7

The pursuit of individual donors

The obvious countries to approach in the search for donors for the Skipjack Programme were the ones that were ongoing supporters of Pacific Island countries and territories as members of the SPC. In alphabetical order, they were Australia, France, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Japan, as the country with, at that time, the biggest fleet that fished for tuna in the central and western Pacific, was another likely candidate for support. Other possibilities included Canada and the European Union, but neither of these had had significant involvement at that time as aid donors in the South Pacific.

Once I accepted the position of 'skipjack stock assessment program coordinator' based at the SPC, I began a formal and structured evaluation of what I anticipated to be the reasons why each of these countries might support the programme. How could I convince them all of the benefits the programme would bring? I quickly concluded that they all shared an interest in having the marine resources of the whole region well managed and, where possible, exploited rationally at optimum levels. It had been established since about 1973 that skipjack likely represented the biggest living marine resource, one for which regional cooperation in the management of was most obvious. The Law of the Sea was just emerging as a topic for discussion between countries. Considerations of how it could be implemented were very preliminary, though they had already brought skipjack fisheries very much to the fore for many Pacific countries and territories. My strategy would be to ensure that all potential donors were fully aware of the benefits to Pacific Island states that would flow from the skipjack research I was

proposing. These benefits would include having sufficient knowledge of skipjack stocks to be able to manage the rapidly expanding fishery with confidence. If total catches were to be increased to optimum levels, cooperation from all countries involved, including coastal states and distant-water fishing nations, would be required. It would be impossible to get adequate cooperation if the status of the resource and its response to increased fishing pressure were not known with adequate precision. I was already aware that greatly increased catches were likely, and if these increases materialised and could be proven by science to be sustainable, the financial benefits to Pacific Island states would be unprecedented.

My initial approach was to contact the most senior government fisheries and/or aid representative that I knew in each country and try to persuade them to open a door for me to get an appointment with the most influential aid or foreign affairs person(s). This approach was largely successful. Australia and New Zealand were straightforward because of the presence of effective consuls general in Noumea. I also knew the senior fisheries people in both countries reasonably well. Being in a French territory made the France connection straightforward. Japan was less of a problem than I had feared. My contacts in the Japan Fisheries Agency and the Far Seas Fisheries Research Laboratory in Shimizu, which I had established while in Papua New Guinea, proved to be extremely valuable. I did not have such good contacts in the United Kingdom, and this did make it considerably more difficult to get to the right people, but with time, I got there. In the United States, I had a powerful contact in Jim Joseph. As the director of the IATTC, he was in the perfect position to help, and he was very willing and capable.

The numerous South Pacific Forum regional meetings on the Law of the Sea represented the perfect platform for me to interact with the right people from both the countries and territories of the region and the possible donors. My impact on donors was greatly aided by the fact that, at the invitation of the Forum Secretariat of the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Co-operation (SPEC), I wrote the foundation documents for discussions at these meetings on what the Law of the Sea could mean for fisheries development in the South Pacific (in particular, Kearney [1976, 1977]; see Chapter 8). There can be little doubt that these two papers and the prominence of my role at these meetings had a huge impact on the donors' perception of my understanding of the major issues impacting tuna research and management and my ability to run the proposed programme.

By the beginning of 1976, my list of possible/probable donors was restricted to those listed previously. I had received a definitive refusal from Canada and a 'not now, but come back in a few years' response from the European Union. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) was vague in its response, but one key staff member indicated that support was most unlikely; he felt that they were already overcommitted. I felt that contributing to other agencies or commissions was not UNDP's preferred way of doing business. They appeared to favour direct dealings with individual countries.

Discussions I had had with each of the likely donor governments on how much money I was requesting began by pointing out that I anticipated a budget of around a million dollars a year for the first three years and then approximately half this amount for one or two more years. There was a lot of uncertainty in the dollar estimates because of rapid changes in the relative value of the Australian and American dollars, which were the two currencies most used or discussed in the region. At the time of the first estimate of the budget for the programme, the Australian dollar (the currency used in SPC budgets) was worth 1.3 US dollars; however, this ratio was changing quickly: it had been 1.5 a little more than a year earlier. To provide some perspective on the relative value of money in the 1970s and today, I recall that in my first visit to Tokyo in 1973, as part of a Papua New Guinea delegation to discuss cooperative skipjack research, I stayed in the Okura Hotel, one of Japan's finest, for AU$22 per night. In February 2025, the cost of a Simple Plan Room–only at the Okura for one night was quoted online as US$1,195.48 – more than 50 times the 1973 price.

