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INTRODUCTION

Maltese fishermen have fished for Bluefin Tuna for the past century. Records kept at the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture indicate that as early as 1920 a substantial amount of tuna was already landed regularly during the season. Although this trend continued for some time, the limitations of the Maltese market and the lack of facilities to store tuna for eventual preservation, made it uneconomical for fishermen to keep targeting this fish. Attempts were made on a number of occasions to set up tuna processing plants and in fact the Tunny Fishery (Shares) Act was enacted in February 1950. For a period of time tuna was imported from Italy and North Africa in order to supplement the tuna catches landed in Malta, in an attempt to make the processing industry viable. Tuna catches in Malta derived solely from set nets (Tunnara) situated in the north of Malta. This activity proved to be uneconomical and was wound up during the 1960s owing to financial difficulties. An added complication was the British military base operating in Malta at the time which hampered this type of fishing activity.

Although tuna landings remained relatively substantial until the 1980s, these occurred as a by-product of swordfish longline fishery. The tapping of the Japanese market from 1989 onwards resulted in renewed interest and consequent targeting of Bluefin Tuna by Maltese fishermen. Bluefin Tuna is now fished by surface longlines. This type of fishing was the only method available to the Maltese fishermen owing to the precautionary approach adopted by the Department of Fisheries in implementing sections 13 to 17 of the Fishing Regulations (LN205/34) and through which no purse seining licences for large pelagics have ever been issued. The estimated total bluefin tuna catches for the years 1990 – 2000 are reported in Table 1.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Total fish catches are being estimated by using three independent sources of data:

- a) the volume of locally caught fish going through the organised markets;
- b) the census of Fisheries held in 1997; and
- c) the volume of tuna exports which, according to information, normally bypass the central fish market completely.

In 1997, the Central Office of Statistics carried out a Census of Fisheries. Total fish catches as reported by both the full time and the part time fishermen in respect of benchmarker year 1996 were considerably in excess of the volume of fish going through the organised markets even though it is understood that the reported catch in the census might itself be somewhat understated. Notwithstanding, the data in respect of 1996 was utilised to compute a grossing-up coefficient for each species in order to derive an estimate of total fish catches. Such a coefficient is being applied for all previous and subsequent years to 1996.

Prior to the year 2000, the volume of tuna going through the organised market was almost certainly exclusive of the amount of tuna going to the export markets. In view, of this, the amount being exported was added to that going through the organised markets in order to derive a more reliable estimate of total tuna catches. The relevant grossing-up coefficient ensures an evening out of fluctuations over the years. Moreover the results are consistent with the total tuna catch for 2000

which Department of Fisheries officials reckon to be inclusive of and thereby a more exhaustive estimate of all tuna catches for that year.

The bluefin tuna brought in by the fishermen are gilled and gutted out at sea. Therefore the Conversion Factor currently used by ICCAT (Miyake Makoto, 1990) needs to be applied to all landings in order to get an estimate of the round weight since this is the recorded weight by ICCAT.

BLUEFIN TUNA PENNING

In the Mediterranean, wild stocks of bluefin tuna are recruited in the period from May to July. They are then kept in cages until they are ready for exporting from the following October till January. After leaving the site to fallow for six months, the process is repeated again. The capture of this large pelagic normally takes place in international waters and given the highly competitive nature of tuna penning, it is in Malta's interest to keep abreast with new developments both for socio-economic and technical reasons. Malta's position is strategically located with respect to the migratory path of the highly priced bluefin tuna and therefore is the perfect site for this activity.

During the year 2000, a single farm started its operations. Its location is at is-Sikka l-Bajda off St. Paul's Bay. Four cages were deployed, each with a diameter of about 45 m. This operation yielded around 330 tons of bluefin tuna for export.

This project exported its total production to Asian markets. The fish caught varied in size between 50 and 300 kg with the majority being in the 150 – 200 kg range. For the purposes of quota allocations, the fish were assigned to the country of registration of the fishing vessel. The fish were then procured with an ICCAT certificate by the flag state of the encircled vessels. On slaughter, the Department issued an ICCAT Re Export Licence.

During this current year, 3 sites have been licensed to operate and a further 5 sites are being contemplated. At present the number of full cages is twelve.

OTHER SPECIES

During the year 2000, 140 tons of swordfish were caught by longlines. These were either targeted directly or else caught as bycatch with bluefin tuna. 4 tons of albacore were landed locally. These were caught as bycatches.

RESEARCH

Malta is still actively taking part in the FAO-COPEMED project on the fisheries biology of bluefin tuna and swordfish. It is also participating in the Bluefin Year Program.

Table 1: Estimated total bluefin tuna catches for the years 1990– 2000

Year	Total Est. Catch (Kg)
1990	80958
1991	105314
1992	80213
1993	250903
1994	571676
1995	587218
1996	399004
1997	393024
1998	407059
1999	447465
2000	376029