

BUILDING BACK TUNA FISHERIES BETTER IN A POST-COVID WORLD

By Emilia Dyer and Martin Purves

The global tuna industry has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, from the fishers who supply tuna to the markets which buy and consume the fish. In an effort to rebuild the industry while prioritising people, nature and the economy, several organisations have decided to collaborate in a new initiative called Reimagine Tuna. Focusing on five pillars, it highlights the fact that all responsible small-scale fisheries (not only tuna fisheries) deserve to gain recognition for the role they can play in feeding the world in balance with nature. How we can do things better at rebuilding our tuna fisheries so that they can help protect and restore threatened and endangered species, habitats and ecological functions, while also safeguarding the livelihoods these fisheries support?



Credit : IPNLF

Aerial view of pole-and-line fishing

Small-scale tuna fisheries lie at the heart of many coastal communities around the world, upheld by traditions dating back generations. Many are in remote locations and survive at the edge of the market as they have been cast aside by industrial giants who have come to dominate the high seas. They are forced to compete for tuna which have been overexploited in the name of profit for so long that stocks are often a shadow of what they once were. Life became even harder for many of these small-scale tuna fishers as COVID-19 struck, disrupting their fishing operations and supply chains, and further shining a light on humanity's inequalities.

Tuna is a global commodity that is consumed at both ends of the market. Not only is it sought after by high-end consumers as tuna steaks, sushi, sashimi and poke, it is also a vital, affordable source of protein for many coastal communities in low-income countries. The global pandemic profoundly disrupted the tuna markets and the fisheries that supply them. Initial panic buying of canned tuna led to an increase in demand for products with a long shelf life. On the other hand, the closure of restaurants and disruption in transport logistics

caused the fresh-frozen tuna markets to collapse overnight. The impact of these disruptions has been felt more acutely by small-scale fishers who are often already at the margin of global supply chains.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we are presented with a chance to look ahead, equip society with the things we want to take forward and leave those behind that do not contribute to making the world a better place. There is, of course, the very real possibility that profit and development will continue to take precedence over global human and planetary health. With this, small-scale fishers are at risk of being even further excluded and left behind. Approximately 800 million people around the world depend on fisheries and aquaculture for their livelihoods. The majority of those are at risk of being left behind in the wake of industrial growth. The global seafood industry therefore has a responsibility to safeguard the futures of these fishers and their communities by delivering on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed by all 93 Member States of the United Nations, provides an ideal

framework to achieve the world we want. A world where poverty is eradicated, our planet is protected, and sustainable growth is achieved where no one is left behind.

We should ensure that small-scale tuna fishers are supported in the post-COVID world. The business community, governments and civil society all have a role to play by recognising the important contribution that socially responsible and environmentally sustainable tuna fisheries can make to help achieve thriving coastal areas, a resilient deep ocean, abundant nature and protected high seas. A healthy ocean is fundamental to a healthy planet, helping to ensure a hopeful future for current and future generations. To achieve this, we need to drive bold and fair actions that will put the ocean on a path to recovery.

A business-as-usual approach won't get us there. Industrial tuna fisheries continue to have disproportionate impacts on ocean biodiversity, are often tainted by human rights abuses, drive inequity in the ocean economy, while many of them also won't be economically viable unless they are propped up by harmful fisheries subsidies. We need to reimagine how we can do things better - rebuilding our tuna fisheries so that they can help protect and restore threatened and endangered species, habitats and ecological functions, while also safeguarding the livelihoods these fisheries support.

Reimagine Tuna, a collaboration among organisations who share a common goal - finding ocean solutions that benefit people, nature and the economy - provides opportunities to rebuild better so that tuna fisheries can be part of the solution rather than undermining sustainable development as envisioned under the SDGs and their targets. The Reimagine Tuna initiative focuses on 5 key pillars – Biodiversity, Plastic Pollution, Human Rights, Equity, and Harmful Subsidies - and offers solutions on how we can improve our impacts on society and the environment. Our purchasing decisions can drive change and this is the key message that Reimagine Tuna aims to deliver, acting as a blueprint for all responsible small-scale fisheries, not only tuna fisheries, to gain the recognition they deserve for the role they can play in feeding the world in balance with nature.

