The background features a stylized, monochromatic blue color palette. It consists of several layers of wavy, horizontal bands in varying shades of blue, creating a sense of depth and movement, reminiscent of water. Four stylized fish are depicted, swimming in the same direction (towards the right). The fish are rendered in a simplified, geometric style with white outlines and some internal blue shading to define their features like fins and scales. They are positioned in the upper left, upper right, lower left, and lower right quadrants of the page.

POLE AND LINE FISHING

**CONSERVATIVE
ENVIRONMENT
NETWORK**

Pole and line fishing in the Maldives

Summary

The preservation of marine ecosystems is vital for improving our resilience to the impacts of climate change and limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees. The ocean has taken up more than 90% of excess heat in the climate system so far¹. Without this, the planet would have warmed far more significantly and the effects of climate change would have been much worse. However, many of our marine habitats such as coral reefs, are being destroyed by ocean warming and acidification and by damaging fishing practices like bottom trawling and overfishing. If these habitats are destroyed, it will make it harder for us to limit global warming and avoid the worst effects of climate change. The Maldives knows this more than most, which is why in 2019 its Fisheries Act outlawed harmful fishing practices and enshrined into law pole and line fishing, which is a much more sustainable way of fishing. While this act has been ambitious in its scope, imports from the Maldives still face higher tariffs in many countries, making sustainably caught tuna more expensive than less sustainable fishing products from other, neighbouring countries.

Background

The Maldives is an archipelago of almost 1200 islands, mostly known for their tropical beaches and abundance of marine life². Unsurprisingly, tourism and fishing are the two biggest industries in the Maldives. In recent years, the Maldivian Government has been vocal about the threats posed by climate change to its particularly vulnerable country. 80% of the land in the Maldives is less than one metre above sea level and is therefore incredibly vulnerable to rising sea levels³. The famed tropical beaches are facing erosion, and rising temperatures are leading to coral bleaching and die offs of marine life⁴. This concern has led to a focus on managing the natural resources of the Maldives as sustainably as possible and quietly the Maldives has become a global pioneer in sustainable fishing.

Fishing in the Maldives

Before the tourism industry took off in the Maldives, tuna fishing was the mainstay of the economy⁵ - in 1990, over half of the country was employed in the fishing industry⁶. Even as the reputation of the Maldives changed to one of luxury resorts and high end holidays, fishing remained an important part of the economy with about 9,500 households still directly involved with fishing. Global consumption of fish and seafood has

¹ Choices made now are critical for the future of our Ocean and Cryosphere, IPCC, September 2019,

² The Maldives set an example of sustainable seafood value chains, *UN environment programme*, July 2018

³ Islam, Faisal; Hove, Hilary; Parry, Jo-Ellen. (2011) "Review of Current and Planned Adaptation Action: South Asia." Adaptation Partnership/International Institute for Sustainable Development, pp.108-118, *UNDP*

⁴ *Ibid*

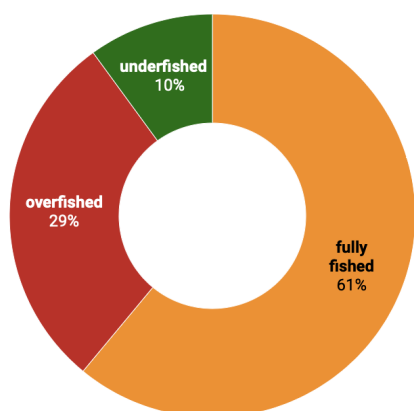
⁵ Maldives National report to the scientific committee of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, 2021, *Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture*, 2021

⁶ Faiz, M., 1997. The status of fisheries in the Republic of Maldives. In: *Proceedings of the Regional Workshop on Responsible Fishing, Bangkok, Thailand*. pp.167 - 191.

more than doubled since 1973⁷ and tuna catches rose until their peak of 167,000 tonnes in 2006 - equivalent to around 13,000 school buses. As the Maldives opened up to more tourism, there was more pressure to increase the yields of fishing in order to compete with the rest of the world and to accommodate the demands of tourists who wanted to experience the coral reefs and to fish themselves. Black corals, which function as an important marine habitat particularly suffered from decades of overfishing and ended up on the endangered species list, and species like turtles and the giant clam both suffered to the point that the government imposed bans on their fishing⁸.

