

Tuna investigation slams use of FADs in Indian Ocean

By Nicki Holmyard
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An investigation by French state television broadcaster France 2 into the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs) to catch juvenile yellowfin tuna in the Indian Ocean, aimed to highlight the dark side of the industry to consumers.

Use of FADs has been widespread since the 1980s, but their use now sits at the center of global discussions on the long-term sustainability of tuna stocks and the ecological impact of tuna fisheries. An addition to being associated with the catch of juvenile tuna, FADs are linked to bycatch of vulnerable non-target species such as barracudas, sharks, and turtles, the modification of tuna habitat, damage to coastal habitats from lost and broken-

up structures that end up on beaches, and interference with other maritime activities, France 2 reported.

FADs can be natural or artificial floating objects or rafts, which are often made from local materials such as wood, bamboo, pieces of net, twisted rope and floats. They can either be anchored in place or left untethered to drift on the ocean surface. GPS tags are used to facilitate location, and fishers use them as a highly-effective method of improving catch rates and reducing operating costs, as tuna are attracted to the debris.

According to the FAO, in spite of intensive research, the reason why fish are attracted to FADs remains a mystery, but it is possible that they are attracted to floating objects that provide a refuge from predators.

In the two-hour long documentary, entitled “Pêche industrielle: gros poissons en eaux troubles,” (Industrial fishing: big fish in troubled waters), which was broadcast on Tuesday, 6 February, presenter Sophie le Gall told viewers that the long-term future of the fishery was under threat because many of the fish being caught are immature and have therefore not had the chance to reproduce.

Viewers were shown a vessel sailing up to and encircling a FAD with large a seine net, then banging on the hull with wooden staves, to scare the tuna into the net. In the Indian Ocean, yellowfin tuna is considered to be 90 percent overfished, but many small juveniles were shown being landed into the hold of the vessel. Fishermen told le Gall that the practice has become “carnage.”

“It’s no longer fishing, it’s harvesting,” said one.

Yvon Riva, president of Orthongel, the French organization of frozen tuna producers, acknowledged that sharks are “collateral damage,” while the catching of juvenile tuna is “a mess,” he said.

Le Gall explained that the global tuna market is worth more than EUR 33 billion (USD 37 billion) per year. Canned tuna is particularly popular in France, with eight out of 10 households making regular purchases.

Le Gall’s team visited Victoria, in the Seychelles, where a 20-strong French fleet of 100-plus meter vessels has relocated from Brittany, in the north of France, due to the depletion of local tuna resources there.

Victoria is also home to a Thai Union cannery, one of the largest in the world. Regarded as the world's biggest producer of shelf-stable tuna products, with annual sales exceeding THB 135 billion (USD 4.030 billion), Thai Union owns well-known brands including Chicken of the Sea, John West, Petit Navire, Mareblu, and Rügen Fisch.

The French 2 investigation found that the Thai Union group used its acquisition of the Luxembourg-based Petit Navire brand to circumvent French tax laws.

They also found that the European Union pays subsidies for Spain and France to have access to the Seychelles' fisheries resources. This money was used to modernize the Seychelles' main port for the benefit of foreign tuna vessels, rather than being used to help local artisanal fishermen, which was the intended purpose of the funding, the investigation found.

The program also investigated the bluefin tuna fishery in the Mediterranean, which operates from Sète in the south of France. A handful of families own more than 90 percent of the quota for this fish, which can fetch up to EUR 10,000 (USD 11,300) per metric ton. Around 120 longline fishermen share the remaining quota.

It was claimed that while E.U. subsidies were used to decommission a large part of the fleet some years ago, several shipowners had managed to recover their fishing quotas and were now operating a modern fleet, with the benefit of further E.U. subsidies. Work by the Bloom Association was referenced, which shows that the biggest companies obtain the largest percentage of public subsidies.

Questions were also raised but not answered in the program about the ownership and quota allocation of Libyan tuna boats moored in Sète.

Following a debate at the end of the show on how consumers can act to limit overfishing, Citizen Boycott called for a boycott of Petit Navire tuna. However, in a letter to the French activist organization, Petit Navire General Manager Amaury Dautreil said that he felt the information given in the program was disjointed and biased.

"A sustainable fishery is essential to the durability of our business. We only fish adult tuna, and most of the fish are not caught under FADs," Navire wrote. "We carry out many projects in collaboration with Greenpeace and WWF, you can check it on their sites."

Meanwhile, in the Pacific Ocean, an ocean-wide three-month ban on the use of FADs has been extended for another year to allow tuna stocks to continue to recover. The FAD ban applies to purse seiners in the Pacific countries' exclusive economic zones and high seas areas from 1 July to 30 September, with an additional two-month prohibition on FAD use on the high seas.

According to Ludwig Kumoru, chief executive of the Parties to Nauru Agreement (PNA), which controls the world's largest sustainable tuna purse seine fishery, levels of bigeye tuna stocks in the Pacific were improving, but not enough to lift the annual three-month ban on FADs, which was put in place 11 years ago. The ban followed warnings by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission that tuna stocks had fallen to around 32 percent of their pre-industrialized fishing levels. The ban will continue until through at least 2021.

Kumoru estimates that between 50,000 and 80,000 FADs are deployed in PNA waters annually. These make use of sonar and satellite buoys, the data from which enables fishing companies to estimate where most tuna congregate.

Image courtesy of France 2



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