

Bluefin tuna fishery policy in Malta: The plight of artisanal fishermen caught in the capitalist net

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ABSTRACT

The bluefin tuna fishery has undergone a major shift in Malta, moving from an open access artisanal nature to a privatized and industrialized activity dominated by the purse seining fleet and the BFT ranching industry. The shift has been exacerbated by the national implementation of an individual transferable quota system, which has enabled the concentration of quotas into fewer hands. The main objective of this article is to understand how privatization has evolved within the sector and the way the Maltese artisanal fishermen are experiencing the shift. This study takes an exploratory mixed-method approach to quantitatively and qualitatively understand how policy underpinnings interplay with the sustainability dimension of the small-scale fishing sector. Results show that the transition of the bluefin tuna fishery from artisanal to industrial has generated a legitimacy crisis over fishing rights, decreased profitability amongst most of the artisanal fleet, and led to a series of socio-ecological impacts on the artisanal fisheries system at large. It is concluded that the neo-liberal trajectories of industrialization have directly undermined the continued sustainability of artisanal fishing communities.

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1. Introduction and background

Artisanal fishing communities represent a long-standing tradition of fishermen engaged in low-capital enterprises that have persisted through various cycles of economic and social change through the recent decades [1]. However, artisanal sectors are generally known to exhibit high vulnerability from unpredictable ecological, social, political and economic fluctuations due to their low-capital base [2]. Furthermore when changes or disturbances arise from exogenous forces, such as policy frameworks that are developed and imposed upon traditional systems of governance and knowledge, this can quickly erode the stability and resilience of small-scale fishing communities, especially if the changes are not synchronized to the realities of the context in which they are implemented [3]. The dismantling of small-scale fishing communities has been registered in various countries worldwide e.g. North America [3], Iceland [4], Australia [5] and Canada [6], and despite their geographical differences, these cases appear to share a similar economic and political backdrop of neo-liberalism that catalysed the communities' demise.

Generally, these studies show how the push towards the neo-liberal privatization of fisheries resources has triggered the

enclosure of the commons with the consequence that small-scale fishing operations become outcompeted by large-scale fishing industries. Through privatization, the latter become empowered to over-accumulate resources and profits, and simultaneously dispossess indigenous rights' holders from their livelihoods [7]. This process of 'accumulation by dispossession', as conceptualized by Harvey, is a transition underpinned by the capitalistic ideology and buttressed by State and/or equivalent authoritative power which play a significant role 'in both backing and promoting' the trajectory of resource aggregation through the crafting of neo-liberal policies [7]. By drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of neo-liberalism in fisheries management, this article provides an in-depth understanding of how shifts in the fisheries' policy fundamentals in Malta have triggered a major change that has made it more difficult for the Maltese artisanal fishing sector to survive. The special focus of this research falls on the management of the BFT fishery, one of the most lucrative fishing activities but also the most regulated in the Mediterranean region.

The BFT fishery in Malta has existed since the 1700s [8] and official landing records of catches have been compiled since the 1920s [9]. Initially BFT was fished by an artisanal trap system (*tunnara*) and successively, from the 1960s, by artisanal-long-lines which are hook-and-line methods baited with mackerel suited to target pelagic species. Some artisanal fishers use specific long-line gear to target BFT, and others harvest tuna as by-catch from swordfish long-lines [10]. Overall, their individual catches differed on the basis of skill and effort applied to the fishery. The

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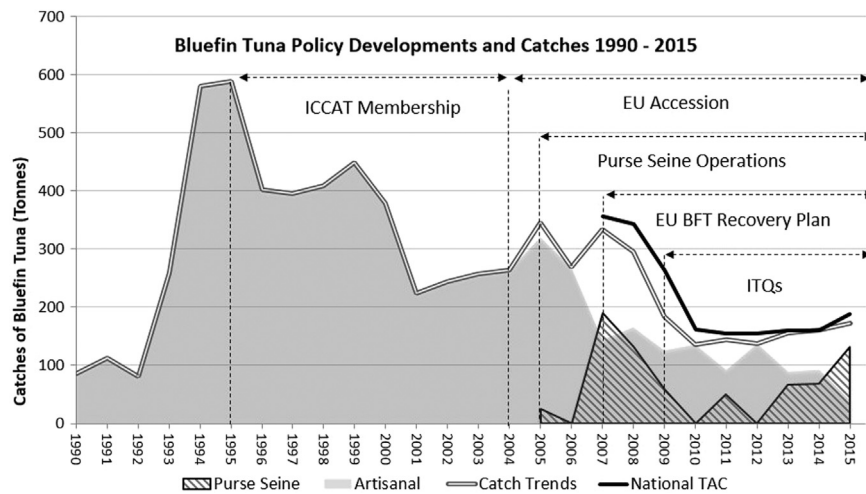


