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The concept of the Skipjack Program starts to materialise

There were more events in 1973 that impacted, or nearly did, my commitment to skipjack research in the broader Pacific. Throughout my PhD studies at the University of Queensland, I had regarded a job with CSIRO Division of Fisheries and Oceanography to be about as good as I could aspire to. So, when a job working on pelagic fisheries based in Cronulla was advertised, even though I now had a good job in Papua New Guinea, I felt I had to apply. I did so successfully. But before accepting, I spent two weeks at CSIRO in Cronulla trying to make up my mind.

My desire to establish the broad-scale skipjack project was strengthening. In the end, it won out. I returned to Port Moresby with even stronger commitment – but not before I had made a firm friendship with Kevin Williams, who was to have been my deputy on the CSIRO project in which I had been offered a leadership position. Kevin has a fabulous depth of knowledge of Australia's tuna fisheries and lots of experience with tagging tuna, particularly southern bluefin tuna (SBT). To this day, nobody has tagged more SBT than Kevin. He has been a great help to me and my exploits with tuna research ever since. I was particularly pleased when he advised me that CSIRO scientists thought so highly of the tagging methods we had developed in Papua New Guinea (Kearney 1974) that they adopted at least some of them themselves. About 20 years later, when my wife heard Kevin publicly repeat his praise of our tagging techniques, she turned to me and somewhat accusingly said, 'You never told me that CSIRO thought so highly of that aspect of your work'. All I could say was, 'You never asked'.

In mid-1973, I received an unheralded visit in my office at Kanudi from Roy (Dick) Baird. Dick was the fisheries officer at the SPC at that time. I knew so little of the SPC that I did not even know where it was based. As I had a busy schedule that day, which did not include a meeting with 'a Dick Baird' who had arrived unannounced, I may not have been as courteous to Dick as I should have been; we spoke for only about 30 minutes. I did have another meeting that day. However, as Dick was to later tell me, this short meeting was sufficient for him to be most impressed with the quality of Papua New Guinea's skipjack research program, including the data printouts on the joint-venture fisheries, the tag recoveries and the results of the baitfish surveys. He told me he had no idea that research of this standard was going on in the area of the SPC, and he was the fisheries officer for the whole area. His visit also provided the opportunity for a brief discussion of the much more ambitious tagging project I was contemplating.

At that stage, my thinking was centred around getting those countries that had significant skipjack fisheries, principally Solomon Islands and Fiji, and possibly French Polynesia and one or two of the US territories, to start their own skipjack tagging ventures. A chartered vessel under centralised direction would then be required to systematically tag in the waters of each of the other Pacific Island countries and territories.

All I had in writing at that time was one page of notes, which was dominated by a listing of the likely hurdles that would need to be jumped. The biggest problem was clearly how to pay for the charter of a suitable vessel for long enough to get enough tags in the water across enough of the total study area. Attached to that one page was a list of the few countries that might be able to do some tagging and a separate list of the countries or organisations that might be prepared to contribute to the funding of such a venture. I did not give Dick a copy of my notes, as I thought they were too preliminary.

Dick was obviously excited by this discussion. In fact, I was surprised that I had no difficulty ushering him out the door so I could go to my next meeting. I remember thinking that he left like he was in a hurry to go and tell somebody about the great news he had just received.

I thought little more of this encounter until I received a letter from Dick several months later. It included the promise of an air ticket for travel to Tahiti to attend a meeting to discuss skipjack assessment. The meeting was to be convened under the auspices of the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack, of which I was being invited to be a member. It was with much

enthusiasm and optimism that I accepted the invitation. This would be the perfect opportunity to begin a public campaign to promote the concept of the broader tagging and baitfish study, which had matured considerably in the past couple of months. I attended my first truly international meeting a few months later with my excitement clearly evident; I made no attempt to hide it.

The first meeting of the Expert Committee was convened by Dick Baird in Papeete, French Polynesia, from February 25 to March 1, 1974, under the chairmanship of Richard Shomura, the director of the Hawaii office of the US National Marine Fisheries Service. It was at breakfast with several of my new colleagues on the first morning of the meeting that my qualifications for membership in an 'expert' committee on skipjack were first put to the test. We were dining outside our hotel when a young man walked past with a very significant tuna, more than 20 kilograms, over his shoulder. The black back of the fish was facing me. I did not immediately recognise the species, but could tell it was not a yellowfin. I said, 'What the hell is that?' None of the others seemed to know, so I caught up with the man carrying the fish and had a good look at it. From another angle, the stripes gave it away. Of course, it was a skipjack. In more than three years of intensive research on skipjack in Papua New Guinea, I had never seen a skipjack over 6.5 kilograms. Not recognising one was not a great start to my career as an international expert on skipjack.

Once the meeting was underway, it was immediately apparent to the members of the committee that even though there was a lot of interest in skipjack fisheries in the area of the SPC, apart from what was going on in Papua New Guinea, there was very little skipjack research in the region. In fact, as the meeting broke on the second day, the chairman said to me:

> It is just as well you brought your data and tagging and baitfish survey ideas to the meeting. Otherwise, we would not have had much to talk about. We certainly would not have had a plan of what we should do next.

The members were easily convinced of the usefulness and appropriateness of the tagging and survey program I was now selling them. The results from our work in Papua New Guinea were a big factor.

The representatives from Solomon Islands, Fiji and the French territories I had on my list of countries or territories that might be able to run their own skipjack programs, similar to the one we had going in Papua New Guinea,

but they simply did not have the research resources to undertake such a task at that time. The members unanimously endorsed the concept of the broader program I was proposing as the highest priority. The introduction on page 1 of the report for the meeting states this:

> After considering all available alternatives for the study of skipjack in the area (of the SPC) the Expert Committee strongly recommended a regional tagging programme in which approximately 100,000 skipjack would be tagged and released over a three year period.

Of particular note from the SPC perspective is the comment on page 11 of the proposal:

> The international sponsorship of the project through the South Pacific Commission enables the vessel to catch both skipjack and baitfish in areas not accessible to a vessel of a single nationality.

This was to prove to be of considerable importance to several of the eventual donors to the programme, particularly the Japanese.

At Dick Baird's invitation, I stayed on in Papeete a few days after the meeting to expand my 'concept note' into a more formal proposal, including a very preliminary estimate of possible costs. Not surprisingly, this estimate was way under what the actual cost turned out to be.

Dick immediately agreed with my suggestion that even though I had conceived the idea of the project and written the proposal, it would be best, at least in the short term, to have it go out under the authorship of the Expert Committee. Dick was keen to demonstrate that his concept of the Expert Committee had been a success, while I was already concentrating on the task of attracting funding for the project. Getting the fisheries officers from all the countries and territories in the SPC on side with the concept of the project was the perfect place to start. We agreed that having all members of the committee feel some ownership would help catalyse support from at least the countries represented on the committee. The members, as owners, would likely be stronger lobbyists for the programme.

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