



WESTERN
PACIFIC
REGIONAL
FISHERY
MANAGEMENT
COUNCIL

2020 TERRITORIAL FISHERMEN OBSERVATIONS

Fishers from Guam, CNMI and American Samoa met with the Council's Advisory Panel from the three territories on Tuesday, February 9, 2021, to discuss their observations on fisheries during 2020. While the Covid-19 pandemic's impact was felt in all the territories, its arrival during March 2020 placed restrictions to fishing activity mostly in the Mariana Archipelago with a lockdown implemented on Guam and curfews put in place in the CNMI. It was not until the latter half of 2020 were all fishing restrictions eased.

2020 Bottomfish Fisheries

Guam

Fishermen reported a banner year for deep bottomfish with a number of young boaters trying deep bottomfish fishing for the first time. Fishers attributed this to a longer period of calmer weather allowing them more opportunities to fish. *Onaga* was caught in all sizes but *Opakapaka* were in the 8-9 pound range and caught in larger numbers. Sharks were also noticeable above 100 fathoms, particularly tiger and silvertip sharks. Sales of bottomfish were affected by the pandemic with hotels not purchasing fish, but restaurants that continued operations were able to purchase bottomfish.

CNMI

CNMI bottomfish fishers reported not catching many *Gindai* as they would expect on the last quarter of the moon as in previous years. Those that fished the northern islands found fish in better numbers than in the southern islands.

American Samoa

Bottomfish fishing for American Samoa was difficult with more rain, high winds, and rough currents in 2020, making it difficult for smaller boats to fish. Fishermen noticed a strong shark presence in November and December. Fishermen reported an increase in sports fishermen engaging in bottomfish fishing. While bottomfishing has been spotty around Tutuila island, fishermen reported high productivity around the Manua islands. *Onaga* catches have been good for some fishermen, landing 100-200 pounds per trip.

2020 Pelagic Fisheries

Guam

Guam fishers attributed challenges in the participation of the pelagic fishery to COVID impacts early on as well as military exercises. Participation increased overall with more boats on the

water. Vendors who purchased fish during 2020 reported buying more pelagic and bottom fish from a larger set of fishers.

Fishers noted that pelagic catch was not spectacular and noticed a drop in mahimahi catch, but noted that wahoo was strong. This could be due to mahimahi being caught in the rough water season and the waters were calmer than normal for a longer period of time in 2020. Fishermen also observed that the waters in 2020 were warmer. Kayak fishing increased and in 2020 reported catching species not normally caught or seen including a prickly shark and snake mackerel.

CNMI

CNMI fishers also reported pelagic fishery impact from 2020, particularly due to curfews that were implemented. The curfews hampered their ability to catch species such as monchong which is normally caught at dusk. Another factor that influenced the pelagic fishing activity in the Marianas was the high cost of fuel, forcing many fishers to find a balance between going fishing or staying at home. In the CNMI, many opted to stay home resulting in less fishers who went fishing during 2020. CNMI also had stronger winds and more storms in 2020 which affected fishers as well.

Pelagic fishers noticed skipjack tunas were harder to find and had to travel further out to sea to find them. They observed that about 80% of the skipjack tuna caught were in the three to five-pound range, which was smaller than the normal 15-20 pound range. They also saw an increase in boats from Guam fishing in CNMI.

Sharks depredation continued in 2020, though some fishers said they did not encounter as many sharks during 2020 as in the previous years. The fishers reported they were losing 15-20 lures daily to sharks which were consistent between 2019 and 2020. One fisher also observed an algal bloom in inshore waters during 2020.

American Samoa

American Samoa fishers reported that the tuna run was late in 2020, where peak catches were expected in October it did not happen. Large skipjack (20-30lbs) were landed in September and October with sizes dropping after that. Fishermen agreed that, on average, skipjack were unusually smaller (5-8lbs) than what was caught in previous years. Blue marlins were hard to come by around the island of Tutuila and the sizes of landed fish were smaller as well. Shark encounters were more frequent than in previous years and noticeable at the banks when yellowfin came by.