As there were six likely donor countries, AU$1 million split evenly six ways would be AU$166,000 each or approximately US$200,000 per year at the exchange rate of 1.3 at the time I first made the request. I tried to maintain discussions around the figure of US$200,000 each per year with every potential donor, but several countries insisted on keeping negotiations in their own currency. This made allowances for exchange rates a little more problematic, for me at least. Further uncertainty resulted from the lack of a definite quote for the cost of chartering a suitable vessel – the major item of expenditure for the programme. There was always the possibility that if I were unable to secure the total of approximately $1 million (in either currency), I would have to reduce the number of months for which the vessel was chartered; nine months per year was the initial predicted minimum requirement, but I felt that 10 months would be much better.

I was uncertain if lesser amounts of time tagging skipjack would result in sufficient releases across the whole study area and enough subsequent recaptures to make the whole experiment viable.

My early discussions with potential donors revealed several generic problems:

A. I was considered by some donors to be too young and inexperienced to run a research program of this magnitude. The Japanese company with which I later negotiated the vessel charter arrangements had a particular problem with this issue (see Chapter 13). I felt that the United Kingdom also had a significant problem with this, but their representatives were too diplomatic to raise it directly with me (see discussion of the UK in the following).
B. I did not have an established research team behind me, and in addition to the immediate problem of not having a 'team approach' to the project, the SPC's lack of recognised scientific standing was thought likely to make it difficult to recruit scientists of sufficient calibre, particularly the ones necessary to do the analyses of the tag release and recapture results.
C. Nobody had ever used tagging to determine the size of a population of tuna; therefore, new analytical models and analytical techniques would need to be developed and then successfully proven and applied to the data we would collect. What proof was there that the analyses and models that were developed would work?
D. The scope of the experiment was enormous; the area of the SPC alone was 30 million square kilometres, and this did not include all the area of the resource: 50 million square kilometres was a more likely figure.
E. The assurances I gave to donors that the design of the whole programme was sound were largely dependent upon my opinion, which was itself derived from my four years of skipjack research in Papua New Guinea. Nobody had ever done anything at all like the big program I was now proposing.

The progress I made with the likely donors in the first 10 or so months is detailed in the following pages.

Australia

As an Australian with a background in fisheries and science, I believed that I was in a strong position to at least know which were the relevant Australian agencies and who the key individuals were for me to discuss possible funding with. Australian consuls general to New Caledonia, particularly Bill Fisher, proved to be excellent conduits to the relevant government agencies and people. Bill, in particular, was very supportive of the programme.

I was aware of strong support on the research side from CSIRO, particularly their tuna researchers, Kevin Williams and Dr Garth Murphy. They could be relied on to support the utility of research for fisheries management purposes and the use of tagging as the primary research tool for Pacific skipjack. On the negative side, Australia did not have a meaningful skipjack fishery, and even its long-line tuna fishery was a relatively small-scale domestic operation. More worrying for me was that Australia's representatives at regional fisheries and Law of the Sea meetings were not normally from CSIRO and often did not display a great deal of interest in, or knowledge of, the fisheries aspirations of Pacific Island states (see Chapter 16). They had shown little leadership in debates on the key subjects. In fact, several of the technical representatives on the Australian delegations to regional fisheries meetings had been notably unimpressive. Australia's diplomats were, as expected, much better informed.

The extremely positive side to Australia's attitude was that they stated publicly that they would support proposals with the strongest island-state backing. This they did, and in the case of the Skipjack Programme, they did so considerably more generously than the other donors. By the conclusion of the Skipjack Programme, Australia had contributed US$996,331. The second highest was Japan, with US$726,333.

Despite Australia's generous intent, it was not prepared to 'lead the charge' and be the first to sign their commitment. But I had little doubt that if other donors supported the programme, so would Australia. The Australian representatives also hinted, rather strongly, that they may be able to be talked into contributing more than the $200,000 per year that was currently on the table for discussion. They clearly thought that the programme was a really good idea. One of the AusAID (Australian Agency for International Development) officials actually told me that the strength of the unanimous

and strong support from the region's fisheries officers was impressive and had had a big impact on donors. Several of the fisheries officers actively lobbied Australian government officials in support of funding for the programme.

