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FOR CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF TUNAS

Interview with Mr. Masahiro Isomae, Chair of the Consultative Group for Promoting Modernization of Japan's Tuna Fisheries

The General Meeting of the Consultative Group for Promoting Modernization of Japan's Tuna Fisheries, which is a voluntary organization established by young business owners among Members to the Japan Tuna Fisheries Cooperative Association (Japan Tuna), was held last December. The meeting elected Mr. Isomae (President of Isomae Fishery Co., Ltd., Hitachinaka City, Ibaraki Prefecture, Chairman of Sumiyoshi Fishery Co., Ltd., Miura City, Kanagawa Prefecture) as the new Chairman of the group. It is said that the current distant-water tuna fishery is suffering from the triple difficulties of "shortage of crew," "high fuel prices," and "low fish prices." How can the activities of the group be linked to the maintenance and continuation of the industry and to the benefit of the industry as a whole? We asked the newly elected Chairman Isomae for his thoughts.

Interviewer: How do you feel about being a coordinator for young business owners in the tuna industry?

Mr. Isomae: In the previous board, where Mr. Usui was the Chairman, I participated as the Secretary-General and was involved in the management of the group. Some of the new board members were self-nominated, and I find their proactiveness reassuring.

However, this is not a group limited to board members. Most of the members are presidents and managing directors of fishing companies located in remote fishing ports, and all of them are busy, making it extremely difficult for all of them to gather together for discussion. With this in mind, I was wondering if all of us could somehow get together. Because of behavioral restrictions due to the novel coronavirus infection, online meetings have become popular, and members have grown accustomed to it. I think the hurdles for everyone to get together and discuss things have been lowered a little because the barrier of not being able to connect due to distance has been reduced.

Interviewer: What do you think of the characteristics of the industry?

Mr. Isomae: The distant-water tuna fishing industry is not a zero-sum game of competing for the pie. For this reason, even if there are secrets about good fishing grounds, there is no need for businesses to fight each other in other areas. What sets us apart from other fisheries is that our interests are aligned and we get along well, even among people in the same industry.

For example, if someone's idea can solve a labor problem, everyone will be saved. If there is good equipment and

more people use it, it will be easier to find improvements, and the price of the product may even go down.

We want to pool our knowledge and spread even the smallest success stories horizontally. To that end, I believe we should unite more.

Interviewer: However, there are still many challenges.

Mr. Isomae: Labor issues are particularly troubling. In particular, the urgent issue of delayed departures due to a lack of vessel staff, namely, executive seafarers with a seaman's competency certificate (navigation/engineering), will affect the maintenance and survival of this industry in the future.

For some fish species, such as southern bluefin tuna and Atlantic bluefin tuna, fishing quotas are increasing as stocks recover. I'm very happy about this, but if the fishing vessels don't leave the port, we won't be able to utilize them. I believe this is an important issue that harms the national interest.

There are varying degrees of efforts in recruiting and training young seafarers, and there are very few companies that do not take the initiative. However, the number of new vessel staff is not keeping up with the number of vessel staff leaving vessels due to age or other reasons. Even if we are able to secure new recruits, the reality is that there are few who will continue to work as seafarers until they meet the seafaring experience requirements, obtain seaman's competency certificates, and become vessel staff. There are also some people saying, "Training is really cumbersome and tiring."

Interviewer: Are there any signs of improvement?

Mr. Isomae: Even in land-based companies, there are disparities in income, and I think that the way young people think about work styles has become more diverse. This feeling can be felt at the "Fishery Employment Support Fair," a joint job fair to recruit new fishermen, hosted by the National Fisheries Employment Training Center.

We have been exhibiting at the fair for more than 10 years, and in the early days, people who were probably close to retirement often visited our booth. However, now the number of young people such as high school and university students is increasing.

I would also like to make effective use of the "Fisheries Guidance" that the training center provides at fisheries-related high schools. This is a great opportunity to convey the appeal of distant-water tuna fishing, not only to students but also to teachers. In fact, we are receiving an increasing number of inquiries regarding employment from schools that my company has visited. We cannot afford to miss this trend.

Interviewer: The presence of foreign seafarers is also valuable.

Mr. Isomae: This industry is advocating a review of the system in line with the current situation. In particular, it is essential that veteran foreign seafarers obtain Japanese seaman's competency certificates and we hire them as vessel staff.

Coincidentally, it was recently decided that the tests to receive a Type 2 driver's license required to drive a taxi or bus will be administered in foreign languages. Until now, the test could only be taken in Japanese, but this is the result of the National Police Agency considering requests for multilingual testing from industry groups that are suffering from a driver shortage.

This problem also applies to the world of fishing vessels. I want to encourage people to jump on the bandwagon.

