

Review

Offshore Fisheries in the Pacific: A Review of Tuna Stock Status, Exploitation and Management in the West and Central Pacific Ocean

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Abstract: Fisheries in the Pacific region are facing increasing pressure from overfishing, climate change, and weak governance, which threaten food security, economic stability, and marine biodiversity. This review paper examines the current state of offshore and coastal fisheries across the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO), highlighting the dominance of industrial tuna fishing, the vulnerability of coastal resources, and the heavy reliance of the Pacific Island Countries (PICs) on marine ecosystems for subsistence and income. Findings of the review show that while important key tuna species remain abundant in some areas, some are at risk of overexploitation, and coastal fisheries are broadly overharvested and poorly monitored. The existence of regional management bodies and community-based initiatives such as marine protected areas (MPAs) and Vessel Day Schemes (VDS) is faced with challenges associated with a lack of local capacity and data. These findings underscore the urgent need for stronger regional collaboration, investment in data-driven management, and support for local governance. For aquaculture and fisheries practitioners, these results emphasize the necessity of integrating sustainable practices and ecosystem-based approaches to support resilience and address food security issues across the Pacific Island communities.

Keywords: tuna; overfishing; Western Central Pacific Ocean; sustainability; management; Pacific Islands; IUU fishing

1. Introduction

Fisheries have long played a significant role in global food production, with an average annual yield of 100 million metric tonnes in recent years [1,2]. Since the 1950s, the fisheries sector has expanded rapidly, peaking in the 1980s and early 1990s, and accounting for over 10% of global marine resource use by the mid-1990s [1]. By 1995, global production reached a record of 112.3 million tonnes [3]. In the Pacific region, fisheries are critical to the livelihoods of Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), supporting food security, employment, and national economies through both subsistence and export-based production [4]. Although fisheries contribute only around 1% to the global economy, they are essential to the survival of many smaller island nations, which depend on them to meet increasing population demands and ensure food sovereignty [5]. Fish have always been culturally significant to many Pacific Island communities, as they serve as a major source of protein [6] for many years.

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) is a particularly significant region, encompassing approximately 14 independent countries and eight territories, with over 200 high islands and 2500 low-lying atolls [7]. The two key sectors of fisheries that the Island nations rely heavily on are: offshore industrial fishing governed by the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) and coastal artisanal and subsistence fisheries located in shallower inshore waters [8]. Table 1 below shows the countries and territories in detail.



Table 1. The 22 Pacific Islands and Territories.

Country or Territory	Land Area (km ²)	Area of 200-Mile Zone (km ²)	Estimated Population (July 2007)
Independent Pacific Island Countries			
Cook Islands	180	1,830,000	15,473
Federated States of Micronesia	702	2,978,000	109,999
Fiji Islands	18,376	1,290,000	834,278
Kiribati	726	3,550,000	93,707
Marshall Islands	720	2,131,000	52,701
Nauru	21	320,000	9930
Niue	258	390,000	1587
Palau	500	629,000	20,162
Papua New Guinea	461,690	3,120,000	6,332,751
Samoa	2934	120,000	179,478
Solomon Islands	29,785	1,340,000	503,918
Tonga	696	700,000	102,264
Tuvalu	26	900,000	9701
Vanuatu	12,189	680,000	227,146
Pacific Island Territories			
American Samoa	197	390,000	65,029
French Polynesia	3521	5,030,000	260,072
Guam	549	218,000	173,995
New Caledonia	19,103	1,740,000	242,561
Northern Mariana Islands	475	1,823,000	64,050
Pitcairn Islands	5	800,000	54
Tokelau	12	290,000	1170
Wallis and Futuna	124	300,000	15,369

Despite this reliance, many Pacific countries face economic hardships, including low-income levels, limited economic growth, and challenges associated with climate change and population pressure. Papua New Guinea, the most populous Pacific nation, is home to over 6 million people. At the same time, Kiribati, with a small population and land area, holds a disproportionately large share of the region's tuna stock. An analysis by [9] underscores the critical economic importance of sustainable fisheries management, where it highlights that in countries such as Kiribati and the Federated States of Micronesia, the value of fishing from their EEZs far exceeds their national income.