France

The French were well aware that the SPC was continuing to lose favour with Pacific Island nations. The South Pacific Forum was taking control of the debate on most key regional issues, even recently including fisheries. France was also very much aware that it continued to upset many Pacific Island nations with its nuclear testing in the region, particularly at Mururoa Atoll. France very much wanted the Skipjack Programme to go ahead, basically because it would be based in Noumea, which would help combat the weakening status of the commission in the region. But France did not wish to be seen as driving the programme. They were consistent in voicing their strong support to me, but not publicly. France would not be the first to contribute. They would much prefer to be seen as supporting what Pacific Islanders wanted, not telling them what they needed. Another major multinational program based in New Caledonia would likely help stop the decline in the popularity of the SPC.

Aotearoa New Zealand

New Zealand was the most upfront and vocal in support. They had done their homework and fully understood the key linkages between quality research, fisheries management, the Law of the Sea and the need for a broad-membership regional fisheries agency. Their fisheries people were on top of the issues, and their diplomats appeared particularly empathetic with the aspirations of Pacific Islanders. The New Zealand director of fisheries research, Duncan Waugh, was tremendously helpful to me professionally and as a friend. The New Zealand consuls general in Noumea were wonderfully supportive, particularly Dr Dick Grant.

New Zealand had one problem with contributing: the New Zealand dollar was not an international legal tender at the time. They would likely have to make their contribution in US dollars.

United Kingdom

British interest and influence in the region appeared to be waning – not the best time to be asking them to increase their financial contribution to regional projects. From their performances at meetings, I had formed the impression that they were interested in the concept of the Skipjack Programme, but they had reservations. They gave the impression of not wanting to become involved in fisheries management in the South Pacific. Perhaps they had had enough of their own international fisheries problems with the European Union in the North Atlantic?

My first visit to London to discuss the programme in person with their aid people was illuminating.

To my pleasant surprise, the two relatively young men assigned to talk to me had done their homework. But what was not so encouraging was that they had strong technical or scientific problems with the experimental design of several key components of the programme. The biggest immediate problem for me was that their concerns largely had at least some legitimate basis; they raised some of exact same doubts that I had had when I was first putting together the proposal for the programme.

They did not state it directly; they were too diplomatic for that, but they clearly had a problem with the fact that I was only 30 years old and had never been involved in a project anywhere near as big as this one, let alone run one. And I did not have a research team behind me. That there had never been an independently funded international fisheries research project as big as this one anywhere in the world did not help.

The fact that the Skipjack Programme funding was to be totally independent of the SPC regular budget meant that the Programme could be considered 'parentless'. They also felt that my arguments in support of the programme were inordinately dependent on my opinion that it would work. They were not aware that I had run a skipjack tagging program in Papua New Guinea based on the same principles, although on a smaller scale. When I gave them details of this, it definitely helped, but it did not make me any older. The strong support for the programme expressed by Pacific Island leaders at the South Pacific Forum meetings on the Law of the Sea had had a very positive impact, but the scientific and technical aspects of the programme had not been discussed in any detail.

They remained concerned about the magnitude of the proposal. The tagging program itself was enormous in both geographic distribution and in the number of fish it was proposed would be tagged. And, of course, the cost. Nothing on this scale had ever been done anywhere in the world. The area to be covered – 30 million square kilometres in the SPC area alone – was so great that they found it hard to believe it could all be adequately covered in three years. They were not convinced that tag releases and recoveries would be spread sufficiently uniformly to enable accurate determination of the skipjack population size and the biological parameters, such as growth and mortality, that would be necessary to guide the fisheries management decisions that were anticipated. They were particularly apprehensive that the programme design may not have been adequately reviewed, and no 'steering committee' was included to help compensate for their perception of my lack of experience.

I was able to allay many of their fears, but not their concern that there had been an inadequate review of the basic design of the tagging experiment. I believed that they particularly needed scholarly opinions from scientists they knew and respected, and that the number and distribution of tags over the huge study area were going to be adequate to achieve the results I was telling them they could anticipate.

I acknowledged that there were some unknowns, and, yes, the adequacy of the distribution of tags was an issue that needed to be managed. After all, the programme was research; it was an experiment. I could not counter their concerns over the scale of the programme. No fisheries research project had ever operated over such a huge area, and tagging had never been used to determine the size of a tuna population. It was true that nothing like this had ever been done. Addressing issues on which there is a great need for knowledge that is currently not available is what science is about. I stressed that reviewers of the science of the design had included staff of the IATTC, the world's premier tuna research institution, Australia's CSIRO and the US National Marine Fisheries Service. Local and regional fisheries expertise had been provided by the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack and numerous Regional Technical Meetings on Fisheries. But they were still not impressed. They were not convinced that the members of the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack had enough experience with skipjack research to inspire confidence. I was, as far as they could tell, the only member who had ever tagged a tuna of any sort. They felt that most of the members would struggle to demonstrate true international-level expertise in skipjack research.