Interviewer: Development of a system to provide support from land for engineers on board fishing vessels has begun in response to the shortage of veteran engine staff.

Mr. Isomae: On fishing vessels equipped with a Wi-Fi connection, we can now send videos of inspection points via the internet, share them with shore staff and manufacturer representatives, and discuss what's wrong there. Furthermore, some manufacturers are researching remote monitoring that reads sensors installed on equipment such as engines and refrigerators from land, and expectations are high for this to become a reality.

In order to introduce such systems to more fishing vessels, we are focusing on the U.S. company SpaceX's satellite internet communication service, Starlink. Compared to current services (Inmarsat, Iridium), communication speeds are faster and cheaper due to lower orbit non-geostationary satellites, making it possible to set up a Wi-Fi connection at a lower cost. However, the use of this system is not permitted outside Japan's territorial waters, since the frequency band used "cannot exclude the possibility of causing harmful interference to other countries."

However, in December of last year, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications announced a draft directive to partially revise the Radio Law-related examination standards, and moves have begun towards deregulation. I will continue to speak out for the necessary deregulation in order to improve safety, improve the working environment, and resolve the shortage of engineers.

Interviewer: "High fuel prices" and "low fish prices" are also affecting the business environment.

Mr. Isomae: Fuel prices have always been high, and they have skyrocketed even further since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The replenishment price at overseas base ports and at sea skyrocketed to 147,000 yen/kl in fiscal 2022, about three times the previous year, and remains high.

Even so, the fish prices covered the situation in 2022, but in 2023, fish prices fell sharply. In addition, all expenses have increased, including labor, food, and repair costs. This makes it difficult to cover increased costs.

Interviewer: The industry is in a really difficult situation.

Mr. Isomae: That's why the significance of the existence of our group, which is unbound and has a high degree of

freedom, is called into question.

For example, most of the fisheries-related high schools that offer the aforementioned "fisheries guidance" are registered as marine personnel training facilities, and their graduates are exempt from the written examination for the national seaman's competency certificates, which is essential for executive seafarers.

However, I heard that some schools are seriously under-capacity. The maintenance and survival of fisheries-related high schools, which produce graduates with specialized knowledge every year and serve as a shortcut to becoming senior mariners, is an issue that will have a bearing on the future of distant-water tuna fisheries.

On this point, board members are asking, "Can we do something?" As I mentioned at the beginning, our industry is easy to expand horizontally. I feel our strength as an organization is that we immediately began to take action as people agreed with us and said, "Let's do this." In April this year, all members of Japan's other distant-water tuna fishing organization, the National Distant-water Tuna Fisheries Association, are scheduled to transfer to Japan Tuna. Some people are already members of our group. I would like to listen to their opinions, strengthen our unity even further, and come up with measures to continue operations in the future.

Prospect for 2024 meetings of tuna regional fisheries management organizations

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has ended, many meetings of regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), particularly technical ones, were still held in a hybrid style (both in-person and online) or online-only in 2023. This tendency will probably continue in 2024 as online participation saves travel time and costs, although online participants must handle time difference in many cases. Here are the prospects for this year's tuna RFMO meetings.

1. Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) (1) Yellowfin tuna

In 2021, the Commission adopted Resolution 21-01 for conservation of yellowfin tuna but six Members lodged an objection thereto after the adoption. At the 2023 annual meeting, the Commission was expected to adopt a new Resolution which would not see the objection from Members. Several proposals were submitted to the 2023 annual meeting, but there was no agreement, particularly on catch limits of Members. As a result, Resolution 21-01 remains with the objection from six Members. The 2024 annual meeting (in Thailand from May 13 to 17) is expected to continue discussion on this issue, as the yellowfin tuna stock is assessed overfished and subject to overfishing, i.e., the stock is in a bad shape and likely to further decrease.

The key question is how to accommodate interests of coastal developing Members that want to develop their own fisheries while maintaining the stock above the level which produces the maximum sustainable yield. This is extremely challenging as the TAC must be reduced under the current stock condition. In usual circumstances, developed Members will be requested to accept bigger reductions than developing Members when the TAC

must be reduced. However, in the case of the IOTC, some developing Members are likely to request no decrease or an increase even when the stock is overfished, and if this is not accepted, they are likely to lodge an objection.

(2) FAD management

The Commission at its special session in February 2023 adopted Resolution 23/02 for strengthening management of fish aggregating devices (FADs). Since seven Members had lodged an objection to it before the 2023 annual meeting, the Commission discussed possible amendments to Resolution 23/02 at the meeting, focusing on possible reduction in the number of FADs used per vessel and purchased per year as well as FAD closure periods. There was no agreement and the meeting decided to defer the discussion to the 2024 annual meeting. After the meeting, the number of Members lodging an objection reached 11 and Resolution 23/02 did not enter into force in accordance with the IOTC Agreement.