Recent reports indicate that 85% of global commercial tuna catches now come from stocks considered to be at healthy levels, much of which is attributed to effective management practices in the WCPO [10]. However, the economic viability of specific sectors, such as pole and line fisheries, has declined due to lower catch volumes and reduced market prices. Climate change, overfishing, and habitat degradation continue to impact coastal fisheries, and projections suggest that reef fish availability in the Pacific could decline by up to 20% by 2050 [11].

Recent studies indicate that oceanographic changes due to climate change are reshaping the distribution of tuna, stock productivity, and fishing effort patterns across the WCPO. Contemporary assessments emphasize increasing variability linked to warming seas, shifting prey availability, and changes in migration dynamics, which pose new economic and governance challenges for Pacific Island Countries (PICs) reliant on tuna resources [10–12]. In response, regional fisheries management bodies have begun integrating adaptive management approaches, improved monitoring technologies, and ecosystem-based frameworks to strengthen resilience under future climate scenarios.

Governance challenges remain a significant concern, particularly in relation to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Recent geopolitical developments, including the expansion of patrol operations by the Chinese Coast Guard and joint enforcement actions by the United States and Pacific nations, highlight the strategic importance of safeguarding regional fisheries [13].

Despite extensive research on tuna fisheries and regional governance frameworks, existing literature often examines ecological stock status, economic outcomes, or management structures separately rather than providing an integrated synthesis across these dimensions within the WCPO. As such, this review paper aims to critically assess the current state of fisheries in the Pacific region by synthesizing recent ecological, economic and governance developments influencing tuna management in the WCPO. Drawing on peer-reviewed literature, policy frameworks, and regional data, the paper evaluates both offshore and coastal fisheries systems, with attention to the ecological, economic, and governance dimensions influencing their sustainability. Through this integrated perspective, the review contributes to a clearer understanding of emerging challenges and supports more adaptive and regionally informed management strategies.

2. Fisheries in the WCPO

2.1. Overview

The area of the WCPO covered in the convention area of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) is home to the largest tuna fishery in the world and is believed to be the most productive boundary for tuna species, in contrast to the more temperate zones. Approximately 80% of tuna are caught in the area, and the tropical and subtropical waters of the WCPO are where most of the key tuna species are captured [14]. For example, smaller yellowfin tunas, skipjack, and bigeye often dominate the ocean surface in schools, while the larger tunas can be found in the deeper waters.

2.2. Offshore Fisheries in the WCPO

This sector is significantly industrial scale-based and constitutes a vast area that involves certain control and contribution from the countries around the region, with several respective institutions or organizations that are responsible for all related aspects. The EEZ in Offshore Fisheries played a crucial role in legally determining and setting fishing boundaries for countries in the Pacific. With only a combined land mass of 552,789 km² for some of the smallest countries, yet they cover approximately 28% of the world's EEZ and an area estimated roughly around 30,569,000 km² [15]. Within these fishing boundaries are some of the world's most productive fisheries. One of the biggest industries that for many years had contributed a lot of revenue to the countries in the Pacific is Tuna, reaching 13.8 million tonnes of production in the WCPO in 2022, the highest level recorded [16]. As shown in Figure 1, total tuna catch in the WCPO has increased substantially over time. Updated catch trends demonstrate continued expansion into the 2010s and early 2020s, reinforcing the importance of adaptive management responses under increasing climate and economic pressures.

