

2. Cooperation to manage Pacific fisheries

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- In the vast Pacific maritime domain, cooperation is critical to addressing the capacity and capability challenges of fisheries management and the diverse maritime security issues that occur in the fishery sector. Pacific fisheries governance lies at the nexus of the ‘expanded concept of security’ under the 2018 *Boe Declaration on Regional Security* encompassing environmental and resource security, human rights, transnational crime and cybersecurity.
- The region has developed distinctive and influential institutions to optimise the governance of transboundary and coastal fisheries in Pacific Island countries. While these institutions are advanced by global standards, they can better coordinate Pacific-led responses to emerging fishery-related security threats.

The **2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent** aspires to safeguard fisheries as integral to the economy, livelihoods, ways of life, and culture of the Pacific.²⁸ Cooperation through regional institutions is the foundation of fisheries governance, enabling collective approaches to foreign interests in Pacific oceanic and coastal fisheries. The first order of work is to safeguard the Pacific’s economic interests, particularly focusing on commercial fishery revenue and the livelihoods that depend on coastal fisheries.²⁹ Balancing the rights of Pacific Island countries with the flag state rights of Distant Water Fishing Nations in lucrative oceanic fisheries is a key challenge. Today, partnerships for fisheries surveillance are inextricably linked to geostrategic interests and play a crucial role in combating fisheries-related maritime crimes. Pacific Island countries, however, remain concerned that geostrategic competition in their region could distract attention from Pacific priorities.³⁰ Increasingly, coastal fisheries are a regional focus,

due to new threats from climate change, coastal pollution, and foreign fishing deals.³¹ This paper addresses oceanic and coastal fisheries in turn, examining how relevant security challenges are tackled.

Two key institutions, the **Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency** (FFA) and the **Pacific Community** (SPC), allow the region to ‘punch above its weight’ in cooperative fisheries management. In the Pacific region, the FFA’s fisheries monitoring, control, and surveillance performs a critical regional role in maritime domain awareness. The Pacific Ocean is undergoing significant shifts due to climate change, which disrupts the distribution and abundance of marine ecosystems, adversely impacting Pacific fisheries.³² The SPC provides vital services at the science-policy interface for capacity development, technical expertise and fisheries data management. The SPC’s coordination of oceanic and coastal fisheries are aimed at climate resilience and community-led management, and it performs a key role in stock assessment and data management for the nearly \$6 billion regional tuna fishery.³³

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The Regional Fishery Management Organisations (RFMOs) with jurisdiction in the South West Pacific are the **Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna** (1993), **Western and Central Pacific Fisheries**

Commission (WCPFC) (2000) and the **South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation** (SPRFMO) (2012). The central regional fisheries advisory body, the FFA (1979),³⁴ is complemented by the **Parties to the Nauru Agreement** (PNA) (1982),³⁵ which established its own advisory office in 2010, and the **South Pacific Group** (2023).³⁶ Together, they focus on developing and protecting Pacific interests in the world’s largest tuna fishery governed by the WCPFC.

The WCPFC remains a cornerstone in the governance of the region’s tuna fisheries. As the key international body responsible for the conservation and sustainable use of highly migratory fish stocks, the WCPFC plays an essential role in facilitating cooperation between coastal states and distant water fishing nations. Its conservation and management measures (CMMs) have been crucial in ensuring the sustainable management of tuna stocks while addressing the impact of fishing on bycatch species, such as sharks and seabirds. The WCPFC’s ongoing commitment to ecosystem-based management is a critical part of the region’s fisheries architecture. Climate change is expected to lead to a shift in the distribution of tuna biomass eastward from Pacific Island countries’ Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean toward the high seas and the convention area of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission’s (IATTC).³⁷ Since 1979, the FFA has championed regional cooperation and effectively advocated for Pacific interests in the lucrative WCPFC tuna fisheries.³⁸ The FFA’s 2012 **Niue Treaty on Cooperation in Fisheries Surveillance and Law Enforcement in the South Pacific Region** facilitates data sharing, and cooperative law enforcement, and surveillance



between Parties.³⁹ Arrangements that aid the operation of the FFA's **Vessel Monitoring System** (VMS), and the administration of the **Regional Fisheries Surveillance Centre** (RFSC) and **Aerial Surveillance Programme** (ASP).⁴⁰

The PNA have been instrumental in transforming the management of the tuna fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific. Notably, the introduction of the **Third Implementing Arrangement** in 2008 brought about innovative conservation measures, such as the three-month FAD closure, the requirement for 100% observer coverage on purse seine vessels, and the prohibition of purse seine fishing in two high seas pockets.⁴¹ These initiatives have significantly strengthened the management framework for tuna

fisheries. The development of the MSC-certified free school skipjack fishery under the PNA has been another significant achievement, promoting responsible fishing practices and setting an international benchmark for sustainable fisheries management.⁴² The success of this certification has been a catalyst for change across the tuna fisheries in the region, driving the broader adoption of sustainable practices and benefiting Pacific Island countries economically.

Additionally, the PNA's introduction of the **Vessel Day Scheme** (VDS) has revolutionised the way fishing activity is regulated within the EEZs of PNA members, allowing them to optimise the economic value of their tuna resources. This has also enhanced the sustainability of the fishery. The new integrated **Fisheries Information Management System** (IFIMS) facilitates cooperation by integrating industry reports on catch and vessel positions, with VDS activity data, and information from mandatory fishery observers.⁴³ International development partners are driven to support these fisheries

surveillance systems, recognising, among other things, their role in enhancing maritime domain awareness in a region of growing strategic importance.

