the carded countries – one was related to legislation/policy while the other was to do with operational and systems... I worked supporting the latter.

For me, the biggest challenge was for countries to understand what the EU wanted from them, particularly in terms of the EU catch certification scheme. The EU did a couple of interpretative flip-flops during the process over a system that had some intrinsic design failures. It became at the end, an export certificate instead of a catch certificate - this meant that non-EU countries had to validate the information on landings or transhipment events that happened months (or even years) before. Hence, if we wanted to set up something that was more than just signing a piece of paper, countries had to set up a system and structure around the catch certificate system that allowed them to run the equivalent of a business accountancy system (but for fish). For countries that are small developing Island States with very limited IT capacities and operational budgets, this was (and still is) a challenge...one that they gallantly confront every day.

For me, two images of the process will stay forever in my mind. During the first visit of the EU inspectors to Papua New Guinea, the lady heading the delegation was asking all these questions and the local officers were trying to understand what she wanted and were not sure what to say. A year later when she came back the same officers were talking over each other as they all wanted to give her the answers she needed! Later on, she told us that not even in many European countries did they have a system like the one in PNG. I always will be incredibly proud of what they achieved there.



Testing dynamometers to better estimate transhipped volumes in Majuro

☉ As you know, there is growing international market pressure in developed countries (driven supposedly by ‘what the consumer wants’) on fishers and exporters to have an ecolabel placed on their catches/products. However, in a few of your blog posts you have expressed a strong dislike for ecolabels. If we adopt the position that ecolabels are here to stay, what are some suggestions that you could make for producing countries faced with the dilemma of either working towards making their fisheries sustainable, or investing in acquiring an ecolabel?

FB This is an interesting and contentious one! My objections on the business of ecolabels (and private certifications in general) arise from various angles that are important to me; some are almost philosophical while others technical.

Let me use a parable to explain: in most countries of the world, to drive a car, you need to go through a process of getting a driver’s license run by an official institution in that country. Once you have that licence, you can legally get on the road and drive a car. How good that system is depends on a varied number of reasons such as human resources, cultural values, the rule of law, transparency, etc. Obviously, there would be countries that are better than others at this. So let’s say that a country has a bad rate of accidents by licensed drivers, in comparison with other countries. So what do you do?

For me, the most logical, democratic and cost-effective solution is to set up a programme to strengthen the institution that is legally authorised to do that job in the country, standardise the licensing systems, exams and controls under auditable standards and reward conformance in some way.

What I would not do is to create a private parallel system on top of the already existing national system. Hence I, as a driver need to get through the hurdles of the official systems, and then contract a foreign private assessor and go over a whole set of new exams and tests (at my cost) to prove to people in rich countries that I know how to drive in a way they consider ‘safe’. And that is what in my opinion private certifications do: they create a parallel system instead of supporting the organisations that are supposed to do the job.

In my opinion, one of the biggest hurdles that we face in sustainability is that while we want it, we allow the underfunding of official institutions and pay fisheries officers and fishers salaries that are way below mediocrity, but we expect excellence from all of them.

The ecolabels model was initially based on the ‘theory of change’, and the belief that a ‘market-based’ approach by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) frustrated with the perceived inability of fisheries regulators globally to mitigate overfishing, will effect a change for the better. Yet even after so many years, there is, in fact, limited empirical evidence that substantial changes in consumer demand for sustainable seafood have occurred. Producers are also directly

affected because they incur the costs of complying with different seafood programmes aligned to different importing markets. Incentives for compliance also remain unclear, given that there is little evidence that price signals are seen by producers, or that any changes in demand have resulted in substantial environmental improvements.

And it gets worse. Even if the origin of this movement is based on the assumption that fisheries administrators (in particular those from developing countries) are not

doing a good enough job, during my work with many fisheries administrations in the Pacific I have spent 2-3 days responding to the questions of the consultants that have come to ‘assess’ the fishery for certification...so in effect, they come for data to the people and institutions that the ‘consumer’ does not trust! That irony for me is mind-blowing. If you really want to help, why not just support the official institutions in the countries whose job and whole existence is to manage fisheries in a sustainable way?.

The idea that a certified product may get a price premium is not a golden rule; furthermore, the logic of that assumption is flawed. In New Zealand we have argued that the industry should not even expect a price premium for certification noting that: “No plausible case can be made for a premium for ‘sustainable seafood’. If anything, a well-managed fishery should also be a cheaper fishery to harvest as the fish should be more abundant and easier to catch!”



Receiving the 2019 Seafood Champion Award for advocacy

Credit: Francisco Blaha

As per the alleged consumer preference, when I was working with FAO GLOBEFISH in 2009, I already had the feeling that we were being told about ‘consumer’ requirements, when it actually seemed that it was more a retailer imposition to create a ‘firewall’ around them by saying that “we sell fish with ecolabels so it should be good!” Personally I see it as a model for retailers offloading ‘due diligence’ to an ecolabel brand their decision-making capacity and expecting producers to pay the bill.