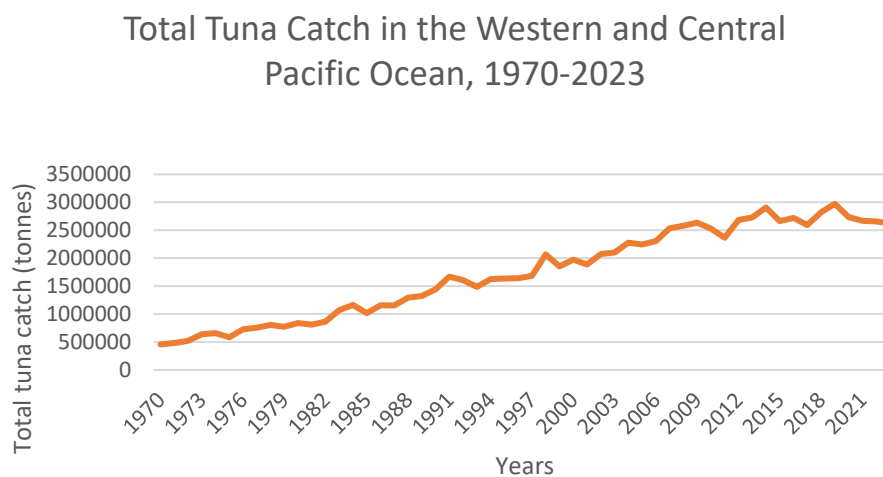


Figure 1. Tuna harvest volume in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean from 1970–2023, illustrating long term increases in industrial tuna production. Adapted from Ref. [17].

The tuna fishery in the Pacific Islands region is a significant revenue earner that provides income and employment to both the government and its people. It is the largest fishery in the world within the WCPO, representing a vital economic resource. In general, approximately 1 million tonnes have been produced each year and most of the harvests are done by foreign fishing vessels. In 2004, four of the key species of tuna, namely, skipjack, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore, produced about 51% of the world's tuna catch [2,18].

As a matter of fact, throughout the 1980s, the annual catch of these four main tuna species increased steadily as industrial effort expanded. For example, the highest annual catch, which was estimated at around 2,467,903 mt in 2009, was triggered by these industrial effort expansions [19]. In addition to these production figures, an unknown amount of bycatch has contributed a substantial portion to the domestic food supply for the Pacific Islanders as well. The figure below illustrates how the expansion of industrial effort has impacted the harvest of the four key species of tuna in recent years. Although the FAO regional landing trends presented in Figure 2 extend to 2022, more recent catch updates are discussed using WCPFC data in Figure 1. Long term trends in marine capture fisheries production across major ocean basins, derived from FAO global production statistics are presented in Figure 2, while the distribution of tuna catch by gear type is presented in Figure 3.

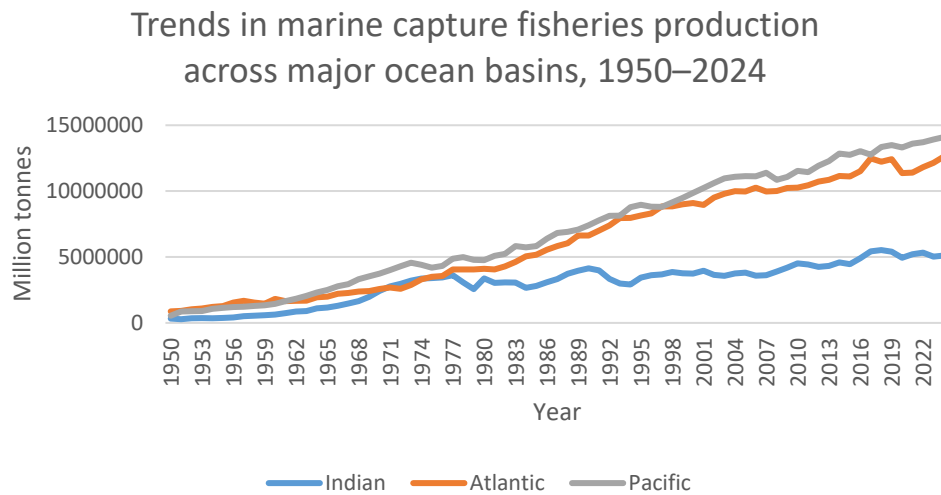


Figure 2. Marine capture fisheries production by major ocean basin, 1950–2024. Based on data from FAO FishStatJ Global Production database [20].