Biodiversity

The first of the Reimagine Tuna pillars is Biodiversity. Over three billion people depend on coastal and marine biodiversity for food and income. However, coastal, marine and polar ecosystems are under threat from over-exploitation of resources, habitat destruction, pollution and climate change. The loss of biodiversity is happening at unprecedented rates, further exacerbating the impacts of climate change. Fishing

is the greatest driver of biodiversity loss in our oceans and a further breakdown of the system will ultimately have a profound effect on society as a whole. We are inherently intertwined with our environment, whether we always realise it or not. The continued loss of biodiversity will not only disrupt our food chains and our social security, but also our health as novel diseases emerge more frequently. If we continue on our current trajectory, the COVID-19 pandemic will not be a once-in-a-lifetime event, but the first in a stream of global pandemics, affecting each and every one of us.

Industrial fishing can have a disproportionate impact on ocean biodiversity due to the often indiscriminate nature of the fishing gears and techniques they use and the lack of effective management to minimise these impacts. Fishery managers still often lack rigorous scientific data to make informed management decisions and the transparency required to do this is all too often still lacking.

A recent study in the respected scientific journal, *Nature*, showed that huge declines have occurred in the abundance of sharks in the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans. Worldwide, oceanic shark and ray abundance has declined by 71% since 1970. More than half of the 31 species that were examined are now considered to be endangered, or even critically endangered. Tuna fisheries have played a major role in these declines, with industrial-scale fishing fleets having been able to reach distant waters since the early 1950s, and gradually spreading their effort to exploit the entire global ocean. Strict prohibitions and precautionary science-based catch limits are urgently needed to avert population collapse, avoid the disruption of ecological functions and promote species recovery.

Tuna fleets, often built on the back of harmful fisheries subsidies, such as longliners deploying thousands of hooks in a single longline and purse seiners using drifting fish aggregating devices (FADs), have had a major impact, not only on shark populations, but also on other endangered, threatened and protected species such as turtles, cetaceans, seabirds and some billfish species. The ghost gear and plastic pollution impacts of these fisheries also have long-lasting effects on sensitive habitats and ecosystems such as corals and sandy beaches.

Instead of accepting the biodiversity impacts associated with industrial tuna fisheries as collateral damage, ways need to be found to better mitigate these impacts and improve the levels of transparency associated with these fleets and their operations. Responsible markets can play an important role in this regard. Sashimi-grade yellowfin and bigeye tuna can for instance be produced by small-scale coastal fisheries,

using low impact fishing gears such as handlines and trolls. An additional benefit of these fisheries is the high levels of employment and the stimulation of local economies, through processing and value-addition, that they bring.



Meaningful support for small-scale fisheries will result in a more sustainable industry while strengthening communities

Supporting such fisheries is a much better option in terms of promoting sustainable development aligned with the SDGs than supporting subsidised longline operations on the high seas that continue to have huge impacts on sharks and other endangered species. For instance, conservationists recently expressed their dismay when an agreement could again not be reached, for the fourth year in a row, among the member states of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) on urgently needed mako shark protections. A clear case of short-term economic interests winning the day against science-based measures, and the result will be that longline vessels will continue to catch and land these species despite their seriously overfished and endangered status.

The prioritisation of sustainable, small-scale fisheries in the national waters of coastal states, will allow for better managed fisheries, limiting the pressure on the high seas to allow tuna stocks to recover.

