17

The Skipjack Programme in 1979

The year 1979 was the second full year of the Skipjack Programme. It followed on from the successes of the first 15 months and was therefore an important period of consolidation.

There were two significant changes to the funding of the programme that year. First was the contribution of $90,000 from the IATTC as joint sponsorship of the longer-than-usual (eight weeks) time spent in French Polynesia. The second major change was the generous increase from $122,474 to $215,180 in the annual contribution from the Government of France.

The same vessel, the *Hatsutori Maru No. 1*, that had been used in 1977 and 1978, was used for the first seven months of 1979. As described in Chapter 13, a charter agreement for a larger (46.75 metres overall length) and faster vessel, the *Hatsutori Maru No. 5*, was negotiated with Hokoku Marine Products Co., Ltd in Tokyo. At the time of these negotiations, the budget was so tight that only an eight-month charter could be agreed upon in the first instance. However, the increased contribution from France and substantial extra assistance from the Government of Japan and the Japan Fisheries Agency made it possible to extend the charter for the full 10-month period at $70,000 per month.

Budgeting had been made particularly tight with the expenditure of $112,878 on the computer and associated electronics, which was not in the original budget. Actual expenditure in 1979 was $1,165,131, which was only $3,108 (less than one-quarter of 1 per cent) below total income.

It was comforting that the accounts up to the end of 1978 were audited by the Australian auditor general, and his approval of the way the accounts had been maintained was contained in his report.

A major event in 1979 was the installation of the programme's computer in April (see Chapter 15). Much of the remainder of the year was spent entering the huge amount of data that had been accumulated in 1977, 1978, and 1979. In the later part of 1979, we experienced a major breakdown of the computer.

We were already so dependent on the computer that every day without it was, in my opinion at least, a catastrophe. Paul Judd described the incident well in his brief history of the Skipjack Programme (Judd 2016):

> The computer eventually arrived in March 1979 and was installed at SPC. It generated a lot of interest in Noumea. The first person hired to run the computer, (in keeping with the Hewlett-Packard agreement of purchase), was Sam Bledsoe, who came from the University of Washington in Seattle. During the six months that Sam worked for the Programme the computer had one major breakdown; Sam was able to diagnose the cause as a specific failure in the main circuit board. Sam was sent off to Sydney to bring back the necessary replacement board. This was only possible because of a wonderful demonstration of donor solidarity for the Programme: Sam's US passport had expired the week before and he had not yet obtained a replacement. With support from the highest levels of both the French and the Australian authorities Sam was able to fly to Sydney that day, pick up a board that had been couriered up from Melbourne, and hand-carry it back to Noumea the next day; all without a valid passport.

Two meetings of significance for the programme were held in 1979. The first was the third formal annual meeting of the Programme's Intergovernmental Administrative/Finance Committee, which was held on October 10 in Papeete, Tahiti, in conjunction with the Nineteenth South Pacific Conference. At this meeting, the donors expressed their pleasure with the progress of the programme. There were several good-natured questions about how our expensive new computer was going and if we were looking after it well enough. The second meeting of significance was the SPC Eleventh Technical Meeting on Fisheries, which incorporated the meeting of the Expert Committee on Tropical Skipjack. The substantive issues for both groups were the activities and results from the *Hatsutori Maru* throughout the region. The individual country reports were the subject of rather

intense analyses: not only were individual fisheries officers greatly interested in the report for their country or territory, but there was great collective interest in the comparison of results from different countries. Individual fisheries officers expressed their pleasure in being able to be involved in the programme's work during their time on the *Hatsutori Maru*. They obviously enjoyed catching skipjack, but they also found great benefit in being able to participate in the bait-fishing activities, both by day and by night.

The 1980 meetings were eagerly awaited, as by then the programme's fieldwork would have been concluded and final assessment results would be emerging.

On January 1, 1979, the *Hatsutori Maru No. 1* was working in French Polynesia, which it continued to do until February 3. It then departed for, in order, the Cook Islands, New Zealand, Australia and Papua New Guinea. By July 2, a total of 32,102 skipjack and other tunas had been tagged on this cruise. The annual target of 33,000 was well within range. With this achievement in mind, the *Hatsutori Maru* was dispatched from Papua New Guinea to take up the invitation of the government of Indonesia to do a relatively short (three-week) tagging expedition in Indonesian waters. I had a particular interest in this event, as I felt that it would add significantly to the coverage of the whole region, including the interaction with bits beyond the area of the SPC. It would hopefully indicate skipjack movement into the SPC from outside this area.