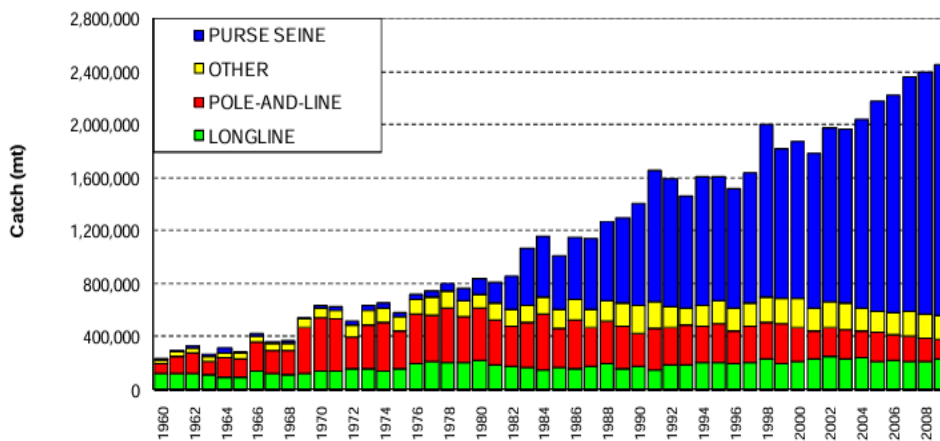


Figure 3. Catch (mt) of albacore, bigeye, skipjack, and yellowfin in the WCP–CA, longline, pole-and-line, purse seine, and other gear types. Adapted from Ref. [19]. Copyright 2010, Pacific Community (SPC).

2.3. Purse Seine

The purse seine fishery is one of the major industrial expansions that is very significant to the WCPO tuna fishery. The operation itself focuses on targeting skipjack tuna and associated catches of small yellowfin and bigeye tuna. Its significance and contribution to the WCPO tuna fishery is evident back in 2004 when a record catch of around 1,200,000 mt was made with a purse seine, reflecting the growing economic importance and development challenges of tuna fisheries in the PICs [21,22]. However, over the years since the 1990s, the PICs have encountered a major challenge of dominance from 4 distant water fishing nations (USA, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan) that accounted for around 75% of the purse seine catch in the WCPO. The difficulty faced by PICs in competing with distant water fishing nations (DWFNs) often possess larger and more technologically advanced fleets, stronger access to capital, and vertically integrated supply chains that allow them to operate at lower marginal costs. In contrast, many PIC domestic fleets face high fuel costs, limited infrastructure, and dependence on foreign investment. Regional governance mechanisms such as the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Arrangement were introduced to strengthen domestic participation by allocating fishing opportunities to locally based vessels. However, implementation challenges, ownership complexities, and market pressures have limited their effectiveness in fully balancing competition between PIC fleets and DWFNs [11,12,21]. Despite structural constraints associated with capital access, fleet technology and market integration, the PICs’ domestic fishing vessels, based under the FSM arrangement, continued to grow, eventually peaking in 2004 and reaching the highest level ever. For example, Papua New Guinea with 17 vessels, FSM and Marshall Islands with 6 vessels each, Solomon Islands with 2 vessels and Kiribati with 1 vessel [22]. On the other hand, USA dominance of purse seine vessels in the WCPO has reduced to less than 20 in 2005 [23].

2.4. Longline

Longline fishing is a common method for targeting tunas, sharks, barracuda, and other species, as well as catching pelagic rays. These longliners are usually set to hang near the surface (pelagic longline) to target tunas and swordfish or along the sea floor (demersal longline) for ground fish such as halibut or cod. In 2004, this fishery produced around 220,000 mt in the WCPO and has played a very significant role in contributing to the expansion of domestic fishing operations in the Southern PICs, in particular, the smaller longline offshore vessels, which are specialized in chilled fish [22]. The expansion of longline fisheries in the Pacific Islands differed from purse seine development, as it relied more heavily on smaller domestically based fleets and niche export markets such as sashimi-grade tuna. While longlining offered opportunities for increased domestic participation, many PIC fleets faced structural constraints including high operational costs, limited cold storage infrastructure and market volatility associated with premium tuna products. In contrast to DWFN purse seine fleets that benefit from economies of scale, longline operations in PICs often struggle to maintain profitability, highlighting broader challenges related to financing, fleet modernization and regional value chain integration [12,17]. Domestic longline fishing operations then started to trigger interest from the PICs as they emerged in Fiji in the late 1980s and in Papua New Guinea in 1995 and from then on became successful in the FSM, which invested more than US\$120 million in its tuna industry [24].