Fig. 1. Maltese BFT Catch statistics between 1990 and 2015 as compiled from the ICCAT database: <https://www.iccat.int/en/t1results.asp?species=BFT&yearf=1990&yeart=2014&flag=EU.Malta&gear=blank&gear=all&order=SpeciesCode®ion=MED&btsearch=Search>). The artisanal fishery catches have been predominant between 1990 and 2007 and successively with the reforms of the BFT policies, the catches have declined to commensurate the national total allowable catches, and were mostly caught by the purse seine fleet which was introduced in 2005. A recreational segment also exists, however, due to representativeness it has not been included in this figure.

cumulative Maltese artisanal BFT catch fluctuated across the decades but there was a drastic increase in the 1990s (Fig. 1) as a response to new export opportunities in lucrative foreign markets, such as Japan, that enticed greater participation by artisanal fishermen [9].

As of 2001, fishermen started experiencing decreasing catches, possibly due to the overexploitation of the species across the Mediterranean waters [11]. Due to its scarcity, the competition for the species became intense, and many Maltese fishermen became involved in 'tuna wars' with foreign companies that used purse seine industrial methods, which not only caught large numbers of fish, but also allegedly disturbed the artisanal long-line activities [12]. Following this prolonged period of conflict the national Minister for Fisheries in 2001 had publicly urged the Maltese fishermen to "equip themselves like their [foreign] competitors" [13]. Later, around 2005, the government issued permits for the start-up of the purse seine fleet which is an industrial type of fishing that uses large nets to catch large numbers of BFT species. This gear, which was first introduced with the emerging expansion of the tuna ranching sector, is considered the most suitable technology for capturing, corralling, and growing out large stocks of wild tuna [11].

This industry, which supplies tuna to the global sushi and sashimi markets has been growing since it began in 2001 and currently there is a total fattening capacity of 12,300 t [14], generating about €500 million in sales over the past 6 years [15]. The Maltese tuna ranching ranks second after Italy in terms of EU tuna production capacity [16], and as a profitable business across the Mediterranean, the expansion of tuna ranching has been supported by several governments across the basin [17,18]. However, this growth, which led to a higher fishing effort on wild tuna, has been a main driver that led to an alarming rate of BFT overfishing over the past decades [19]. The co-existence of industrial and artisanal fleets in the Mediterranean had contributed to the decline of the bluefin tuna species [20], and international efforts have been ongoing to reverse this situation in the Mediterranean and elsewhere [21].

A global plan to improve the health of the stock by 2022 was introduced in 2007 by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) [22]. As part of this plan, a system of total allowable catches (TACs) across countries was enacted to regulate the fishing activity of Atlantic and Mediterranean

BFT. TACs allocations have been decreasing every year until 2013 in an attempt to control catches, reduce overfishing, and eventually limit capacity. These regional efforts have improved the recovery rate of the BFT, and without undermining the stability of the stocks, it was agreed at the ICCAT meeting in 2014 that TACs were to be increased by 20% each year, until the new stock assessment in 2016 [23].

Malta as an EU Member State is signatory to the BFT conservation efforts and subject to the policies including quota restrictions and increments that are annually recommended at the ICCAT level and successively transposed as EU Council Regulation (s) that bind EU member states. As part of the agreement, Malta is requested to annually devise a national management plan to align the fishing capacity to the BFT fishing opportunities agreed and assigned during the European Council meetings. This obligation and the local measures that have accompanied it, have brought a drastic change in the Maltese fishing management portfolio of the BFT fishery. For example, the Maltese Government with the consent of the fishermen's co-operatives agreed to: a) reduce the BFT fleet capacity by 25%; b) introduce a national system of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs) based on historical records; and c) create the BFT recreational segment as a new category of fishing activity that is allocated approximately 1–2% of the national TAC.

These regulatory changes, which are embedded in neoliberal ideology, have synergistically reshaped the fundamental organization of both the BFT fishery and the artisanal sector as a whole. The Government's management plan frames these changes as the 'backbone of the Maltese Fisheries conservation actions' which are aimed to 'facilitate the recovery of BFT stocks to create sustainable economic conditions for the continued operation of the BFT fishing fleet'. [24]. This article draws on this statement as the point of departure for a critical assessment of the impacts of the policy measures enacted under the BFT management plan, with a special focus on the traditional artisanal fishing community.

The impacts that the Maltese artisanal fleet has experienced through the changes in the BFT fishery have not been studied to date. While much work has been done on the politics of the bluefin tuna ranching sector in Malta and the Mediterranean e.g. [17,25,26], the position of the artisanal fishermen of Malta within the fast moving policy infrastructure for bluefin tuna in the EU remains somewhat obscure. Bluefin tuna has always been considered as one of the main profitable fisheries for the Maltese

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