

Fish resource management: Australia and Japan should not let their potential for collaboration go to waste

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Australia and Japan will both be severely impacted by mismanagement of the natural resources of the Asia Pacific, one example being unsustainable fish consumption. Not only are both countries large consumers of tuna fished in the region, but degradation of fish stocks will leave the region vulnerable to increased influence from China. This essay begins by outlining the issue of unsustainable natural resource management. Tuna fishing in the Pacific Ocean is analysed as a case study. Following, this essay explains why this issue is important to the future of the Australia–Japan relationship. Finally, recommendations are made on how Australia and Japan can collectively address declining tuna stocks in the Pacific Ocean. This essay advises that Australia and Japan collaborate on sustainable fishing development in the Pacific to prevent the misuse and subsequent eradication of sustainably fished tuna in the region.

The (mis)management of natural resources, particularly in the context of climate change, is a pressing issue in the Asia Pacific. From 1961 to 2017, the global consumption of fish saw a 3.1 percent rate of annual average increase. During the same period, annual world population growth was only 1.6 percent.¹ These uneven growth rates point to the unsustainability of global fish consumption. Tuna made up approximately 24 percent of catches in 2018.² As populations and subsequent consumption in the region grow, accompanied by the effects that climate change will have on aquaculture production, effective and sustainable resource management will become a more and more pressing issue.

The current supply of tuna cannot continue to keep up with the high consumption demands. The Pacific currently sources approximately 60 percent of the world's tuna consumption³ and accounts for over half of the world's tuna cannery supply.⁴ However, tuna stocks in the Pacific Ocean were reported to have declined by 96 percent in 2013.⁵ Urbanisation, higher incomes, and population

¹ "The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020" (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2020), p. i-208, <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229en/online/ca9229en.html>, 3.

² "The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020," 6.

³ Meg Taylor et al., "Tuna Fisheries Are Vital to Our Blue Continent," Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.ffa.int/node/2109>.

⁴ Les Clark and Sangaa Clark, "A Presentation to the ANU Pacific Update 2014," A Presentation to the ANU Pacific Update 2014, June 16, 2014, <https://devpolicy.org/presentations/2014-Pacific-Update/Day-2/Les-and-Sangaa-Clark.pdf>, 6.

⁵ Fiona Harvey, "Overfishing Causes Pacific Bluefin Tuna Numbers to Drop 96%" The Guardian, January 10, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jan/09/overfishing-pacific-bluefin-tuna>.

growth have resulted in increased demand for, among other consumables, fish.⁶ Food security will be threatened if demand grows at a rate that the supply cannot match. Simultaneously, fishing stocks will be negatively affected by climate change through warming ocean temperatures and extreme weather events. The rapidly changing natural and human environments will cause significant stress on the global tuna industry, particularly in the Asia Pacific region.

Australian and Japanese people will both be severely impacted by dwindling stocks of fish. Both countries are major importers of tuna.⁷ In fact, Japan is the largest importer of bluefin tuna, fresh and frozen, representing almost 90 percent of the global trade.⁸ As large players in the tuna trade, Australia and Japan would be adversely affected by loss of business. Because seafood, tuna in particular, makes up a significant proportion of the diets of people in both countries, it is imperative that efforts are made to secure the existing stocks and ensure that future fishing is viable.

Decreasing resources will also severely impact the economy — domestically, regionally, and globally. In value terms, fishery products are the most heavily traded natural food commodity in the world, and trade issues involving fish are becoming increasingly important in the Asia Pacific.⁹ In 2019, agriculture, forestry, and fishing contributed to 12.7 percent of the GDP of small Pacific Island states.¹⁰ Given that the seafood trade makes up such a large portion of the economies of the Pacific islands, loss of production will cause devastating economic loss.

This environmental and economic issue has a security dimension. Economic decline in the Pacific would provide an opening for China to increase its influence among Pacific Island states through increasing donations amid increased demand for assistance. This would consequently undermine Australia and Japan's partnerships with these countries. Managing China's rise is another shared interest of Australia and Japan,¹¹ as proven by their current involvement in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.