2.5. Pole and Line

Similar to purse seine fisheries in terms of target tuna species, pole-and-line fisheries have recently faced inefficiencies in their catch in the PICs' EEZs. Most of the catch was done by the Indonesian and Japanese fleets, and very little by the PICs. In countries such as Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, and Palau, the efficiency of tuna catch and cost-effectiveness of purse seine fisheries have led to the decline of Pole and line fisheries in the WCPO, resulting in their inactivity [23]. Solomon Islands is the only country that boosted Pole and line fishery in recent years, with its main market in the UK, but not until the year 2000 when all these started to collapse and ceased completely in 2009 [19]. The graph below shows the continuous trend of tuna catch by gear type in the WCPO from 1970 to 2023. Long-term trends in tuna catch by gear type are shown in Figure 4.

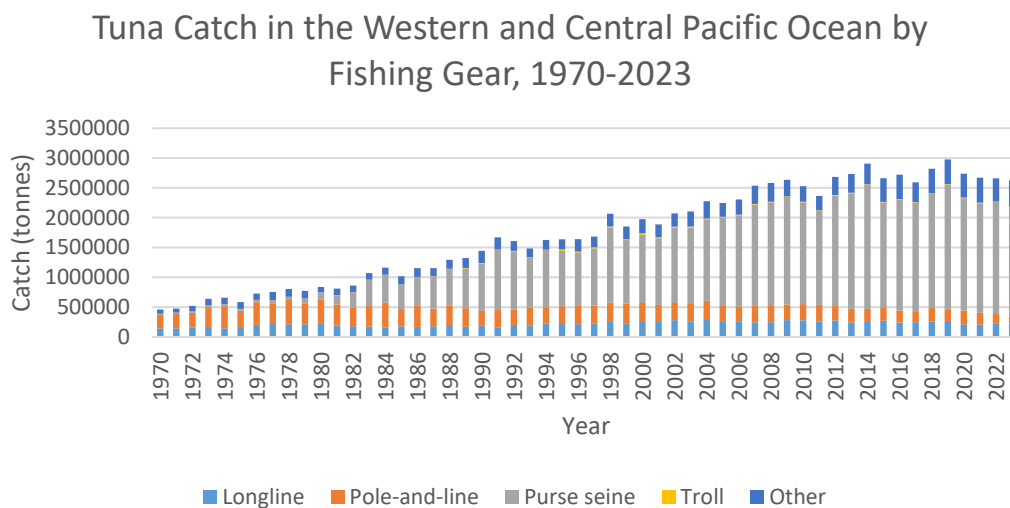


Figure 4. Tuna catch trend in the WCPO by gear type from 1970 to 2023. Adapted from Ref. [23].

3. Tuna Stock Status and Exploitation

The status of the four main tuna species in the WCPO reflects interactions between fishing effort, environmental variability, and regional management measures. Although the four principal tuna species in the WCPO share overlapping habitats, their exploitation dynamics and management priorities differ substantially. Skipjack tuna generally remain in a relatively healthy state due to high productivity and adaptive purse-seine management, whereas yellowfin and bigeye tuna face greater pressure from fishing effort and require more stringent conservation measures. Albacore tuna, particularly in longline fisheries, presents distinct challenges related to recruitment variability and economic viability rather than biomass depletion alone. These differences highlight the need for species-specific management strategies within an integrated regional framework. Skipjack

tuna has historically been considered the most resilient of the WCPO tuna stocks, supported by high reproductive capacity and adaptive management measures within purse seine fisheries. More recent WCPFC evaluations indicate that skipjack biomass remains relatively healthy, although localized increases in fishing effort and environmental variability may influence future recruitment patterns [25]. FAO [12] further notes that climate driven shifts in oceanographic conditions may alter spatial distribution and fishing strategies, reinforcing the importance of flexible management frameworks such as effort based controls and regional cooperation.

