

Developments in Yellowfin Tuna Fishery of Maldives

Summary

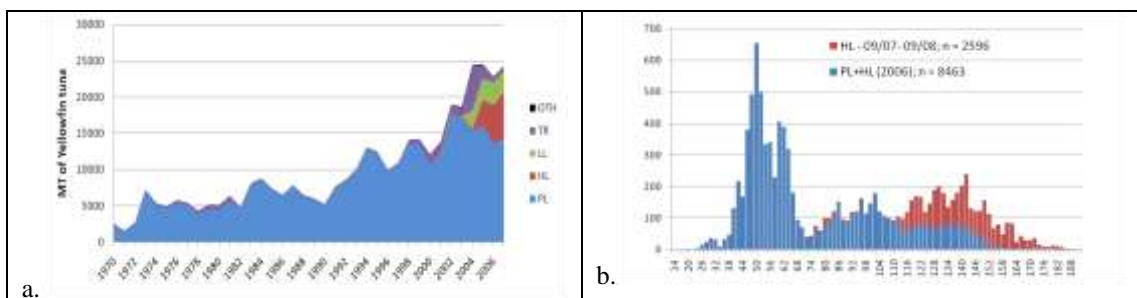
Yellowfin tuna (*Thunnus albacares*) is the second most important species caught in the Maldives. Reported annual catches are currently around 25,000 MT (figure) which represents 16% of total tuna landings in Maldives. Yellowfin tuna are caught from pole-and-line, handline and longline gears. Few amounts are also caught from trolling gear.

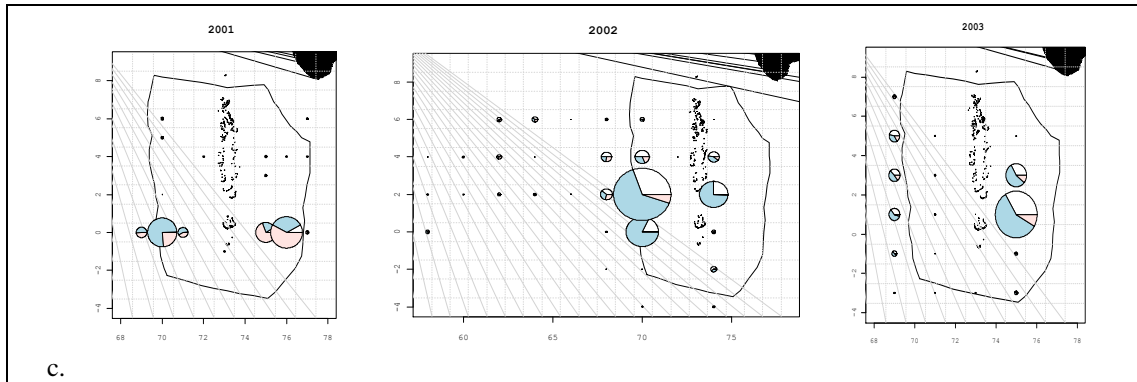
The largest fraction of yellowfin catches are made in the pole-and-line fishery contributing 60% of the total reported catch (by weight). Pole-and-line catches juveniles between 30-60 cm (FL) (figure) taken from surface mixed schools of skipjack, yellowfin and bigeye tuna. They are essentially caught around anchored-FADs located within 12-15 miles from the atoll reef. A network of over 40 FADs is now regularly maintained by the Ministry of Fisheries, Agriculture and Marine Resources. A small proportion of the bigeye tuna (*T. obesus*) is also caught along with yellowfin and skipjack. Bigeye is not reported separately in Maldives. Estimates show that 5% of the yellowfin tuna reported in Maldives will be bigeye tuna.

An important segment of the yellowfin fishery is the handline fishery which targets large yellowfin tuna (> 100 cm) (figure). The developments this fishery are driven by the export demand and investments in fresh-packing and processing facilities. Recent export figures shows about 7,500 MT of fresh yellowfin (whole, gill and gutted, head and gutted, loins, fillets, belly cuttings, etc) were exported. However, reported catches from handline fishery were 6,500 MT (16%), much less than declared weight at customs authority. Handline fishing is done in large (> 25+m) pole-and-line vessels with exception that they carry ice boxes (10-15 MT capacity). Regular handline with hooked livebait (often scads) are commonly used method. Records show that over 90% of the catches are from dolphin associated schools. A fishing trip often lasts about 7 days and catch is landed at packing/processing facilities located close to Malé area.

Yellowfin tuna are also caught in the Maldives by the longline fishery. The fishery operates in the EEZ (beyond 75 miles) and is carried out by foreign vessels under a license agreement between government authorities. They are under a VMS maintained at Coast Guard Centre. Maldivians have made few attempts in operating longline vessels but have failed. Thus longline fishing is done entirely by foreigners. The vessels are about 50-60 GT (18-22 m LOA). Records shows about 20-30 vessels operated in recent years. During 2007 many left due to poor fishing and rising fuel prices. The reported catches from longline fishery are just over 3,000 MT in the recent years representing about 12% of total yellowfin catch. The catches comprise of yellowfin and bigeye which the recent data showed 71% and 23% respectively (figure). The processing and export opportunities in Maldives had meant that many vessels now land their catch in Maldives.

Fishing effort is poorly reported in the Maldives. It is reported in “number of days of fishing”. While this may be appropriate for the pole-and-line fishery which continues to be a “day-trip” it is becoming difficult for the handline fishery. Catch reported by the handline gear are of multi-day fishing which may be caught from more than one locality. Their catch is stored in large ice boxes and landed to packing facilities close to Malé. Catch location (i.e., atoll) from handline fishery is complicated as most, if not all, their catch is reported as Malé catches. This has resulted in very high catches of yellowfin tuna being reported in Kaafu Atoll (Malé area).





c. Figure. a. Catches of yellowfin tuna by gear. b. Size composition of yellowfin catches. c. Longline catches by species (blue: yellowfin, pink: bigeye and other in white in arbitrary scale).