Surveillance is enhanced through cooperation with international partners from the **Pacific Quadrilateral Defence Coordination Group** (Australia, France, New Zealand and the USA) under Operation Solania.⁴⁴ Australia, however, remains the most significant donor in Pacific fisheries governance with Britain, Canada, the EU, and Korea also contributing support.⁴⁵ Pacific Island countries also overcome the capacity challenges of surveilling their vast oceanscape through innovative alliances. The FFA is leveraging emerging technologies such as the **Dark Vessel Detection system** and the **Starboard Maritime Domain Awareness tool**.⁴⁶

To enhance data collection, it also collaborates with organisations like Global Fishing Watch and Skylight.⁴⁷ Cyber security remains a threat to commercially and strategically sensitive surveillance data, as does the potential for online penetration of diplomatic meetings related to regional fishery resources.⁴⁸

Cooperation to combat illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing occurs through the RFMOs to align with requirements under the **FAO's International Plan of Action for Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU** and the **Port State Measures Agreement**.⁴⁹ Regional cooperation is also needed to fulfil responsibilities governed by the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime** (UNODC) which works with the FAO and Interpol on IUU fishing and instances of drugs, weapons, human trafficking and smuggling on fishing vessels.⁵⁰ The **International Labour Organisation** (ILO) tackles the persistent threat of forced labour and modern slavery in fisheries.⁵¹ The WCPFC and SPRFMO are responding to these international requirements on fisheries-related crime, human rights, and labour abuses with the preparation and adoption of conservation and management measures (CMMs) to improve efforts to combat these crimes. Enforcement, however, typically relies on adequate surveillance and robust national legislation for prosecution. Pacific Island countries rank poorly in governance and transparency indices and bad actors can exploit these deficiencies

and in the case of transnational organised crime actively pursue them.⁵²

To realise sustainable fisheries, support global food security, and conserve marine biodiversity the **Sustainable Ocean Initiative** developed a cross sectoral coordination mechanism between RFMOs and **Regional Seas Organisations** (RSOs).⁵³ The Pacific RSO, **Pacific Regional Environment Programme** (SPREP), provides technical assistance and support to its Pacific Island members on environmental security threats such as marine pollution (inclusive of vessel pollution, plastics and fishing gear),⁵⁴ and the management of fisheries bycatch species, for instance cetaceans, seabirds, sharks, and turtles.⁵⁵ The adoption of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Treaty in 2023 provides an enhanced role for RSOs to uphold the high standards for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) within RFMOs' convention areas.⁵⁶ Cooperation between SPREP and the WCPFC is facilitated through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which, with increased participation from SPREP, could enhance CMMs on bycatch species.⁵⁷ In the SPRFMO, despite the 'significant adverse impacts'⁵⁸ of destructive fishing methods on vulnerable deep-sea communities, SPREP lacks an MoU with SPRFMO to guide their conservation.

Coastal fisheries contribute to national economies, enhance community resilience, and ensure food security through subsistence, artisanal, and commercial fishing, as well as aquaculture.⁵⁹ Rapid population growth, intensifying urbanisation and coastal development have undermined ecosystem health, traditional tenure, and custom within seascapes.⁶⁰ Together with climatic shifts that amplify cyclones, storms, and floods, the role of coastal fisheries in promoting community resilience has been weakened. Against this background, declines in coastal fisheries present an immediate threat to the security of Pacific Islanders.⁶¹

Furthermore, incursions by small foreign vessels illegally exploiting coastal fisheries present immense challenges to existing coastal state surveillance and prosecution capabilities.⁶² Despite

the challenge this poses to small island administrations foreign vessels have been successfully caught in the waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.⁶³ Diseconomies of scale in coastal fisheries are a consequence of capacity constraints on market-ready products as well as remoteness from regional and international markets. These market factors will continue to impact the potential of coastal fisheries, along with climate-induced changes to natural disaster intensity and frequency.

The Pacific's collective response to coastal fishery threats occurs at multiple scales. At the international scale, under SDG14, Pacific Island countries advocated for a specific target 14.7 for Small Island Developing States aimed at increasing the economic benefits and market access for their coastal fisheries.⁶⁴ At the regional level, **SPC's 2015 Noumea Strategy** 'A new song for coastal fisheries – pathways to change'⁶⁵ reset support for improved education, user rights, and inclusivity toward integrated community-based fishery management.⁶⁶ The SPC and FFA have jointly committed to supporting enhanced surveillance and investment, as outlined in the 2015 **'Future of Fisheries: A Regional Roadmap for Sustainable Pacific Fisheries'**, to effectively implement the roadmap's objectives.⁶⁷

Concretely, the 2002 **Pacific Island Regional Ocean Policy** and the 2010 **Framework for a Pacific Oceanscape** direct more integrated solutions, guiding the development of Pacific national policies towards realizing scalable and functional community-based fisheries.⁶⁸ Further direction is provided in the SPC's **'Pacific Framework for Action on Scaling up Community-based Fisheries Management: 2021-2025'**, aimed at empowering and enhancing the resilience of Pacific communities.⁶⁹

Pacific oceanic and coastal fisheries management encompasses environmental security, food security, human rights, and combating transnational and cyber blue crime. The region's collective institutions and regional strategies have enabled remarkable achievements in managing international cooperation for monitoring, control, and surveillance toward the fisheries' sustainability.