Yellowfin tuna has experienced greater fishing pressure than skipjack, particularly in equatorial regions where purse seine and longline fisheries overlap. Earlier studies highlighted concerns about recruitment and potential overfishing under expanding fishing effort [26]. Updated WCPFC Scientific Committee analyses suggest that while the stock remains productive, continued monitoring of fishing mortality and juvenile catch is necessary to avoid localized depletion [25]. Changing oceanographic conditions and shifting fleet dynamics introduce additional uncertainty, highlighting the need for adaptive harvest strategies and strengthened regional management coordination [12].

Bigeye tuna presents comparatively greater management challenges due to interactions between longline and purse seine fisheries, particularly the capture of juvenile fish associated with fish aggregating devices (FADs). Earlier assessments indicated increasing vulnerability under expanding industrial fishing effort [27]. Recent WCPFC evaluations show that management measures targeting fishing mortality and effort controls remain central to maintaining stock sustainability [25]. Climate variability and market pressures are further identified as additional factors influencing stock dynamics and fleet behaviour, underscoring the need for integrated ecosystem based management approaches [12].

Albacore tuna in the WCPO differs from the tropical tuna species in both ecological behaviour and economic importance, particularly within longline fisheries targeting sashimi and canned markets. Earlier assessments suggested that while biomass levels were relatively stable, recruitment variability and age specific catch patterns posed risks to long term sustainability [26]. More recent WCPFC analyses indicate that economic factors, including operational costs and market fluctuations, play a significant role in shaping fishing effort and fleet participation, while climate variability and shifting productivity patterns may further influence albacore distribution, emphasizing the importance of adaptive management strategies that integrate both ecological and economic considerations [12,25].

Overall, while skipjack remains comparatively resilient, increasing uncertainty surrounding yellowfin, bigeye and albacore dynamics highlights the importance of adaptive regional governance and ecosystem-based management approaches. Species-specific catch trends over time are illustrated in Figure 5.

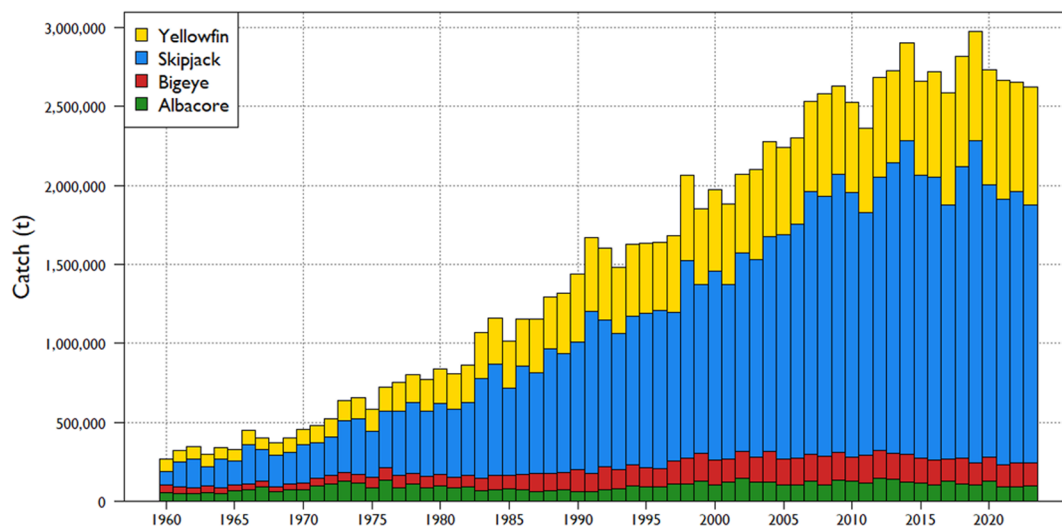


Figure 5. Tuna catch trend by species in the WCPO, 1960–2024. Adapted from Ref. [28].