For example, I work a lot in the transshipment hub of Majuro, and I have been many times in situations where I see very similar purse seiners transshipping to the same carrier - both fishing vessels catch the same tuna species, using the same methods, under the same management system, from stocks evaluated by the same institutions, with the same regional controls over the activities, yet fish from vessel ‘A’ that does not pay for the ecolabel process, therefore as the narrative goes, is not sustainable? While fish from vessel ‘B’ that pays, is?



Credit: Francisco Blaha

Boarding and inspection training in Majuro

Having said so, I would not mind their existence if they were based on a model pushed by consumers that want extra guarantees and are happy to pay for them. In this case, consumer associations donate to ecolabels, or ecolabels themselves source funds from consumers. So if a fishery or an operator wants to be certified, they apply and go through the process with absolutely no conflict of interest. The way now is that they (ecolabels) are offering a service to a client, and when the client pays, they want the results... this is just too murky for me.

Furthermore, and coming back to the consumer principle, the reality is that 71% of the world’s population live below US\$10 a day, of which 45% exist on below US\$2 dollars a day. So it is the rich consumer that can afford to have a choice. I work very close to countries where for example, a locally based and owned industry was developed by using their own funds, and they have successfully achieved an ecolabel certification at the cost of almost US\$180 000, yet the government budget for malaria and dengue in the province where their operations are, is around US\$60 000. I find that shocking - imagine the difference that money could have made at the local hospital! Yet the local company has been almost forced by corporate clients and distributors in developed countries that buy their products, to go through the certification process in order to maintain their supply preference and price.

FAO tell us that over 70% of the seafood consumed in developed countries comes from developing countries. Partly this is because the fisheries in developed countries have either collapsed or can’t keep up with local demand. Yet all of the ecolabels, private certifications, retailers and most of the consumers that require them are based in developed countries. This has led me to say that I see the whole private certification scene as hypocrisy in the best-case scenario, or neo-colonialism in the worst-case scenario.

I also have a lot of technical issues which I have problems with, such as compartmentalisation of catches, the use of observers for commercial interest, their ignorance of subsidies, the reliance on compliance data offered only by the clients, and so on ... that would also take a while, and you can read about them in my blog (www.franciscoblaha.info).

⦿ This is perhaps another contentious question. The debate on subsidies for fishing has been raging for many years, and there are also many nations (both developing and developed) which have sent their fleets out to the EEZs of other countries where they operate under various agreements. What is your position on subsidies (or programmes which have the same impact as subsidies), their effect on fishery resources, markets, and fishing communities?

⦿ Yeah... I always said that if I find the fisheries genie, I’ll ask him for three fisheries wishes: increased transparency, elimination of subsidies, and an income structure for fishers and fisheries officers that reflect the money accrued from their work!

But yeah, I doubt I will get to do it! Of the three wishes, subsidies should be the easier one to fix and even so, there have been negotiations on them at the WTO for over 20 years! This is beyond ridiculous. There has been well-documented evidence for years now that fisheries subsidies contribute to economic losses in the fisheries sector, create serious distortions in global

fish markets and push fisheries beyond their realistic economic (and biological) models. They also have serious impacts on food security and livelihoods, particularly in developing countries.

While I'm really against fisheries subsidies, I am aware that their disappearance will not be the magic panacea that will fix all fisheries issues, but at least it would even out the economic playfield, and that would be of massive help.

I always believe that the key redeeming factor of commercial fishing is in the fact that it should be commercial, hence if you don't make money from fishing, you should not fish... end of story.... subsidies don't allow that process of natural selection to exist. I also know that there are some so-called 'beneficial subsidies' around enhancing management capabilities, R&D, surveillance and enforcement, small scale fisheries support, etc.... I see all that as part of what government responsibilities are, and to be covered by national taxes. Yet, so far the 'harmful subsidies' (fuel, fleet support, capacity enhancement, shore operations, etc.) get way more money than the 'beneficial' ones... so it is just hypocrisy to promote the belief that the 'beneficial' subsidies justify the existence of the 'harmful' ones.

Even if you think only a little bit about it, is ridiculous that while FAO tells us that 60% of the world's marine fish stocks are now fully exploited and 33% overfished, governments still pay out an estimated US\$35 billion (2018 estimate) on fisheries subsidies, of which an estimated US\$20 billion contribute directly to overfishing by allowing fleets to continue fishing beyond the break-even point.

But it also upsets me that they are used for geopolitical issues beyond just fishing – noticeably the biggest subsidisers are the Distant Water Fishing Nations (i.e. China, Taiwan, Korea, Russia, Japan, USA, EU, etc.). These subsidies are not only used for supporting vessels but also many joint ventures including shore-based operations that were never planned to make money, but for foreign companies to have the excuse of being a 'domestic' operator. While these companies provide promises on job creation, they gain major tax concessions and cheap fishing rights. After catching the fish, they find some initial excuses such as low labour productivity, high cost of services, etc. Then over time, these become permanent excuses, and they send the raw materials for processing back home or somewhere else.