Overfishing

The Maldives is certainly not the only country affected by overfishing, which has become a destructive force across our world's oceans. Many yield-focused commercial shipping fleets focus on trawling as the most efficient method for catching fish. This involves pulling a large net through the ocean and collects more than just target species, with species like dolphins, sharks, seabirds and turtles getting caught up in the nets. This bycatch also hurts coral reefs which rely on herbivorous fish to clean algae from the coral as well⁹. The legal status of international waters which are not under any state's jurisdiction means that it is difficult to monitor overfishing, but some estimates place the proportion of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing at between 12 and 28% of global fishing¹⁰.



This chart from 2021 shows the proportion of global fish stocks that are either overfished, underfished or fully fished. The proportion of global stocks that are overfished is nearly three times the proportion which are underfished. How vulnerable stocks are to overfishing depends on many factors like how many young a species has or how quickly a species can mature. Many shark species for instance have very few young and take a long time to mature which means that they are easy to overfish and take a long time to recover. Even though nets and some of the most damaging fishing practices have never been a major fishing method in the Maldives, the increase in demand for fish and the increasing

mechanisation of fishing fleets from the 1970s onwards did harm marine life¹¹.

The Maldives Fisheries Act

⁷The Maldives set an example of sustainable seafood value chains, *UN environment programme*, July 2018

⁸ Fishing in the Maldives, *The Maldives expert*, 2018

⁹McKeever. A, How overfishing threatens the world's oceans—and why it could end in catastrophe, National Geographic, 2022

¹⁰ Facts & Figures: the cold hard facts about overfishing, WWF,

¹¹Faiz, M., 1997. The status of fisheries in the Republic of Maldives. In: *Proceedings of the Regional Workshop on Responsible Fishing, Bangkok, Thailand*. pp.167 - 191.

When the centre-right Maldivan Democratic Party came to power in 2018, it recognised the importance of maintaining marine life in order to protect the livelihood of those in the fishing and tourism industries, as well as the natural resources that surround the islands. Ministers opened a consultation with the 9,500 households directly involved in the fishing industry¹². The results from the consultation led to the Maldives Fisheries Act of 2019, which laid out measures to ensure the sustainable use of fishery resources in the Maldives and to combat illegal fishing.

The act entitled fisherfolk for the first time to pensions, education and training¹³ and outlawed gender discrimination in the industry¹⁴. The act also explicitly banned trawl net fishing and any type of fishing with a net except bait fishing or fishing for personal consumption¹⁵. Other dangerous methods like fishing with explosives, chemicals or other poisons were banned as well.

¹²Waheed. H, Conserving Maldives' ocean resources for a sustainable livelihood, World Bank, February 2020