I left the meeting with a deep sense of dread. It was one thing for one of the potential donors not to be supportive, but it was a totally different thing when the reason for that lack of support was an unacceptable experimental design of the backbone of the whole programme. If this concern were made public, other donors may well review their commitments. I had to convince these guys, and quickly.

I was on the way home on the plane when the lightbulb revelation occurred. It appeared that they were not accepting the reviews of the programme I had listed because none of the reviewers was known to them. They could not validate that adequate scientific excellence had been brought to bear on the programme's design. I had made a significant mistake in listing only the reviewers of the scientific design who had experience with skipjack fisheries, and they were predominantly Americans whom the British did not know. There were no skipjack fisheries in Britain. Why did I not think of the solution in the interview? I had this problem completely covered, but had missed my opportunity. Reviewers of the project proposal had, in addition to the Americans I had mentioned, included two of the world's most widely known and respected fisheries population dynamacists, Dr John Gulland and Dr Sidney Holt. Most importantly, they were both British.

At the end of 1974, I had gone to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome on a consultancy basis to rewrite my original programme proposal with Dr Gulland's and Dr Holt's guidance. This revised proposal, with increased explanation of the analytical processes to be employed, was published by FAO under my name as an FAO consultant (Kearney 1975). It was presented to the joint meeting in Mombasa, Kenya, of the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council (IPFC) and the Indian Ocean Fishery Commission, where it was strongly supported. Both Dr Gulland and I attended that meeting and spoke to my paper.

The more specific concern, over the spread of tags, was now much easier to counter than it had been at the time the original programme proposal was written. At that time, I had serious apprehension over this issue myself. The area for research was huge, and there was no way the fishing, and hence the tagging, could be equally successful in every part of this area. However, tag returns from the skipjack tagging project I had run in Papua New Guinea continued to be accumulated, and now that the fish had been at liberty for almost two years longer, it was increasingly obvious that they were moving much greater distances and were mixing much more than I had originally had any evidence to confirm. Most skipjack were not migrating in

predetermined patterns; they were, however, moving great distances and in practically every direction. The total population was mixing much more than the science available prior to the tagging we did in Papua New Guinea suggested. That research in Papua New Guinea was already changing the world's knowledge of skipjack. The need to release tagged fish in precisely the same numbers in all parts of the study area was no longer the issue it had been. But only scientists with access to the latest skipjack tagging results from Papua New Guinea would be aware of this.

I was back in London in, I think, not much more than two weeks with written responses to each of their concerns, except my age; I hadn't had a birthday in the time I was away. The information I gave them included a copy of the FAO version of my proposal that Gulland and I had spoken to in Mombasa. I also gave them a copy of the draft of my paper 'The Law of the Sea and Regional Fisheries Policy' (Kearney 1977b), which described the relationship between research and the possible creation of a regional fisheries agency.

I was also able to assure them that once sufficient funding for the programme was confirmed, a steering committee would be formed with representatives from all donors. The primary task of this committee would be financial oversight of the programme, but suggestions on the science and technical management of the programme would be welcome.

I had little doubt that the formal involvement of Drs Gulland and Holt in the latest version of the programme proposal carried the day. From then on, support from the United Kingdom was not questioned. They confirmed that they would contribute if other countries did, but they made it quite clear that they would not be the first to sign.

The United States of America

US interest in the Skipjack Programme differed from that shown by other 'colonial powers' in the SPC in several major ways, but primarily because the United States is a distant-water fishing nation in the South Pacific. It is a major player in the purse seine skipjack fishery. It is also a member of the IATTC and, as such, has had a long association with major tuna research and management programs. Dr Jim Joseph, an American and the director of the IATTC, was now a close friend of mine and had effectively been my mentor for the past year or more. He was a very strong supporter of the programme

and was actively lobbying the US government on my behalf. His contacts in the government were very good; as the director of the IATTC, they were required to be. He advised me that his lobbying for the programme had been greatly helped by Harold Carey, a particularly important supporter in government circles. I only met Harold on one brief occasion, but Jim was in regular contact with him: I believe he had been the US representative on the board of the IATTC for some time.