So there is absolutely nothing good coming from subsidies for those that are not direct beneficiaries of the schemes... and that is most of us.

☞ On to another issue which is of deep (and very real) concern to islands, let's talk about climate change and its effect on tuna resources in the Pacific Islands region. If, as many studies

have suggested, there may be an eastern redistribution in the biomass of skipjack and yellowfin tuna by 2050, most of the islands will see significant decreases in the tuna stocks in their waters. What are your thoughts on how the islands could reduce their vulnerability to climate change? What role could the WCPFC play in this process?

FB That is a real big one, and the hardest issue we face. Last year the Pacific Island Fisheries Forum Agency introduced a resolution to the WCPFC urging the Commission to:

- Fully recognise the impacts of climate change; in particular on the fisheries, food security, and livelihoods of small islands developing states and territories
- Take into account in its deliberations – including in the development of conservation and management measures – the impacts of climate change on target stocks, non-target species, and species belonging to the same ecosystem or dependent or associated with the target stocks
- Estimate the carbon footprint of fishing and related activities in the Convention area for fish stocks managed by the Commission, and develop appropriate measures to reduce such footprint
- Develop options such as carbon offsets to decrease the collective carbon footprint associated with meetings of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies.

Which is all very good but this does not stop the impacts we already see. When you read a scientific paper by the leading scientists in the region that **the combined catch of skipjack and yellowfin is projected to decrease by 10–40% by 2050 in the Exclusive Economic Zones of Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu...** this is hard to swallow... I spend half my years in those countries working there with friends. Tuna is the lifeline for these countries, but the balance of benefits is entirely skewed, in a way that has not moved far from the era of colonialism which is still very recent in this region. A giant country like PNG is ten years younger than me!

And this is an issue of overarching importance for the region since competing interests are impacting tuna sustainability. Also, there is a fundamental (and perhaps unbridgeable) difference; as clearly expressed to me by a friend a few years ago: "for non-PICs and DWFNs the issue of sustainability of catches is one of long-term financial benefit. However, for Pacific Islands Countries (PICs) it is also an identity and food

security issue, one that DWFNs have less trouble with as they can leave...but we in the PICs cannot”.

Personally, the issue infuriates me a lot - the Pacific and its tuna gave me a new and good life when I came here in the early 90s, escaping far from my origins and my struggles. The Pacific gave me more opportunities than my own country of birth without expecting from me anything other than honesty and respect. But most importantly it gave me many good friends and an extended family in places that barely figure on maps, yet there is more ‘humanity’ here than in countries whose ‘empires’ cover the earth. So for me it is heart-breaking... the Pacific Islands are the least contributing region to climate change, yet are the ones receiving with full force its impacts, and that is so unfair.

☉ And on a final note, you have had an interesting career in fisheries, from your beginnings in the industry as a crew member on a fishing trawler in your native Argentina; and now as an international fisheries consultant, a trainer in areas such as regulatory compliance, and a well-known operator in the Pacific Islands. What are some lessons you have learned from all the experiences you have had through the years?

☉ That is kind of deep... and I’m not sure I have an answer... I’ve been in fishing for most of my life, started at 18 and I’m 55 now, and I am still learning every day from my (and others’) mistakes, on things that I see working and those that don’t.

I grew up under difficult family circumstances, during turbulent times of social unrest and political violence, and it made my relationship with authority a challenging one. Also, being dyslexic, which at the time was seen as being dumb, didn’t help either. And even if I had grown up in a farming area, I always loved the ocean, so while fisheries felt natural to me, I was also an outsider to it. Therefore, in reality, no one had any expectations about my life (nor even me!), so failure seemed inevitable. Yet on the other hand, this was totally liberating as it opened me up to trying new things without pretending to be anything else other than whom and whatever I am.

I have always been very fortunate and thankful to have found people along my way that were kind enough to offer me the one thing I could not get by myself... an opportunity. So I always try to stick to

three principles in life: don’t be pretentious, be grateful, and provide people with opportunities if you can.

I’m also very aware and conscious of the privileges I have by being the almost stereotypical looking man for fisheries - a big, bulky and bearded man with skin looking like leather - , of partly European ancestry and the chance to have had an education... surely these factors influenced many of the opportunities given to me. But then this also makes me very adamant in terms of providing for equality and equity in fishing. If my gender, age and background represent the only way to do things, then how come we are facing the problems we have? How hypocritical would it be of me to not bring new voices, new perspectives, new ways to do things! The fact that we have more diversity now than ever before (even if we have a long way to go) is what keeps me optimistic.

So I don’t know if I have lessons to share! Other than to try to do your best and don’t let others be the limit to your hopes, wherever and wherever you are.

Finally, I always quote Noam Chomsky’s words: “We have two choices: to abandon hope and ensure that the worst will happen; or to make use of the opportunities that exist and contribute to a better world. It is not a very difficult choice.”



Credit: Francisco Blaha