

“Hang in and survive!”: The ongoing struggle of ipponzuri tuna fishers in Iki Island, Nagasaki, Japan



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Katsumoto Cho, a port town in the northernmost part of Iki Island, has long been well-known for ipponzuri (pole-and-line) fishing, including squid fishing and later tuna fishing. Within 30 minutes of the port, where the Tsushima Current pours in, is the well-known fishing ground ‘Shichirigasone’ (1).

Highly regarded as ‘Iki tuna’, bluefin tuna caught on Iki Island is cherished for its excellent quality, resulting from the ‘Ipponzuri’ fishing method which preserves quality of the fish as each tuna is carefully processed, one by one, during the catch. One to two fishers board a small 5-ton (t) class boat and fish for bluefin tuna using only a pole and line (2). Unlike in purse seine fishing, the amount of the catch can be adjusted to prevent overfishing. With the agreement of its members, the Katsumoto Fisheries Cooperative Association (FCA) banned the use of purse seine nets altogether in the 1950s and decided to conduct local fishing only with pole and line (3). Both tuna and squid are targeted using this method.

The fisheries on Iki Island are mainly coastal and small-scale. There used to be only squid fishing for the coastal fishery until 2000, but around 2000, it also encompassed bluefin tuna fishing (Ishii 2009). Ever since, there have been efforts to have it branded as ‘Katsumoto Ipponzuri Tuna’ (4). However, in recent years, the decline in Pacific bluefin tuna stocks has seriously impacted fisheries in Iki. According to the 2022 catch data of bluefin tuna by the Katsumoto FCA, the total bluefin tuna catch has been reduced from 358 t in 2005 to about 23 t in 2014. With the situation continuing to deteriorate, it is difficult to run the family fishing business based only on the amount of bluefin tuna, and as a result, several fishers have left the business.

Photos: © Wei Xu & Katsumoto Fisheries Cooperative, 2023

Location:
IKI Island, Nagasaki Prefecture
Japan

Ecosystem type:
Marine

Main gear:
Hook and Line

Target species:
Tuna, Squid

Vessel type:
Power driven

No. of small-scale fishers:
278



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Justice in context

Types of justice:

- Distributive
- Social
- Economic
- Market
- Infrastructure/wellbeing
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- **Environmental**
- COVID-19 related

Since 2012, there has been a sharp decline in the overall catch, including that of large bluefin tuna. As a result, the total sales of the Katsumoto FCA plummeted from 1.04 billion yen in fiscal 2005 to 80 million yen in fiscal 2014 (5). The Iki fishers believe that the decline of tuna stock is due to the purse seine fishing in other waters in the Sea of Japan. In particular, there are claims that many bluefin juvenile tuna are caught during the spawning season, leading to a decreased stock (2). Another reason is that bluefin tuna and squids are now caught in large numbers in purse seines.

The coastal fishers have also complained of unfair allocation of catch quotas. According to the Japan Fisheries Agency 2023, the current Total Allowable Catch (TAC) for bluefin tuna in Japan for the 2023 management year is 4,194.8 t for small fish (under 30 kg) and 6,776.8 t for large fish (over 30 kg). In Japan, the bluefin tuna catch quotas allocated to fisheries are permitted by the Minister (offshore fishing), such as purse seine fisheries, and the Governor, such as set nets and ipponzuri (coastal fishing). For the 2023 management year, the allocation quota for large fish to the large and medium-scale purse seine fisheries was 3,962.4 t out of 4,753.2 t. On the other hand, the amount for coastal fisheries was 1,923.3 t (7). Most quotas for the most expensive large tuna fish belong to large and medium-scale purse seine fisheries. The method of allocation of catch quotas is often based on past catch performance. Bluefin tuna is a migratory fish and may not be caught at all due to seasonal spatial migration and sea conditions. For this reason, Iki Island ipponzuri fishers have requested the government to give more consideration to coastal fishers in the allocation of quotas.

In addition, injustice issues such as competition with recreational fisheries, which are often being regarded in Japan as 'pleasure boat fishing', foreign fishing fleets, and berthing cargo ships issues are likely to persist.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Generally referred to as coastal fisheries, they are characterized by commutable distances from fishing ports (within a day). According to the official definition from Annual Statistics on Fishery and Aquaculture Production, coastal fisheries include non-fishing-vessel fisheries, fisheries with non-powered fishing vessels or with powered fishing vessels less than 10 tons, set-net fisheries and beach seine fisheries.

Dealing with justice

Sources:

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1. In 2013, 347 ipponzuri tuna fishers from five fisheries cooperatives in Iki Island came together and established a voluntary group, the 'Iki City Tuna Resource Conservation Association,' which aims to seek catch limits for inshore tuna during the spawning season to prevent the depletion of tuna resources.
2. Iki Island tuna fishers engage in activities such as exchanging opinions and holding meetings with tuna fishers from all over Japan at regular basis. They widely appeal to the current status of Iki's tuna fishery and the importance of resource management to broaden the circle of resource conservation activities.
3. In 2015, the 'Iki City Tuna Resource Conservation Association' and all tuna ipponzuri fishers of Tsushima Island who use the waters around 'Shichirigasone' announced a voluntary two-month ban on fishing for adult tuna over 30 kg from June 1st to July 31st. Approximately 400 fishers on Iki Island and about 600 fishers on Tsushima Island agreed to secure tuna resources and decided to ban fishing during the spawning season. The voluntary ban on tuna fishing is Japan's first attempt (8).
4. To raise awareness, tuna fishers in Iki Island have also actively used social media, to disseminate information and their thoughts and activities. However, with the decrease in fishers and aging population, it is difficult to keep the social media active nowadays.

Despite the various efforts of fishers, this issue on Iki Island remains to be solved. "We will hang in and survive!" The strong voices of fishers are heard as the battle of the pole-and-line tuna fishing in Iki continues.



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