The 2024 annual meeting is likely to have a hard time again reaching an agreement on the FAD closure periods, unless the Scientific Committee provides clear scientific advice on this issue. Even if such advice is provided, it will not be easy to agree since the FAD closure has negative impacts on the fishing industry as well as canneries (as raw material is not supplied to them during the closure periods). One of the problems is that the Members advocating the strengthening of FAD management measures are taking an extreme position, i.e., there should be no agreement if they do not like the package of the FAD number and closure. An agreement could be reached as to a reduction in the number of FADs while an agreement on the FAD closure is more difficult. It would be wiser to agree on the FAD number and continue discussion on the FAD closure.

(3) Shark

At the 2023 annual meeting, the Commission discussed prohibition of both wire trace and shark lines (branch lines running directly off the longline floats) as well as prohibition of separating fins from bodies (fins naturally attached) aboard with alternative measures similar to those of the WCPFC. There was no agreement and the Commission requested the relevant Working Parties and Scientific Committee to review the latest science and best practices in other oceans and, in collaboration with the Compliance Committee as appropriate, provide advice to the 2024 annual meeting on technical and mitigation measures to strengthen the conservation of sharks. In particular, advice was requested on: (i) vulnerable species such as oceanic whitetip sharks, whale sharks and thresher sharks; (ii) how to reduce the impact of tuna fisheries, including the use of wire trace and shark lines; and (iii) the application of fins naturally attached requirements. If such scientific advice comes up, a similar proposal will be submitted to the 2024 annual meeting.

It should be recalled that after the IOTC annual meeting, the IATTC adopted measures similar to those of the WCPFC. This means that there will be more pressure to adopt such measures at the 2024 annual meeting.

(4) Allocation criteria

The Technical Committee on Allocation Criteria convened 11 times since 2011 prior to the 2023 annual

meeting to agree on a set of criteria to calculate allocations, but resulted in no agreement. Following the annual meeting, the 12th meeting was held in October 2023, and decided to cancel the meeting scheduled in February 2024 and focus its efforts on the 13th meeting in October 2024. This indicates that discussion will take place at the 2024 annual meeting, but no agreement is envisaged.

It should also be noted that the independent Chair of the Committee resigned and this is expected to further delay the process. The Commission must decide whether another independent Chair should be contracted or a Chair should be elected from Members as is the case in other committees.

2. Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC)

The Commission adopted conservation and management measures for tropical tunas (skipjack, bigeye and yellowfin tuna) in 2021 (C-21-04), which include: (i) the individual vessel limit (IVL) on the catch of bigeye tuna for purse seiners (FAD closure period will be extended if the vessel caught more than 1,200 metric tons (MT) of bigeye tuna); and the gradual reduction in the number of FADs activated at one time by the size of the vessel. These measures are applicable for 2022, 2023 and 2024. The Commission also agreed that in 2022, 2023, and 2024 the results of these measures will be evaluated and based on such evaluation, the Commission shall take further actions including substantial extension of closure days for purse-seine vessels or equivalent measures, such as catch limits.

In 2022, the IATTC scientific staff did not recommend any modifications to C-21-04 because there was no concern about the stock status of bigeye, yellowfin and skipjack although the effects of C-21-04 would only be evaluated in 2023 when data from the 2022 fishing year is available for analysis.

In 2023, the IATTC scientific staff expressed concern about the resumption of the general increasing trend in the number of floating-object sets (including FADs), but did not recommend any modifications to C-21-04 because the effect of this increase on the status of the bigeye, yellowfin and skipjack stocks needs to be evaluated with conventional stock assessments for these species, which will be conducted in 2024.

Accordingly, discussion at the 101st meeting of the Commission scheduled in Panama from September 2 to 6 will depend very much on the results of the stock assessments. Based on them, the Commission is expected to review the measures and decide whether they should be extended or amended for 2025 and beyond.

3. Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT)

At the 2023 annual meeting, the Commission adopted an annual total allowable catch (TAC) for 2024 to 2026, which was calculated by the management procedure (MP). No substantial discussion is expected for the TAC in 2024 and 2025 unless exceptional circumstances not envisaged in the MP are detected. The Commission also agreed to allocations among Members, but this is a temporary agreement and some Members wish to reopen discussion on allocation at the 2024 annual meeting,

which will be held in Taiwan from October 7 to 10.