Plastic pollution

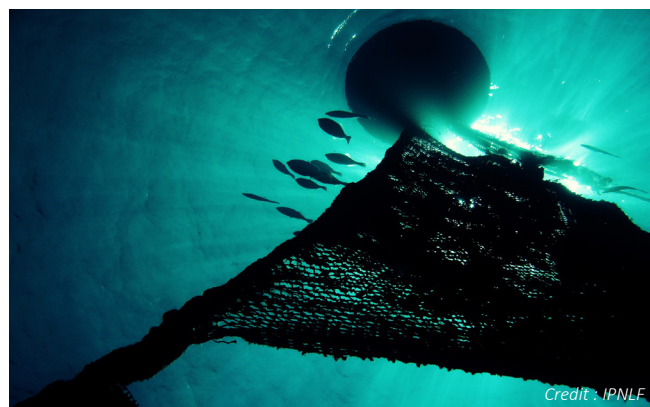
The second pillar of Reimagine Tuna looks at the contribution that tuna fisheries make to plastic pollution. Gillnets, longlines and purse seine nets can do a lot of damage when lost at sea, gradually breaking down to microplastics but remaining in the environment for over 600 years. One of the main sources of plastic pollution associated with industrial tuna fisheries is however, the vast numbers of drifting FADs that are lost, abandoned or discarded every year. In the Western and Central Pacific Ocean alone, around 90% of the 40 000 to 50 000 dFADs deployed every year by tuna purse seiners are never retrieved. Many of them sink, where they continue to impact on deepwater ecosystems, while others cause pollution and habitat destruction on sandy

beaches, seagrass beds and corals when they wash ashore. Although biodegradable materials are sometimes used in the construction of dFADs, most of the sub-surface structures are still constructed of synthetic materials. These sub-surface structures can contain netting of up to 100m long.

A recent study on Aldabra Atoll, one of Seychelles' UNESCO World Heritage Sites, showed that the main sources of the pollution arriving on this island are related to the industrial fishing industry in Seychelles, which provides tuna to EU countries and other high-income markets around the world. The scientists from Oxford University published their findings in the journal, *Nature Scientific Reports*, estimating that the cost to clean up the entire island is approximately US\$4.68 million, requiring 18 000 person-hours of labour. This is the largest accumulation of plastic waste reported for any single island in the world.

There are many other small islands that overlap with tuna fishing grounds and these small island developing states receive unprecedented amounts of the world's plastic waste. The authors of the study argued that there should be some recompense for the damage being caused by these tuna fisheries. Currently the fishing fleets are not compensating the coastal states for the ecological damage and pollution their lost fishing gear is causing, leaving these states to foot the bill to clean up the mess. Some are calling for the introduction of the 'polluter pays' principle, which is the commonly accepted practice that those who produce pollution should bear the costs of managing it to prevent damage to human health or the environment.

This project has highlighted how even remote highly-protected island ecosystems are now being impacted by global pollution, the role that industrial tuna fisheries play in causing this pollution and how difficult and costly it is to remedy.



Reimagine Tuna calls for greater efforts in reducing plastic pollution in the oceans

Abandoned, lost, or otherwise discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) causes over 70% of marine animal entanglements worldwide and has been attributed to 30% declines of certain fish species. This problem has been ongoing for decades and only recently has it begun to get the attention it deserves. However, the worst offending fisheries are still not being held accountable for their plastic pollution and the impact of this on our ocean animals.

Through Reimagine Tuna, greater accountability will be called for in fisheries to reduce their plastic pollution by implementing measures to minimise their gear loss, introduce biodegradable alternatives and implement greater transparency in their fishing operations. Ethical consumers can use their purchasing power to help bring about these changes. They should demand that fisheries associated with their tuna products demonstrate that they have minimal plastic pollution impacts.

Human rights

Many tuna fisheries, especially distant water longline operations that stay out at sea for prolonged periods, continue to be tainted by human right abuses, and in extreme cases have been linked to modern day slavery. Currently, slavery, human trafficking and abuse occur frequently on the high seas, facilitated by the lack of effective jurisdiction across international waters. Vessel owners can recruit vulnerable people into forced labour and slavery, trapped at sea for years, providing very little food to them and withholding their passports and meagre wages so that they remain entrapped. Those being investigated for these abuses have been known to change the ownership of vessels, vessel names and registration numbers to avoid further scrutiny and prosecution.

As we emerge from the pandemic we have an opportunity to improve the regulatory framework that governs the high seas. However, this will require major steps forward in terms of high-seas regulations, closing loopholes and strengthening the protection of workers. Concurrently, concerted efforts have been made by civil society NGOs to expose slavery issues in these fisheries, address worker voices and access to justice, and to co-ordinate and align through voluntary homogenised action hubs such as the Seafood Working Group (SWG) convened by Global Labor Justice – International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF), among other such international groupings.

