Comment

A label for tuna?

According to GLOBEFISH of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), tuna is the third major fish commodity traded internationally, after shrimp and groundfish, accounting for about 9 per cent of total trade in value terms. Tuna is practically the only fish processed and traded on an industrial scale.

Japan is the largest market for tuna in the world. The Japanese large-scale tuna longline industry, in particular, produces around 200,000 tonnes of *sashimi* tuna, which is the highest-value seafood in the Japanese, and perhaps the whole world, market. It also imports about 270,000 tonnes of *sashimi* tuna, of which 50,000 tonnes, or 10 per cent, comes from the 'flags of convenience' (FOC) fishing vesselssubsequently christened by FAO as 'illegal, unreported and unregulated' or IUU fishing vessels.

In 1999, Japanese tuna boatowners, mainly large-scale longliners, launched a campaign against tuna caught by FOC tuna fishing vessels. The campaign sought to prevent vessels fishing as FOC from landing, trading and consuming tuna in Japan.

The Japanese boatowners' campaign against FOCs has since grown into a larger international initiative called the Organization for the Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries (OPRT), as reported on page 32 of this issue of *SAMUDRA Report*. The new initiative is supported by the Japanese government, and OPRT's membership now includes other important tuna longlining nations like China, Taipei, Indonesia, Korea and the Philippines.

In Japan, it is reportedly an alliance of boatowners, traders, distributors and consumers. OPRT believes that Japan, as one of the leading tuna fishing and consuming nations, is responsible for conserving and managing tuna fisheries. It is working on what it calls a consumer-oriented labelling project. It plans to publish a 'white list' of tuna longliners that comply with international tuna management measures, which is expected to reward the 'white list' vessels with a special label. Though OPRT calls it an 'ecolabel', from available information, the initiative appears to be more of a certification scheme by the OPRT to differentiate tuna caught by its own members from those caught by FOC/IUU fishing vessels.

The OPRT campaign does not, however, make any mention of tuna caught by small-scale tuna longliners, of which there are a not inconsequential number around the world. For example, South Pacific countries like Palau, Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Fiji and Samoa have small-scale longline fisheries that supply *sashimi*-grade tuna to the Japanese market. Such fishing for tuna is more sustainable, in terms of both scale and intensity of fishing effort. Small-scale tuna longlining is perhaps among the best win-win-win combinations, from the point of view of sustainability, trade and livelihood.

The OPRT's concerns about FOC/IUU fishing vessels are valid and understandable. The logical solution to this problem, however, would have been to create a 'negative list' of FOC/IUU fishing vessels that are prevented from landing or selling their tuna catches in Japan, rather than developing a 'white list' or a 'positive list' of large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels. Punishing FOC/IUU vessels and rewarding the OPRT vessels also has a flip side to it. It leaves a third group out in the cold. While the 'white list' vessels are given preferential access to the lucrative Japanese fresh-tuna market, fishing vessels that are neither FOC/IUU fishing vessels nor members of the OPRT are caught in the crossfire, and are not given any access. This smacks of protectionism.

If OPRT would like to be taken more seriously, it cannot overlook the small-scale tuna longline fisheries in many parts of the developing world. It should also accommodate responsible tuna longline vessels that are neither FOC/IUU vessels nor those of members of OPRT. In sum, rather than rewarding a few, OPRT should reward all responsible producers of tuna in the true spirit of setting up "an effective responsible trading system for resource management".