4. Management of Offshore Fisheries

The management of Offshore Fisheries in the Pacific Island region remains complex, requiring coordination between conservation objectives and economic interests, particularly in relation to equitable benefit-sharing and revenue distribution among PICs [21]. Tuna stocks are highly migratory species distributed across multiple EEZs, making them vulnerable to overexploitation without strong regional governance [29]. Since the adoption of the United Nations Fish Stock Agreement (UNFSA) in 2001, Regional Fisheries Management Organizations

(RFMOs) such as the WCPFC have developed management frameworks to regulate fishing effort and promote sustainable utilization [30].

While several management tools have been introduced, including Vessel Day Schemes (VDS), total allowable catch (TAC) limits, and seasonal closures, their effectiveness has varied across fisheries. The VDS implemented by PNA has generally been regarded as a successful effort-based control, improving revenue for PICs while contributing to reduced fishing pressure in purse seine fisheries [31]. However, TAC-based approaches have faced implementation challenges due to differing national interests and enforcement limitations across vast ocean areas. Earlier disputes among fleets highlighted governance gaps, but more recent WCPFC measures emphasize adaptive management, increased compliance monitoring, and decision making driven by data [12,25]. These approaches align with broader global evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of catch shares, capacity reduction strategies, and ecosystem-based fisheries management in improving stock sustainability and economic outcomes [32–34].

Recent governance developments reflect a shift toward more technologically supported and ecosystem-based management strategies, particularly in response to climate change and its impacts on tuna dependent economies in PICs [32,35]. These include reductions in FAD fishing effort, expanded electronic monitoring (EM) programs to improve compliance, and regional initiatives promoting climate resilient fisheries management. Such measures demonstrate increasing recognition that environmental variability and shifting tuna distributions require flexible regulatory approaches [33]. Compared with earlier decades, contemporary management frameworks place greater emphasis on transparency, real time data reporting, and cooperative enforcement among member states [12,25].

Despite these advances, offshore fisheries governance in the Pacific continues to face structural challenges, including limited institutional capacity, uneven enforcement resources, and competing economic priorities among member states. While regional cooperation through organizations such as the Pacific Community (SPC), Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), and the South Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) has strengthened policy alignment, implementation outcomes vary across fleets and fisheries sectors. Moving forward, integrating climate adaptation strategies, improving monitoring technologies, and enhancing regional collaboration will be critical to sustaining tuna resources while supporting Pacific Island economies. Recent advances in monitoring technologies such as electronic monitoring systems and stock assessment models, alongside growing attention to sustaining tuna dependent economies, further support data-driven fisheries management and enforcement in the WCPO [35–37]. In addition, studies on regional governance and economic optimization emphasize the importance of cooperative frameworks and equitable benefit sharing mechanisms across Pacific Island nations [28,38]. Global marine capture fisheries trends based on FAO FishStatJ production data further highlight long term changes in ocean basin production, reinforcing the need for adaptive and regionally coordinated management strategies [20].

5. Conclusions

Fisheries in the WCPO provide the basis for PICTs with economic stability, food security, and cultural heritage. This review paper has highlighted the crucial role of offshore tuna fisheries, particularly purse-seine and longline operations, and identified the increasing burden placed on tuna stocks due to the complexities associated with industrial effort and management. While skipjack tuna remains in good biological condition, yellowfin and bigeye stocks are under significant pressure, emphasizing the need for continued vigilance and adaptive management.

Efforts by regional bodies such as the WCPFC and multilateral agreements like the UN Fish Stock Agreement reflect a shared commitment to sustainable governance, yet practical challenges persist. Issues and challenges from IUU fishing, limited institutional capacity, and weak enforcement continue to undermine progress toward sustainability for the future. Despite these challenges, recent innovations such as the VDS, catch shares, and ecosystem-based strategies offer promising pathways to more resilient and equitable fisheries management. The evidence reviewed here reinforces the importance of strengthening regional solidarity, investing in fisheries data systems, and enhancing the technical capacity of national institutions.

Future research should focus on evaluating the effectiveness of these emerging management tools in practice, particularly in supporting domestic fleet development and ensuring fair economic returns to Pacific nations. As climate variability and geopolitical interests grow, safeguarding Pacific fisheries will require more integrated, science-based, and community-informed governance than ever before.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

Use of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies

During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT to brainstorm and check grammatical errors. After using these services, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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