

Tuna Fishing in Bangladesh Industry in Flux

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It is well known that tuna fish holds worldwide recognition as one of the largest, most popular, and economically significant fish species. It plays a crucial role in global marine fisheries exports, with the Pacific Ocean being the primary source of tuna catches (67%), followed by the Indian Ocean (12%) and the Atlantic Ocean (12%). Even the global tuna market has grown significantly in recent years and surpassed initial estimates. In 2022, it reached a value of \$21.97 billion, surpassing the expected value of \$13.75 billion for 2023 by Reuter's report. With such consistent growth, the predicted value of \$13.75 billion for 2023 will likely be comfortably exceeded. Another projection indicates a continued robust expansion with a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.5% from 2023 to 2028. By the end of 2028, the market is expected to reach an impressive value of \$33.75 billion. These analyses highlight the promising future of the tuna market, establishing it as a lucrative and thriving industry. Tuna, especially the highly valued bluefin variety, commands high prices in international markets.

Noteworthy, Bangladesh's neighboring countries, including India, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, have already tapped this lucrative market. And in recent years, tuna and other migratory deep-sea species have gained priority on the government agenda in Bangladesh. By venturing into deep-sea fishing, Bangladesh aims to seize these promising economic opportunities and establish itself as a significant player in the global tuna market. Mainly, after the successful demarcation of maritime boundaries, Bangladeshi fishers gained access to the high seas, specifically the Area Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ). Numerous studies have indicated a

promising potential for tuna fishing in Bangladesh, and joint surveys with Thailand have revealed abundant pelagic species like tuna, tuna-like fishes, and sharks in Bangladesh's marine waters.

But unfortunately, confirming the immense potential of deep-sea fishing in the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh has struggled to attract various stakeholders' involvement in this lucrative venture. Although the government started issuing licenses to the private sector for exploring tuna and other pelagic fishes beyond the 200-meter depth of the Bay and in international waters, none of the firms have brought trawlers for tuna fishing, primarily due to the considerable capital investment required and the absence of reliable data on tuna stocks and fishing grounds. Despite abundant tuna in Bangladesh's waters, no specific tuna fishery exists. Tuna is primarily caught as bycatch by mid-water industrial trawlers and artisanal gillnetters operating in the south-eastern and north-western parts of the Bay of Bengal, particularly near Cox's Bazaar. Industrial production accounts for only a tiny percentage of tuna fish.

Considering the facts, the government has taken matters into its own hands by launching a project to capture costly and migratory tuna fish. With an investment of Tk. 6106.00 lakh, the Department of Fisheries plans to procure three longliner fishing vessels, allowing for the exploration of tuna and pelagic fish in the exclusive economic zone located 200 nautical miles offshore.

The government project "Exploring (catching) tuna and pelagic fishes from the deep sea in the Bay of Bengal" has been on-going since July 2020 and is scheduled to complete in December 2023.

This experimental project seeks to build expertise through overseas training in tuna fishing and aims to encourage private-sector participation in this promising industry. The government's decision to take the lead is driven by the country's desire to establish itself as a formidable player in deep-water fishing in the Bay of Bengal, an area rich in diverse marine resources.

To facilitate the project's objectives, a contract was signed with Uni Marine Services PTE. Ltd., a Singapore-based supplier, for the procurement of three fishing vessels and associated fishing gears. The contract was valued at USD 2,886,000. But due to budget policy, the Ministry of Finance suspended the purchase of all types of foreign vessels. However Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock is pursuing to complete the project.

As we approach the conclusion of the experimental project in 2023, our journey in deep sea fishing has been filled with valuable learning experiences. While we have faced certain challenges in meeting designated timelines, we may view these obstacles as stepping stones towards progress in the marine sectors.

Recognizing the importance of timely implementations, we can be committed to streamlining our processes and optimizing efficiency to establish Bangladesh as a formidable player in deep-water fishing in the Bay of Bengal. By doing so, we can hope to open new opportunities and strengthen our position in the global seafood market. Together, we can work towards a

brighter future, where Bangladesh's marine sectors thrive and contribute significantly to the nation's prosperity.

Bangladesh has an exciting opportunity to promote private sector participation in deep sea fishing. By actively encouraging local businesses and entrepreneurs to engage in this industry, we can unlock their potential to contribute significantly to its growth and development. This inclusive approach will foster innovation and creativity and create a thriving ecosystem where both the user and the provider can mutually benefit. The government and private sectors mutually should come forward and take decisive action to address the apparent lag in implementing the project or any effective action. This can include thoroughly reviewing the current approach, identifying bottlenecks, and streamlining processes to ensure effective execution. Timely and proactive measures are necessary to unlock the potential of the deep sea fishing and drive sustainable growth and prosperity for Bangladesh.

Bangladesh already joined the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission in 2015, an inter-governmental organization responsible for the management, conservation, and sustainable utilization of tuna and tuna-like fish. Membership in this commission requires countries to provide information on tuna stocks within their water boundaries. By engaging in tuna fishing, Bangladesh can gather vital data and ensure the long-term viability of this valuable species. Bangladesh needs more global engagement in marine fisheries as commitment compels consistency.

While neighboring countries have been prosperous in deep-sea fishing, Bangladesh has faced challenges due to a lack of expertise and suitable vessels. Previous attempts to involve the private sector in deep-sea fishing proved unsuccessful, primarily due to the significant differences between the wooden trawlers commonly used by Chattogram-based fishermen and the specialized vessels required for tuna fishing. The industry can gain success within various challenges by prompt government initiative, private sector involvement, investment in infrastructure and technology, and omitting data collection limitations. These initiatives may create a sense of the industry's ability to thrive. However, rapid action requires exploring the industry before it becomes late. Implementing absorbed knowledge and addressing challenges through collaborative efforts, such as fostering dialogue, inspiring private sector engagement, securing funding for infrastructure and technology, and improving data collection methods, are now on our immediate to-do list for exploring deep sea fishing.

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