

THE FISHERIES RESOURCES OF THE CLIPPERTON ISLAND EEZ (FRANCE)¹

Daniel Pauly

*Sea Around Us Project, Fisheries Centre, University of British Columbia,
2202 Main Mall, Vancouver, V6T 1Z4, Canada
d.pauly@fisheries.ubc.ca*

ABSTRACT

Clipperton Island is a French Territory in the Eastern Central Pacific, about 1,300 km southwest of Acapulco, Mexico. The geology and biology of Clipperton Island, including its coral reefs and fish fauna, are well-documented. Although there was an unsuccessful attempt at settlement, the island is presently uninhabited, and surveillance by the French navy is scattered to non-existent. Therefore, there is probably a high degree of illegal fishing in the Clipperton Exclusive Economic Zone; this is increased by the fact that at least one neighboring country contests French sovereignty. Diving for lobsters and shark finning also appears to occur near Clipperton Atoll, but the extent of these activities will likely remain uncertain. For the *Sea Around Us* Project, and its global database of fisheries catches, this means that the catches made by various countries in the Clipperton Island EEZ must be estimated indirectly. This can be done by 'allowing' all countries that report catches of large pelagic fishes from the Eastern Central Pacific (FAO Area 77) to enter the Clipperton Island EEZ, which should account for the catch of tuna and other large pelagics from that area.

INTRODUCTION

Clipperton Island, named after an English privateer, is a French Territory in the Eastern Central Pacific, about 1300 km southwest of Acapulco, Mexico (Figure 1). The area of Clipperton Island is 9 km², its position is 10°18'N and 109°13'W. The EEZ around Clipperton has a surface area of 435,600 km² (www.clipperton.fr/).

Although there was, in the beginning of the 20th century, an unsuccessful attempt at settlement, the island is presently uninhabited, and surveillance by the French navy is scattered to non-existent. Therefore, there is a high, but unknown degree of illegal fishing in the Clipperton Exclusive Economic Zone. Also important is the fact that Mexico, based on historical and geographical arguments, contests French sovereignty (see www.clipperton.fr/ for details).

The geology and biology of Clipperton Island, including its coral reefs and fish fauna, are well-documented, and were last reviewed in Charpy (2009). An extensive bibliography may be found at www.clipperton.fr/incagen.html?biblioaccueil.htm~main.

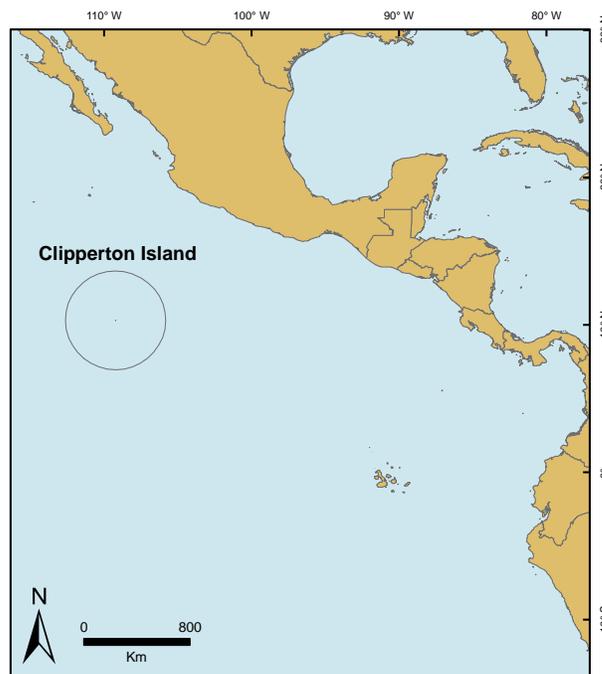


Figure 1. Clipperton Island and its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

¹ Cite as: Pauly, D. (2009) The fisheries resources of the Clipperton Island EEZ (France), pp. 35-37. In: Zeller, D. and Harper, S. (eds.) *Fisheries catch reconstructions: Islands, Part I*. Fisheries Centre Research Reports 17 (5). Fisheries Centre, University of British Columbia [ISSN 1198-6727].