Even though we had been assured by Indonesian national officials that all necessary arrangements had been made for our visit, on arrival in Jayapura, the *Hatsutori Maru* was met by a significant party of heavily armed military personnel. The vessel was effectively seized. It was not allowed to fish or to leave Indonesia. Jean Pierre Hallier, the cruise leader on that voyage, was seriously distressed when he called me. In essence, when he accepted the cruise leader position, he did not anticipate the duty statement included dealing with guns being pointed at him. We maintained phone contact each day. I considered immediately flying to join him and the crew, but decided that the best chance we had of getting a rapid resolution of our predicament would be for me to get the donor governments to come to our aid. I could do this more efficiently from my office than on the research vessel.

We subsequently were to learn that the government in Jakarta had not informed the regional authorities of the pending arrival of the *Hatsutori Maru*. My repeated appeals to the Indonesian officials who had arranged the visit did not result in sufficient action to solve the problem. I raised the issue

with our donor governments. I then asked two of them to raise the issue at the United Nations. To my surprise and delight, they agreed to do so. Whether they did this at the Indonesian ambassadorial level or in some form of more formal meeting, I do not know. But the *Hatsutori Maru* was finally cleared to leave Indonesia on July 16, two weeks after arriving. By then, there was no time to reschedule a visit to another country. The *Hatsutori Maru* returned to Japan to conclude the cruise four days early.

By the end of the second year of the programme, the *Hatsutori Maru No. 1* had been used to survey most of the countries and territories of the SPC; the exceptions were Nauru, Niue and Pitcairn. All of these, and lots of repeat visits to other countries, were included in the schedule for the last cruise in 1980.

As for 1978, the results from skipjack tagging and baitfish surveys in 1979 were extremely pleasing. In 160 fishing days, a total of 43,438 fish were tagged – an average of 271 per day, which was even better than our 1978 average of 244 per day. Our 1978 world record of 2,910 releases in a day was substantially bettered on March 2, 1979, when 3,692 skipjack were tagged and released off the east coast of Aotearoa New Zealand. I remember the event well, even though I was not on the vessel at the time.

That evening, Bob Gillett, the cruise leader, called me to say that the scientists and crew were exhausted and he had given them the next day off. Certainly, well deserved. To add some perspective, they had tagged more than 10 tonnes of skipjack in one day. In addition, the scientists had to transcribe all the tagging results from tape recorders and catalogue the rest of the day's activities, such as the record of all school sightings and analyses of skipjack stomach contents, before bedtime. Then, of course, if they were going to fish the next day, they would have to catch bait that night! Even though the crew (particularly Bob Gillett, who had always displayed this wonderful 'all systems go' attitude) found it hard not to take advantage of record-breaking fishing conditions, sanity prevailed. Even Bob was exhausted. He was a bit worried I might insist they fish the next day. If I did give him that impression, I apologise. On the grand scale of the programme's total tag releases, the record-breaking day had pushed the total number of releases in New Zealand up to more than an adequate level. More is better, but we were well in front of the essential requirements of the programme. By this stage in the programme, we were confident that the number of tag recoveries was going to be more than sufficient to enable an estimate to be made of the total population of skipjack in the study area.

Crossing the Tasman Sea

Life on the *Hatsutori Maru No. 1* was not always about breaking world records for tagging tuna and smooth sailing around beautiful tropical Pacific Islands in calm, clear-blue seas. Charlie Ellway, one of the programme's scientists on board for the crossing of the Tasman Sea, recorded that event:

> During the skipjack survey down the west coast of New Zealand's North Island, we had sighted only a few schools, and on the evening of the Sunday, 25th March 1979, anchored off Nelson at the top of the South Island to set the bouke-ami net for bait. Next morning, the crew loaded ~100 buckets of small pilchards into the bait wells of the *Hatsutori Maru #1* and the vessel proceeded into Nelson to resupply for the brief survey down the west coast of the South Island, and then passage across the Tasman Sea to Australia.
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> The *Hatsutori Maru No. 1* departed Nelson at 1800hrs heading down the west coast of New Zealand's South Island. We spent most of the next day searching for tuna schools before heading across the Tasman to Eden. On Wednesday morning the boat encountered growing seas, with a large swell from the southwest. By the next morning, the weather had deteriorated, and the alarm- buzzer got everyone out on a deck to tie down any loose deck gear. The wind built during the day, and the captain was forced to 'slow ahead', or 'hold station' as sea-farers call the defence strategy of staying-put facing into the sea. Seas were breaking over the bow and occasionally the sides and even very occasionally the stern.
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> As evening approached, the sea became very, very rough; an estimated Force 7–8. The deck was constantly awash. The beach seine net broke loose and one of the forward tagging cradles was all but destroyed. The captain called a halt about 1900 hrs so we could strengthen the tie-down of the deck gear including the bouke-ami. A further halt was called at 2300hrs when the captain turned the boat so we could safely work on a floodlit deck with a following sea. The #5 bait well was pumped dry and the seine net piled into it. The bait transporter had been wrecked and was put over the side. We held our breath as the captain turned the boat back into a wild and forceful sea.
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> The night was restless for the entire crew. Just after midnight, a huge wave set the boat corkscrewing wildly, throwing those of us in their bunks, around. It was particularly uncomfortable for the Fijian crew in the forward quarters, who had to endure the vessel rapidly

