Foreword

I first came to know of the Skipjack Programme, and Bob Kearney, in 1979 or 1980, when he gave a seminar at the ANU while I was an early-career scientist at the Fisheries Division of the Department of Primary Industry in Canberra. My first impression was of a knowledgeable and driven scientist, and even at that early stage of my own professional development I could see what a huge undertaking he was in the process of pulling off with the Skipjack Programme. Little did I know at the time that, about seven years later, I would myself take up a senior scientist role at the South Pacific Commission (SPC) in Noumea, New Caledonia, and have the opportunity to build on Bob's remarkable achievements.

From the vantage point of 2026, it is easy to take Pacific tuna science for granted. But in the mid-1970s, very little was known of the potential of the skipjack resource, which was then producing about 300,000 tonnes of catch annually from a predominantly Japanese pole and line fishery. When Bob first proposed a tagging programme to measure the size of the population across more than 30 million square kilometres of ocean, many fisheries scientists were doubtful it could work, and almost nobody believed the funding could be found. That it happened at all – and that six donor governments were persuaded to hand $4 million directly to one young man – is one of the more remarkable stories in the history of fisheries science. That Bob then delivered on the promise, tagging more than 140,000 skipjack and producing a population estimate that has stood the test of nearly fifty years of subsequent assessment, is another matter altogether. That assessment gave the Pacific island governments and the tuna fishing industry of the time the confidence to allow the fishery to greatly expand, primarily through the introduction of purse seining. The region's skipjack fishery is now the largest tuna fishery in the world, having exceeded 2 million tonnes in two of the last seven years; its stocks are not overfished, and it is widely regarded as one of, if not the best-managed tuna fisheries on the planet. It generates vital revenue, employment and nutrition

for the people of the Pacific, particularly the smaller countries that have few other natural resources. None of that was inevitable prior to this remarkable story unfolding.

This fantastic book tells that story in Bob's own voice, with the candour, occasional exasperation and dry humour of someone who lived every part of it. It is fascinating and entertaining in equal measure. It is also a very human story that encapsulates friendships, adversity, inspirational leadership and the unwavering support through the whole period from his amazing wife, Hope. Readers interested in the science will be captivated by the biology of an extraordinary species, the tagging and bait-fishing methodology, the numbers behind a fishery now worth billions of dollars a year. But the book's other value lies in its unflinching account of how a novel science project was funded, how institutions resisted and eventually accommodated new ideas, and how the personal conviction of one scientist altered the trajectory of an entire region's fisheries management. Anyone with more than a passing interest in fisheries or the Pacific will greatly enjoy it.

With my colleague Peter Williams, I was glad to contribute to the chapter tracing the evolution of the Skipjack Programme into the Tuna and Billfish Assessment Programme and then into today's Oceanic Fisheries Programme — an 80-person, multimillion-dollar operation that Pacific Island nations, distant-water fishing states and regional agencies alike now depend on. It was a privilege to help carry that work forward, leading the OFP from 2002 to 2019, and it is equally a privilege to write this foreword for the man whose vision made it possible in the first place.

John Hampton
Chief Fisheries Scientist, Oceanic Fisheries Programme,
Pacific Community, 2002–2019

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.