The US tuna industry was also strongly supporting the programme. From their experience with the IATTC, they knew the role that research would play in future resource allocation and the pricing of access to the resource for distant-water fishing nations. They definitely did not want the programme to go ahead without US participation. The strength of the interest of the United States in fisheries management in the SPC area was exemplified by the size of the US delegation at the relevant meetings: there were 39 US representatives at the second meeting on the Law of the Sea in Suva. I was extremely confident of US support, and I held hopes that I might be able to persuade them to catalyse the actions of others by being the first to confirm their contribution.

Japan

The only country on my list of likely contributors that was not a member of the SPC. Japan had also never made a significant financial contribution to an international organisation of which it was not a member. Getting Japan to commit, therefore, posed some interesting challenges. As the biggest catcher of skipjack in the study area, Japanese involvement in the programme was highly desirable; access to data on the catches by the Japanese fleet and their active contribution to the recovery of tags were going to be essential. I had an even stronger personal interest in Japan being involved; as far as I could see, a commercial Japanese skipjack pole and line boat appeared to be the best option for our chartered research vessel. Japanese government involvement in the charter process would facilitate cooperation with the company that owned that vessel and ensure that, should anything go wrong with that vessel or some aspect of the charter agreement, one of the members of the funding group, Japan, would take particular interest. My experiences with the poor mechanical condition of the FRV *Tagula*, in Papua New Guinea, were very much to the fore when considering a charter agreement and the management of the vessel and its crew.

I was confident that Japan wanted to be part of the programme; Japanese fisheries scientists were extremely strong supporters. But Japan was not going to be the first to sign up. The other five likely donors were all members of the SPC, so Japan did not believe it was appropriate that they should lead the move to fund the programme.

The concerns of several donors, most obviously the United Kingdom, that assurances of the success of the programme were almost totally dependent on my opinion did resonate with me. I felt strongly that I needed to do something serious to correct what was clearly an issue for some donors. I decided to seek Jim Joseph's help to convene a meeting of internationally recognised skipjack fisheries experts to ensure that the goals and design of the programme were clearly aligned with the best options for skipjack research – and were clearly seen to be so. Jim's help was, as usual, effective.

I was able to convene the 'Ad Hoc Meeting of Scientists to Discuss Skipjack Fisheries Developments and Research Requirements' in Noumea from December 5 to 10, 1976. The attendees at this meeting and their countries or organisations were (in alphabetical order) M. A Fonteneau, France; Dr R. C. Francis, New Zealand; Professor K. Fujino, Japan; Dr J. A. Gulland, FAO; Dr J. Joseph, IATTC; Dr R. E. Kearney, SPC; Dr J-C Le Guen, ORSTOM; Mr A. D. Lewis, Papua New Guinea; Dr G. D. Sharp, IATTC; Mr R. S. Shomura, NMFS USA; and Dr S. Ueyanagi, Japan.

There is little doubt that this group more than adequately represented the world's expertise in skipjack research at the time.

After reviewing the state of skipjack research worldwide and a detailed discussion of the Skipjack Survey and Assessment Programme, the summary recommendations from this meeting were:

A. High priority should be given to the proposed Skipjack Survey and Assessment (tagging) Programme being coordinated by the South Pacific Commission (see Recommendation No. 2).

B. Arrangements should be made for coordinating skipjack research encompassing all countries with an interest in fisheries in the region. For the immediate future, pending more permanent arrangements, this could be done through a working party sponsored jointly by SPC and IPFC.

> C. This working party should give early attention to the collection and compilation, on a regional basis, of catch and effort statistics, and of such environmental data as are likely to assist in the interpretation and analysis of the statistical data.

Recommendation No. 2 stated:

> In order to further investigate the stock structure of skipjack in the Pacific a large-scale tagging effort should be undertaken with substantial sampling effort being undertaken in areas where, at present, no skipjack fisheries exist. This Ad Hoc group of skipjack scientists therefore recommends that the tagging programme being coordinated by the South Pacific Commission be implemented as soon as possible.

The assertion that the programme, as I had designed it, was the best way to address the lack of knowledge on Pacific skipjack was no longer dependent disproportionately on my opinion. In fact, I doubt that any tuna research project has ever had a more powerful international review committee than this one. I thank the scientists from the United Kingdom for their insistence, discussed previously.

This text is taken from *Pacific Skipjack: The Remarkable Story Behind the World's Biggest Tuna Fishery*, by Bob Kearney, published 2026 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/PS.2026.07