

Marshall Islands Tuna for Marshallese

By Oscar. N. Ragus

In the Bible, Israel is known as the land flowing with milk and honey. Similarly, if we are to consider two of the largest local industries in the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), then we can say that it is a nation flowing with coconut and tuna. Just as the ancient Israelites enjoyed the fruit of the land during Old Testament times, so should the modern Marshallese continue enjoying the fruit of the sea—tuna, that is. But how?

To begin with, we need to consider that fresh tuna, as well as other seafood, can cost more than frozen chicken and pork. For a family with a constrained budget and price sensitivity, the choice for protein can easily become imported meat instead of local seafood. Now the digital wallet Lomalo has been released in conjunction with the Universal Basic Income. Why not consider tuna as part of what can be called Universal Basic Food? Perhaps Lomalo can be programmed so that Marshallese can buy a certain amount of seafood (including tuna) for free every quarter of the year. Another option is to give a discount (say 5-15%) for seafood purchases using the wallet, with the discount being subsidized by the RMI government.

Second, tuna can become an integral part of the school meal program of the Public School System (PSS). As mentioned earlier, tuna can cost more than meat, so caterers would likely not choose it as an ingredient as much as possible. As such, PSS can require caterers to serve tuna a minimum number of times per week, or even per month, so that students can enjoy it as a regular part of their diet. At the same time, PSS should expect bid prices from caterers to increase due to higher input costs from the use of tuna.

Third, the government can perhaps reinforce livelihood skills through the curriculum of the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education. For example, in the Philippines, home economics and agriculture classes have been required classes in elementary and high schools for several decades. In the Marshall Islands, then, home economics and aquaculture can be offered in at least within the PSS.

Home economics topics can include seafood preparation, seafood recipes, and seafood preservation techniques (such as drying, salting, freezing, smoking, and canning). Meanwhile, aquaculture topics can include identification of different seafood species, artisanal fishing methods, and commercial fishing. I work at the College of the Marshall Islands (CMI), which offers the Certificate of Proficiency in Rating Forming Part of a Navigational Watch. For related topics such as boat navigation and boat maintenance, CMI could probably develop workshops or short-term courses for the general public.

Fourth, not all Marshallese may own boats and/or fishing gear, especially if they belong to the lower socioeconomic classes. So, they would not be able to fish for tuna even for subsistence. A noble vision, then, for the various atoll governments is to each operate a fleet of small boats that can be: (1) used for free by atoll residents based on annual allotments; and/or (2) rented at a low cost. While giving access to the open seas for all Marshallese, such operations can also

provide additional employment. Moreover, small-scale fishing would reduce waste from bycatch and help protect the marine environment.

Fifth, there is a large number of tuna fishing vessels operating within the ocean territory of the RMI, but my impression is that there is only a limited number of Marshallese who work as deck hands, bridge crew, and engineers. Perhaps foreign-owned vessels can be required to hire or train at least one Marshallese before a fishing license is granted. If training is limited among Marshallese, then the government can try expanding the programs at the College of the Marshall Islands. Also, scholarships and awards can be given for studying seamanship both on-island and off-island.

In addition, if careers in the tuna industry are of low demand to Marshallese because of more attractive options on-shore in RMI or in the United States, then the RMI government can consider subsidies on salaries. When I worked in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), I recall that many locals (called Emiratis) preferred to be employed by the government because of better salary and benefits. To make employment in the private sector more attractive compared to employment in the private sector, the UAE government topped up the lower private sector pay with subsidies paid directly to the employees. At the very least, RMI's figures for unemployment and NEET ("Not in Education, Employment, or Training") can be reduced if more Marshallese work in the tuna industry.

Sixth, if the RMI government wants to increase its fleet of tuna fishing vessels and to access new markets for its tuna, then it should continue looking for joint venture partners. This April 2026, the RMI's new ambassador to the UAE was just sworn in. Due to the recent tensions in the Middle East, many nations within the Gulf Cooperation Council (which includes Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman) would probably be more open to diversifying their revenue sources away from oil, natural gas, and tourism. For instance, the UAE government has stakes in telecommunications (Etisalat and du) and airlines (Emirates, Etihad Airways, and Air Arabia), and it has various sovereign wealth funds—so it might be more than willing to invest in the tuna industry.

Also, I have heard about the Marshall Islands' supplying tuna to Wal-Mart. Well, in the Middle East, some of the larger retailers include Carrefour, Lulu, and Spinney's, so why not court those companies, too? The UAE has the Port of Fujairah and Khor Fakkan Port that both face the Indian Ocean directly, so there is no need to go through the Strait of Hormuz for some shipments.

Lastly, the Marshall Islands government can also share directly to the Marshallese citizenry its earnings from the tuna industry. From what I understand, Alaska shares its oil wealth to Alaskans through payment of dividends from a fund. Perhaps the Marshall Islands government can also establish a sovereign wealth fund supported by earnings from the tuna industry (say 10-25% of revenues). Then the said fund can directly deposit declared dividends to the Lomalo wallets of Marshallese residing in the islands.

Alternatively, instead of the fund's earnings being shared as dividends, they can be designated to be used for specific departments of the government, such as 25% education and 25% for health. For instance, the tuna sovereign wealth fund can support medical cases of indigent patients and various scholarships

In short, there are many ways that Marshallese can enjoy and benefit from tuna. It is a resource that needs to be managed well, so that future generations can partake. What works in the Republic of the Marshall Islands can be adapted and adopted among the rest of the PNA.