Tuna for sale...*roadside stalls in Kiribati.*

TARAWA'S APPROACH TO TUNA CONSERVATION

One: Nauru Agreement; Two: No fishing in PIPA

By Christopher Pala

KIRIBATI IS TAKING A TWO-PRONGED APPROACH to conserving its marine resources. On one hand, it's joining a group of Pacific nations in imposing strong conservation measures on foreign fishing fleets it licenses to fish in its Exclusive Economic Zone, which is the size of India, under what is called the Nauru Agreement.

On the other, it delays imposing restrictions on fishing in its Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) to such an extent that, under the present agreement with its sponsors, the first access contract renewals restricting fishing in PIPA are not planned until 2010 and blue-water fishing there may never cease altogether.

Despite this cautious approach, Harvard University has invited President Anote Tong to address its Center for the Environment and the New England Aquarium is to present him with the David B. Stone Medal, given periodically to individuals who have excelled in ocean stewardship.

Past awardees have included Jacques Cousteau, Sir David Attenborough, Walter Conkite and Senator John Kerry. Both events were to take place in late September.

Kiribati is not alone in moving to set aside vast swathes of open ocean. In the United States, President George W. Bush has proposed extending no-fishing areas off half a dozen isolated Pacific Islands countries ranging from the Northern Marianas to the Line Islands, though how big an area will be involved—it could be larger than PIPA—remains unclear.

Separately, the 350,000 sq km Northwestern Hawaiian Islands' Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument designated in 2006 is scheduled to end all fishing by 2011, though today just a handful of small vessels are fishing, and only for bottomfish.

In Australia, the Pew Trusts in September was to unveil a proposal to create a 1 million sq km no-take zone off the north-east coast.

The Coral Sea Heritage Park would run the length of the Great Barrier Reef, where fishing is allowed in about two-thirds of the area, and extend outward to the limit of the EEZ, with a bump to include the Coral Sea Islands.

If the Australian government adopts the proposal, fishing in the reserve—already limited to Australian fleets—would stop when the park is designated, which could be by 2010, says Imogen Zethoven of Pew Trusts. But both the American and the Australian reserves are beyond the band that goes 300 nautical miles north and south of the equator where most of the tuna catch is concentrated, so their waters are less important for the health of tuna stocks, according to marine biologists.

Under its agreement with the New England Aquarium and Conservation International, Kiribati is pledged to put about a quarter of the blue-water portion of the 410,000 sq km Phoenix Islands reserve off-limits to all fishing vessels by about 2010, when its foreign partners expect to have raised $13 million, enough to ensure an income of $175,000 a year.

By 2013, the partners hope to raise $25 million, guaranteeing $700,000, which is about a quarter of the estimated potential loss Kiribati would accrue if it closes the entire reserve to fishing.

The figure is based on the principle that 16% of the fish caught in the Kiribati EEZ are, on average, caught in the Phoenix Islands' EEZ. PIPA amounts to about half the Phoenix Islands EEZ.

The partners agreed to the 16% figure even though the draft agreement notes that fishing vessels banned from PIPA could end up hauling in the same amount of these highly migratory fish as they fish in other areas of the EEZ, incurring zero losses in catch from the PIPA closure.

Nor does the rationale for financing the potential losses due to the closure take into account two other factors: the lowered attractiveness of a Kiribati fishing license from the restrictions from the Nauru Agreement that are expected to start being inserted into fishing contracts at the start of 2010, and the heightened attractiveness of Kiribati's vast EEZ because the price of skipjack has doubled in a year and bigeye and yellowfin prices are also high.

Anote Tong...*Kiribati president.*

John Hampton, the Oceanic Fisheries Programme Manager at the Secretariat of the Pacific Community, is one of several experts who believe that if Kiribati officials hold firm, they could avoid giving a PIPA discount for access fees because of these high prices.

In the Pacific, about 10 times more tuna is caught than all other fish species combined, and the fast-breeding skipjack represents 64% of the catch. Stocks of yellowfin (23 % of the total) have been dropping and scientists say the catch should be reduced by at least 10%. Bigeye (6% of the total) is the most endangered of

the commercial equatorial tuna and tuna scientists say fishing should be cut by 30%. About half of the bigeye and yellowfin stocks have been wiped out by overfishing in the last half-century, scientists estimate.

Under the agreement being negotiated between Kiribati and its American sponsors, the first phase, $25 million endowment would provide funds for three activities: the management of the reserve itself would get $300,000 a year, including scientific monitoring and law-enforcement; the operating budget of the fund would receive $200,000; and $700,000 would be available for reimbursing potential access fee losses.

Implicit in the agreement is the notion that for Kiribati to stop all fishing in the entire PIPA, the trust fund would have to have $100 million.

Marine conservation experts familiar with the project say raising $25 million is feasible, but raising $100 million would be much harder, particularly if the Kiribati government insists on keeping its fishing contracts confidential.

The publicity surrounding the creation of PIPA and its likely listing as a UNESCO World Heritage Site has begun to generate grants—including one for $1 million from the United Nations Global Environmental Facility—and interest in tourism investments that are likely to exceed possible losses from access fees from fishing fleets.

But the agreement does not provide for this extra national income offsetting the potential losses from access fees and lessening the donors' obligation to raise funds for that part of the trust fund.

Meanwhile, in 2010, about the same time as the first 25% of PIPA's no-take blue water is expected to be inserted into new contracts, along with banning all fishing within 12 miles of land and 60 miles off Kanton, the Phoenix Islands' only inhabited one, the Nauru Agreement would impose a whole set of different restrictions on foreign purse seiners, which account for about three quarters of the Pacific tuna catch. Fish Aggregating Devices—platforms known as FADs that attract multitudes of fish—would be banned for three summer months a year; no licensee would be allowed to fish in the 790,000 sq km high seas pocket bordered by Kiribati and seven other islands nations; all vessels would be required to carry observers, up from 15% today; and all tuna would have to be retained, preventing fishers from dumping dead small fish to make room for more valuable big ones.

There will be no compensatory mechanism if fishing fleets balk and decline to renew licenses because of these restrictions. While there are some indications that some tuna spawn in PIPA, whose closure would then increase their abundance in areas outside the reserve, the benefits of the Nauru Agreement measures are much clearer.

"Closing these high seas pockets is very important," says Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia, Canada, a prominent fisheries expert. "They tend to be a free-for-all and drain the fish from the EEZs."

Lagi Toribau, of Greenpeace in Fiji, adds that a number of foreign purse seiners are operating illegally in the high-seas pocket, often in tandem with legal ships. If the legal ships stop fishing in the zone, that will make it easier to curb the activities of the illegal ones, he says.

FADs, Pauly explains, "are a big problem and the more restrictions on them the better. They attract masses of juvenile fish that haven't had a chance to reproduce and also larger adults that would normally live in deeper waters that aren't accessible to purse-seiners".

Having "100% observer coverage is also excellent because it's been well-documented that observers significantly change the way fishing is done", adds Pauly.

"For instance, fishers know they will get less illegal by-catch in some areas than in others and they will go there if there's an observer on board."