Fishing activities in the Clipperton EEZ

The following fisheries-related activities were reported in www.clipperton.fr/: “*The island has been abandoned since World War II; since then it has only been visited by sport fishermen, regularly scheduled patrols by the French Navy, and Mexican tuna and shark fishermen. [...] In 1988, five Mexican fishermen became lost at sea after a storm that occurred during their trip along the coast of Costa Rica. They drifted within sight of Clipperton, but were unable to reach it. In 1998, two American deckhands, from a fishing boat based out of California were stranded on the island for three weeks*”.

Other sources (e.g., Nieussat 1976; Goujon 1988) also mention events and anecdotes indicative of a high degree of illegal fishing in the Clipperton EEZ (illegal because this fishing does not occur after an access agreement has been concluded with France, and/or fishing licenses acquired). This is summarized in www.clipperton.fr/: “*Tuna fishing is the main activity in Clipperton EEZ, but it is practiced only by foreign vessel operating without permission*”.

Estimation of the catch and catch value taken for the Clipperton EEZ

The extent of the illegal fishing mentioned above is difficult to estimate. The FAO, in 1969, estimated the tuna catch around Clipperton to be 25,000 t·year⁻¹ (www.clipperton.fr/), which following Nieussat (1976), would have been taken by US, Mexican and Japanese vessels.

On the other hand, Goujon (1988) estimated “*foreign vessels*” to catch between 3,000 and 20,000 t·year⁻¹. It is probably the upper figure which is more realistic, given that Anon. (2009) writes: “*Ten factory ships and a number of catcher boats were observed fishing between December 2004 and March 2005 [...]. During every scientific expedition and visit by a vessel from the French Navy, fishing vessels under the flag of Mexico, Costa-Rica, Guatemala and even the USA were observed and recorded. During an expedition in 2001, three fishing vessels were observed in three days in the waters around Clipperton [...]. Also in 2001, a Costa-Rican longliner was boarded whose fishing map was centered on Clipperton Island*”.

As a result, our main source (Christian Jost, n.d.; www.clipperton.fr/) suggests the catch taken from the Clipperton EEZ to be 50,000 t·year⁻¹. However, this catch need not consist exclusively of tuna and associated fish. Thus, bluespiny lobster (*Panulirus penicillatus*) were either absent or extremely rarely observed during dives conducted as part of surveys in November 1997 and February 2001, while “thousands” were observed in the 1960s. Similarly, the scarcity of sharks was noticeable (except for hammerhead sharks), again compared with earlier accounts, which suggest that the waters immediately adjacent to the island are also exploited.

The losses to France that this represents have been roughly estimated, using a value of 0.42 €/kilogram of fish caught, based on Korean-French agreement on Korean fishing in French Polynesia. For an annual catch of 50,000 t, this amounts to 21 million € (=31 million US \$), which is much higher than the sum of 1.2 million € actually received, for an annual catch of 3,000 t·year⁻¹, from 60 Korean vessels (www.clipperton.fr/).

Although France is a member of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), French fishing vessels (longliners and purse seiners) have been operating in the Clipperton Island EEZ only since 2006. As the French navy cannot effectively patrol the Clipperton Island EEZ, it is hoped that the presence of French vessels will contribute to deter poaching by boats of other countries (www.clipperton.fr/).

CONCLUSIONS

For the *Sea Around Us* Project, and its global database of fisheries catches, this means that the catches made by various countries in the Clipperton Island EEZ must be estimated indirectly. This can be done by ‘allowing’ all countries that report catches of large pelagic fishes from the Eastern Central Pacific (FAO Area 77) to enter the Clipperton Island EEZ, which should account for the catch of tuna and other large pelagics from that area. This should be complemented by an assumed catch of lobster and (finned) reef sharks, which also appear to be exploited near Clipperton Atoll.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the support of the *Sea Around Us* Project, a scientific collaboration between the University of British Columbia and the Pew Environment Group.

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- www.clipperton.fr (see Jost, C.)