⁶ "The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020," 8.

⁷ José Fernández-Polanco, "An Overview of the Global Tuna Market," Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (GLOBEFISH), accessed July 22, 2021, <http://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/fishery-information/resource-detail/en/c/880744/>.

⁸ Fernández-Polanco, "An Overview of the Global Tuna Market."

⁹ "Thirtieth FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific," Agenda Item 11 (Gyeongju, Republic of Korea: Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010), p. i-42, <http://www.fao.org/3/k8736e/k8736e.pdf>, 21.

¹⁰ "Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (% of GDP) - Pacific Island Small States," Data (World Bank Group), accessed July 30, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS?locations=Z4-S2>.

¹¹ Shiro Armstrong, "Australia and Japan as Anchors to Regional Recovery and Cooperation," East Asia Forum, July 13, 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/07/09/australia-and-japan-as-anchors-to-regional-recovery-and-cooperation/>.

China has recently been ramping up its involvement in the Pacific through its Belt and Road Initiative. For example, in late 2020, a memorandum of understanding was signed between China and Papua New Guinea to construct a \$200 million comprehensive multi-functional fishery industrial park in the latter country.¹² Because the area in which the fishery is proposed to be built already has a scarcity of supply, concerns have been raised regarding the possibility of overfishing. It would not be ideal for Australia and Japan to allow China to increase its regional presence, given the risks that it would pose.

Although Australia and Japan are both already large regional powers who donate considerable amounts of aid to the region, more should be done in order to ensure that stability can be maintained in the rapidly changing regional environment. Australia currently donates the most Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to the Pacific. Japan is also a leading contributor and is currently the sixth largest donor to the region.¹³ But Japan still has much room to grow in terms of aid. In 2019, 45 percent of the aid received by the Pacific was from Australia. China and Japan provided 8 and 6 percent of ODA to the region in the same year respectively.¹⁴ To overtake China, Japan must either increase its independent aid budget, or turn to a partner for collaboration.

Australia and Japan should utilise their strong collaborative relationship to ensure that tuna fishing in the Pacific remains sustainable. Both countries would be threatened by declining stability in the Asia Pacific, and share a strong interest in preserving regional stability.¹⁵ Nguyen and Dayant argue that wider collaboration between Australia and Japan “would allow both countries to build on their respective strengths in Pacific development”.¹⁶ A contingent feature of a stable Asia Pacific is sustainability — in terms of both the environment, food supply, and trade. To ensure that this remains feasible, Australia and Japan should develop a joint sustainable fishery initiative to simultaneously sustain the fishing trade and suppress Chinese encroachment in the Pacific.

¹² Laura Tingle, “As the Australia-China Relationship Deteriorates, a \$200m PNG 'Fishery' Deal Raises Eyebrows,” ABC News (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, December 11, 2020), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-12/australia-recognised-threat-png-vulnerability-represents-china/12974846>.

¹³ Michael Nguyen and Alexandre Dayant, “The Underappreciated Value of Japanese Aid in the Pacific,” *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute, October 11, 2019), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/underappreciated-value-japanese-aid-pacific>.

¹⁴ Alexandre Dayant, “Follow the Money: How Foreign Aid Spending Tells of Pacific Priorities,” *The Interpreter* (Lowy Institute, April 17, 2019), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/follow-money-how-foreign-aid-spending-tells-pacific-priorities>.

¹⁵ Armstrong, “Australia and Japan as Anchors to Regional Recovery and Cooperation.”

¹⁶ Nguyen and Dayant, “The Underappreciated Value of Japanese Aid in the Pacific.”

Fish, a key part of the Asia Pacific's environment and economy, is in danger from unsustainable fishing practices. More specifically, the supply of tuna, one of the most consumed seafood products, is deteriorating rapidly. A debilitated Pacific economy will provide openings for China to increase its presence, both regionally and within specific states. Greater Chinese influence threatens Australia and Japan's positions in the region. Thus, to facilitate sustainable development and prevent China from becoming more influential in the Pacific, Australia and Japan should collaborate on the development of sustainable fishing in the region.

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