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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN FISHERIES FOR SKIPJACK TUNA IN THE PACIFIC OCEAN

By

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ABSTRACT

Of the several tuna species of commercial importance, the skipjack tuna is the only one that is still underutilized and able to withstand further fishing pressure. Comparing the periods 1960-65 and 1966-72, landings of albacore, bigeye, bluefin, and yellowfin tunas in the Pacific Ocean declined 10, 31, 35, and 15% respectively. The catch of skipjack tuna, on the other hand, increased from 240.0 thousand metric tons to 297.0 thousand metric tons, an increase of more than 46%. Fishing for skipjack tuna has increased rapidly in recent years. Prior to 1960 the important skipjack fisheries were located in the eastern Pacific off the central American coast and in the western Pacific off the Japanese islands. Other minor fisheries were based in Hawaii, Palau (Western Caroline Islands in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands) and Tahiti. In the mid-1960's the Japanese began a rapid southward expansion of their skipjack fishing fleet. Boats operating in the southern fishing grounds landed 14.0 thousand metric tons of skipjack in 1964-65. By 1973-74, landings had increased to 84.3 thousand metric tons. Coincident with the expansion of the home-based fleet, Japanese fishing companies entered into a series of joint-venture operations with Governments of several island territories. In Papua New Guinea a joint-venture fishery started in 1970 with a landing of 2.4 thousand metric tons. By 1973 the catch had increased to 28.0 thousand metric tons, and forecasts for 1974 are for an even higher landing.

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Other joint ventures are presently operating in the Solomon Islands, Indonesia, New Bebridas, New Caledonia, and the Philippines.

Nearly all of the increase in skipjack tuna landings in the Pacific has been made using the pole-and-line fishing method. The success of fishing has been clearly related to the successful carrying of large quantities of baitfish over long distances, as in the southern water fishery of the Japanese-based boats, or to a readily available supply of baitfish in the island areas such as Papua New Guinea. Skipjack tuna are known to occur in many other parts of the Pacific islands, but inadequate bait supplies there have precluded the development of new fisheries or the expansion of existing ones. Currently a number of countries, among them the United States and Japan, are conducting field trials to catch skipjack in commercial quantities using purse seine gear.