> lifting over steep waves and lurching down the other side to meet the next sea. Next morning, we were still slow ahead, however the wind dropped a little and swung to the south. At midday the captain changed course to northwest, and to our relief, set off at full speed for Eden in a confused, but not dangerous, sea.
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> The seas remained pretty sloppy for the remainder of the day. On Saturday, the wind and waves dropped away and we cleaned up, getting the deck ship-shape once more. Although the sea picked up the following day with a heavy swell, it did not delay us from reaching Eden the next morning to clear customs and meet up with the Skipjack Programme leader, Bob Kearney.

I discussed this rather 'exciting' event with the captain of the *Hatsutori Maru*, Mitsutoyo Kaneda, upon the vessel's arrival in Eden. He said that the whole crossing of the Tasman had been perilous, to the extent that for about four hours one night, he feared that there was close to a 50 per cent chance the vessel would not survive the storm. He said that he did not tell everybody on board just how bad it was, for there was nothing any of them could do anyway. Figure 8 gives visual documentation of what the ship was up against.

Once again, in 1979, not a day was lost due to the malfunction or mismanagement of the chartered vessel. But more than one was lost due to bad weather, as described previously. One other issue of some interest did occur, and it did so while I was on the boat. We were at anchor one evening with the bait lights blazing, and I had just finished dinner when the engineer approached me. He looked seriously agitated. I did not know that he spoke English and so was surprised when he addressed me: 'Kearney-san, we have very big problem'. I steeled myself for the worst. 'Come with me', he said. Then it got worse: 'I will get captain', which he hurriedly went up to the wheelhouse to do. When he came back with the captain, he told us both to follow him. Down into the engine room we went. My first reaction was that it was very crowded with machinery, but it was spotless. There was no obvious sign of a catastrophe. 'Listen! You can hear problem'. All I could hear was the repetitive thumping of the main auxiliary engine, a noise I quite like when at sea, but I would not like to have it in my bedroom at home. I felt better when the captain asked the engineer what we were supposed to be listening to, or for. It wasn't just me who could not hear a malfunction. The engineer continued: 'Engine making very bad noise. If getting worse engine will stop. Then, no electricity, no fishing. Very big problem'. I immediately agreed with him: that would be a very big problem. So, I asked him what

we needed to do. His response: 'Get spare part urgently. I can fix if I have spare part'. I assumed he was telling me that the *Hatsutori Maru* would need to leave immediately for the closest port that would have the necessary spare part. So, I asked him how long we had to get the spare part before the engine would stop. He said, 'Not long. Maybe only six weeks'. As I had been warned of the urgency, six weeks sounded like an eternity to me. Surely we could get a spare part in that time?

I asked the captain and the engineer why they did not just get Hokoku Marine Products to send the necessary part to the harbour master at the next port the *Hatsutori Maru* would be visiting. But they were adamant that they wanted me to arrange the spare part for them. The only conclusion I could take from this was that they had made a mistake by not having a spare of this particular part on board and did not want the parent company to know this. I cannot remember exactly what the part was, but it was not huge – something like a gasket.

I got them to give me the full details of the part and the make, model and serial number of the engine. The next morning, I messaged Noumea and gave instructions to whichever of the two cruise leaders was there at the time, for the part to be tracked down. I explained that if the shipping companies were reluctant to help, they should contact Jean-Louis Boglio, who was the harbour master in Noumea and a close friend of mine. I explained that the cost was not an issue, and if the part had to be couriered from wherever, then just do it. Whoever was due to join the boat at the next port of call should hand-carry the part with them and not put it in their checked baggage.

I was advised within a few days that all was under control. I cannot remember which was the next port of call, but I do remember that as we approached the dock, the engineer was on the front deck and looking rather anxious. Ten minutes later, after inspecting his package, he was all smiles.

My take-home impression of the whole affair was how good the engineer was at picking up the issue six weeks before it became a real problem. I had nothing but gratitude for Hokoku Marine Products from the first negotiation of the charter agreement to the conclusion of the fieldwork. Again, the comparison with the performance of the *Tagula* during the Papua New Guinea Skipjack Program (see Chapter 1) underlined how good the parent company's handling of the two *Hatsutori Maru* vessels had been.

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.2026.17