

Culture

Many previous inquiries into the cultural significance of tuna focused narrowly on the contribution of tuna as food for cultural events. On islands where tuna fishing is important, its cultural influence extends into many other aspects of life including recreation, status in the community, and cultural heritage.

On many islands, fishing for tuna has been and still is a source of pleasure. While many subsistence societies have not, in the past, included a component that could be described as “leisure time,” activities that provided a large amount of excitement and pleasure while at the same time serving the more basic survival needs were looked upon with favor. The anthropological literature on the region contains many references to tuna fishing as a source of recreation, but of special interest is that fact that it is often referred to as the most important sport:

- Kennedy (1930) writes: “Easily the most exhilarating sport in the Ellice Group is the hunting of bonito.”
- In French Polynesia, according to Handy (1932), fishing for skipjack was the “most enjoyed pastime of chiefs.”
- MacGregor (1937) calls skipjack fishing “the greatest sport of Tokelau men.”
- In the Society Islands, offshore fishing “was and is their greatest sport,” says Nordhoff (1930).
- In Samoa, notes Hornell (1950), “the enthusiasm for this madly exciting sport remains as strong as ever. No blood runs so sluggish as not to course wildly with excitement as the fish are whirled aboard in a frenzied fight against time.”

In more modern times, the recreational aspects of tuna fishing have not been forgotten:

- Game fishing clubs exist in all but two FFA member countries, and most of the members and participants at the fishing competitions are local residents. More informal competitions are held in rural areas. Game fishing competitions are held yearly among villages in the northern Cook Islands and the

results are reported in the national newspapers (J. Dashwood, personal communication).

- Gillett (1987) writes: “Tuna fishing [on Satawal, Micronesia] is also fun. In a culture in which the use of the canoe is one of the most important aspects of daily life, tuna fishing is the most exhilarating use of the canoe. Even when catches are poor, hardly enough to justify a trip for the food value, there are no crew shortages. Loss of sleep, bone-chilling rain, baking sun, and hours of monotonous transit to the fishing ground aboard a pitching, rolling, jerking canoe are considered small sacrifices for the thrill of poling tuna.”
- According to SPREP (1985): “The recreational aspect of the tuna fishery [in Tokelau] is quite important – the fact that several men can hand-line tuna from one boat and that several boats can fish in the same vicinity, gives the activity a special social character. Joking and lighthearted insults, especially during the heated action of a big hookup and the accompanying fumbling, are much enjoyed.”

It is difficult to place a monetary value on the recreation provided by tuna fishing. In a study in Hawaii (Meyer 1987), the recreational and subsistence use of the catch was valued at \$30 million, but the “hedonic value” of fishing was estimated to be over \$335 million.

Fishing for tuna can be a very visible activity in small island communities, especially since the fruits of the labor can be quite impressive. In comparison to other types of fishery, tuna fishing is a relatively complex undertaking requiring considerable knowledge, fast thinking, long experience, dexterity, and physical stamina. The large amount of respect and status that a good tuna fisherman receives inspires other members of the community to emulate that success, and to some extent this has an effect on daily life. This applies not only to subsistence fishermen (e.g., Mau Pialug in the outer islands of Yap in FSM) and small-scale commercial fishermen (e.g., Tekake Williams in Rarotonga), but to industrial fishermen (e.g., Graham Southwick in Suva) as well.

In the age of satellites, computers, and skyscrapers, most Pacific Islands communities can never expect to be recognized for excellence in the more spectacular aspects of cosmopolitan life. The fact that many Pacific Islands culture groups can claim to be world-class tuna

fishermen or even the best in the world has real value to those communities and reinforces cultural pride. Although this is certainly true for residents of resource-poor islands east of the Pacific Islands region, it is also true for groups elsewhere. Ivens (1972) writes: "To the Melanesians of south-east Solomons, the catching of bonito is one of the things for which he exists."

Many ceremonies important to the cultures of the Pacific Islands involve tuna.

- A study on Solomon Taiyo (1998) reports: "Rituals surrounding the bonito [skipjack] are woven through the rich tapestry of Solomon Islands culture. Believed to have been sent by the gods, tuna presented a challenge to the skills and bravery of the Solomon Islands fishermen. In many parts of the Solomon Islands boys were initiated into adulthood by learning the mysteries and skills of bonito fishing through the ritual ceremony known as maraufu or malaohu. The importance of the bonito rites was reflected in the intricate artwork of the sacred bonito canoes and canoe houses. Carved with images of bonito, sharks, frigate birds, and fishermen, the canoes and canoe house posts represent the largest and most impressive examples of Solomon art."
- Gillett (1985) indicates that in Tokelau a thorough knowledge of tuna fishing is an important prerequisite for young men to undergo the ceremony of *kau kumete*, in which the highly esteemed title of *tautai*, or masterfisherman, is conferred. A *tautai* is considered the repository of tuna fishing information, which has been accumulating for hundreds of years.
- Buck (1930) describes the elaborate Samoan customs and ceremonies associated with tuna fishing gear manufacture, fishing nomenclature, and tuna catch distribution.
- Strict taboos and ceremonies surrounded tuna fishing activities and the consumption of tuna on many islands and atolls of the central Carolines, a strong indication of the reverence and importance attached to the resource. For example, on Satawal island, when skipjack tuna were brought ashore after a fishing expedition they were not treated carelessly and were butchered and divided only by respected senior members of the community (Hijikata 1987).

In the Pacific Islands, cultural importance is sometimes reflected in handicraft production. Close examination of a high-quality handicraft outlet can reveal a surprising number of artifacts related to tuna fishing. The women’s handicraft shop in Tuvalu, for example, regularly offers for sale tuna lures, gear boxes for tuna fishermen, and models of tuna fishing canoes complete with miniature poles/lures and carved wooden tuna. The beautiful pearl-shell tuna lure, considered by many to be the most characteristic fishing gear of the Pacific Islands (Anell 1955), is sold in handicraft shops in Honiara, Vila, Pohnpei, Tarawa, Funafuti, Apia, Yap, and Tongatapu, and is on display as well in many museums in the region and around the world.

Items such as coins, stamps, and flags often celebrate important aspects of a nation’s identity. The fifty-cent coin of the Cook Islands features a yellowfin. Pacific Islands countries have issued stamps depicting tuna, tuna fishing, tuna fishing gear, and even tuna research. The flag of the Tokelau interisland vessel features a tuna pearl-shell lure. This design was chosen after a nationwide competition.

Figure 4: Tuna, Tuna Fishing, and Tuna Fishing Gear on Pacific Islands Stamps