4. International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

(1) Conservation and management measures for tropical tunas

Since the adoption of the current measures for tropical tunas in 2019, the Commission has been discussing amendment mainly to the total allowable catch (TAC) of bigeye, allocation of the bigeye TAC among Contracting Parties, Cooperating non-Contracting Parties, Entities or Fishing Entities (CPCs) and management measures for FADs. In 2023, the Commission held two intersessional preparatory meetings, but could not agree to any amendment at the 2023 annual meeting. The most difficult part of the discussion is allocation of the bigeye TAC. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the total catch amount exceeded the TAC from 2016 to 2019 because of lack of allocations. The total catch was below the TAC in 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, but the 2022 catch was close to the TAC, reflecting the recovery of the fishing activities in the post-pandemic era. This tendency is likely to continue and the total catch may exceed the TAC again without allocations. There is general agreement that developing CPCs should be given more allocations for the development of their own fisheries. However, developed CPCs refuse to sacrifice too much for developing CPCs. The Commission is planning to hold the first intersessional meeting in May and the second one just prior to the annual meeting (in Cyprus from November 11 to 18). The discussion will remain challenging unless both developing and developed CPCs show more flexibility.

(2) Swordfish

In 2023, the Commission intended to agree to an MP for north Atlantic swordfish, which would calculate a new TAC, but could not agree to it and decided to roll-over the current measures for one year. The Commission will hold at least one intersessional meeting to continue the discussion to choose a single MP to calculate a new TAC for the species. Even if the Commission can adopt a new MP, the issue of allocation will resurface if the TAC changes. Some Members currently fully utilize their allocations while some Members do not. The former will request more allocation while the latter, especially developing Members, will not want to give up any allocation.

(3) Sharks

At the 2023 annual meeting, a proposal was submitted on the so-called fins-naturally-attached policy. It was intended to prohibit separation of fins from shark bodies at sea and require all sharks to be landed with the fins naturally attached. This proposal had been submitted to the Commission for more than a decade, but was never adopted. Given that the WCPFC and the IATTC have already adopted an alternative approach, a similar proposal may be submitted to the 2024 annual meeting. The discussion will also be affected by the result of the IOTC annual meeting on the same subject.

5. Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC)

(1) Tropical tunas

The Commission adopted a new conservation and management measures (CMM) for tropical tunas at the 2023 annual meeting (WCPFC20) for 2024 to 2026. No discussion is expected on FAD management measures, purse seine fishing efforts, bigeye catch limits and other related measures in 2024. The Commission is supposed to agree to target reference points for bigeye and yellowfin as part of the work to establish an MP for these species at the 2024 annual meeting (WCPFC21), which will be held in Fiji from December 2 to 6, 2024.

(2) At-sea transshipment

Possible strengthening of the conservation and management measure (CMM) on the regulation of at-sea transshipment was discussed through the intersessional transshipment working group (TS-IWG) and at WCPFC20, but no agreement was reached. A TS-IWG meeting will be held in September 2024 with the expectation that a new CMM will be adopted at WCPFC21.

(3) Crew labour standards

There was no substantive discussion on this issue during WCPFC20 and the Crew Labour Standards Intersessional Working Group will continue discussion in 2024. A half-day meeting will be held in June 2024 and another half-day meeting will be held in September with the strong expectation that a new CMM on crew labour standards will be adopted at WCPFC21.

(4) Seabird bycatch mitigation measures

New Zealand will lead informal intersessional meetings with interested Members to review the latest scientific evidence on seabird bycatch mitigation and gather views on the review of CMM 2018-03 with an aim to draft a revision of the CMM for submission to WCPFC21.

(5) Sharks

Under the current CMM on sharks, separation of fins from bodies is in principle prohibited and, if separated, certain alternative measures are applied for storing the separated fins and bodies on board vessels. At WCPFC20, the Commission agreed that Members who utilize such alternative measures must provide detailed information on the implementation and monitoring of those measures to the Technical and Compliance Committee (TCC20) to be held in September 2024. The Commission also encourages Members to report to TCC20 any enforcement difficulties that they encountered in the case of the alternative measures and how they have addressed risks such as monitoring at sea, species substitution, etc. The information provided shall be used by TCC20 and WCPFC21 to review the implementation of alternative measures.

(6) North Pacific striped marlin

In recent years, North Pacific striped marlin has been in bad shape. However, there is doubt about the validity of the stock assessment as the stock declined after the large-scale high seas driftnet fisheries, which were incidentally catching the species, were terminated due to a decision of the United Nations in the early 1990s. Accordingly, the Commission decided to conduct an independent peer review of the stock assessment in 2024 and agreed to await the outcome of the peer review with a view to considering potential revisions to the current CMM at WCPFC21. If the peer review endorses the stock assessment, the Commission will have to strengthen the CMM.