Greater transparency in tuna supply chains will go a long way to educate consumers, making it easier for them to make the right choices and casting their vote for ethical, sustainable tuna. As a general principle, serious human rights abuses are mostly associated with offshore tuna fisheries that do long

trips and do not return to port frequently. Most responsible small-scale tuna fisheries using pole-and-line, handline and troll fishing methods are seen as low risk in terms of human rights abuses and are therefore a safer choice for ethical businesses that want to do the right thing and also contribute to sustainable development as envisioned under the SDGs.

Equity

Small-scale fisheries in particular are a key contributor to the livelihoods, food security and identity of some of the world's most marginalised communities. They are however often competing for fishing opportunities with industrial fisheries that have depleted their traditional fishing grounds. In many cases they are also outcompeted by industrial fisheries in the marketplace where these fisheries are better organised and resourced. The odds are further stacked against small-scale fisheries through the much higher level of government subsidies many of these industrial fisheries receive and the fact that representatives of industrial tuna fisheries often dominate decision-making at both the national and regional levels.



The end of the pandemic is an opportunity for us to change our systems and support small-scale fishers using low-impact, sustainable gears such as pole-and-line, handline and troll to rebuild our economies. It's time for us to change the allocation of resources and fishing rights to be more equitably distributed and prevent the overfishing of our waters. This is a chance to shift investment from industrial giants to local fishers, not only to preserve marine life, but to increase the quality and security of livelihoods of fishers in coastal communities across the world.

Harmful subsidies

Recent estimates have shown that of the US\$35.4 billion of global fisheries subsidies provided in 2018, only 19% went to small-scale fisheries, while more than 80% went to the

large-scale fishing sector. This means a fisher involved in an industrial fishery receives disproportionately (3.5 times) more subsidies than a fisher involved in a small-scale fishery. In terms of subsidies per landed value, industrial fisheries receive twice as many subsidies per dollar landed than small-scale fisheries. The negative impacts of this unequal distribution of government support should be obvious.

Some of the small-scale tuna fisheries that are environmentally sustainable and socially responsible are already struggling to survive as they are outcompeted by industrial fisheries that have greater access to fishing and market opportunities. Things are further skewed when new tuna purse seiners and longliners are constructed via state subsidies and when they are recipients of fuel subsidies. In some cases, buyers and retailers even actively promote these subsidised tuna fisheries as the most sustainable choice based on certification schemes or standards that ignore the impacts of harmful subsidies.



Credit : IPNLF

A much better way to create equity and drive sustainable development aligned with the SDGs, would be to remove capacity-enhancing subsidies and instead use the funds to support fishers through coastal fishing community projects. Such projects could focus on fisheries sustainability, social

justice and food security, rather than on reducing the cost of fishing or artificially enhancing profits through the provision of harmful subsidisation.

Closing remarks

There is a theme of inequality running through our world today and the COVID-19 pandemic has only heightened the disparities surrounding us. The end of the pandemic offers a rare opportunity to radically rethink the way we catch and trade tuna. Supporting small-scale, socially and environmentally responsible fisheries that can contribute to the SDGs can certainly help to address some of the inequity of the ocean economy.



The Reimagine Tuna initiative will be a long-running campaign, forming a coalition of like-minded organisations who want to see more radical change to the tuna fishing sector. We want to focus on solutions rather than problems as we step away from profit-driven industrial fisheries, and towards environmentally and socially responsible fisheries that put coastal communities and environmental sustainability first. We do however also have to be realistic in what can be achieved. Small-scale fisheries might not be able to feed the world. In this context, Reimagine Tuna is also focused on making industrial tuna fisheries more accountable and responsible.

Our vision of post-COVID tuna fisheries are fisheries which help to protect and restore threatened and endangered species, habitats and ecological functions, while safeguarding the livelihoods they support. Fisheries that do not benefit from capacity enhancing subsidies such as vessel construction and fuel subsidies. Fisheries that are not engaged in overfishing, IUU fishing or use destructive fishing gears. Fisheries that respect and protect the human rights of our tuna fishers and finally, fisheries that promotes sustainable development where no one is left behind. 🌐



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