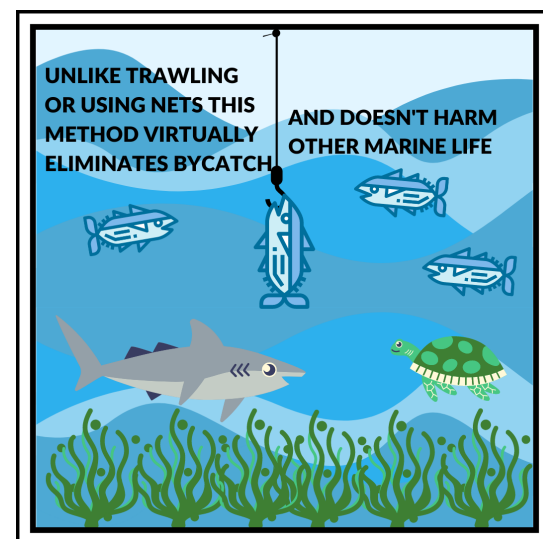
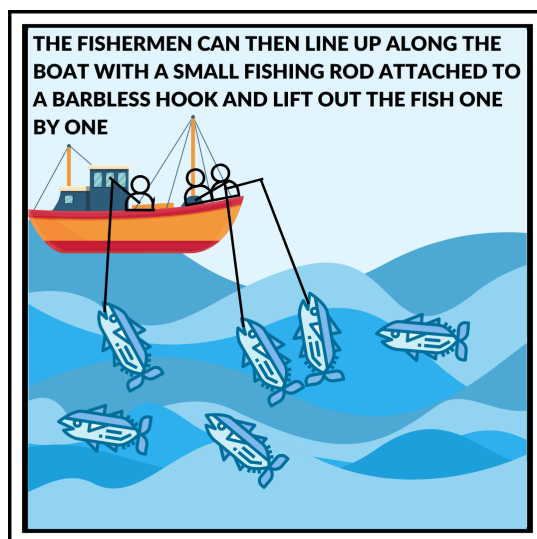
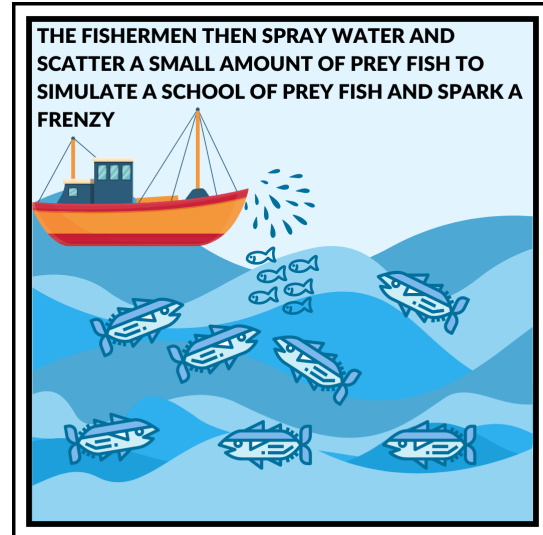
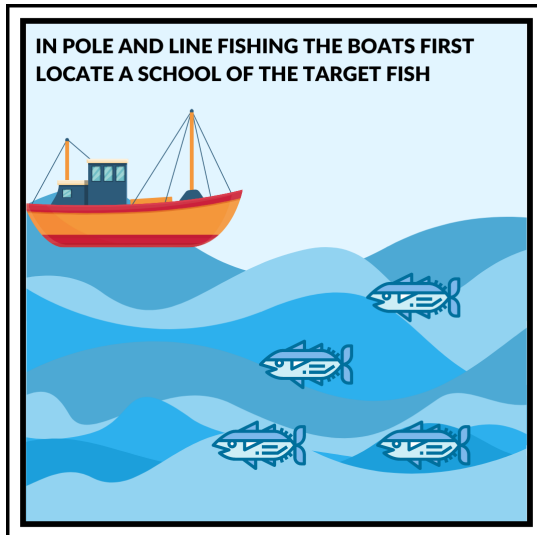
¹³*Ibid*

¹⁴ Fisheries Act of the Maldives, 14/2019, Ministry of Fisheries, Marine resources and agriculture, 2019

¹⁵ *Ibid* p14

Pole and line fishing

The most important part of the Maldives Fisheries Act was enshrining the hardline and pole and line fishing methods in law. These methods make sure that overfishing is avoided and harmful bycatch is virtually eliminated. A 2017 study of pole and line fishermen reported a bycatch of 0.65% of total tuna catch by weight¹⁶. The operation of pole and line fishing is explained in the images below.



¹⁶Maldives National report to the scientific committee of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, 2021, *Ministry of Fisheries, Marine Resources and Agriculture*, 2021

A sustainability premium

One article on the Maldives Fisheries Act listed the co-benefits of the act, saying that;

*'Others too will stand to gain. They include those supplying fishing gear, cages, or fish feed; traders, aggregators and exporters; experts, researchers, as well as youth looking for jobs in the mariculture farms, marketing, and logistics. And better regulation is likely to help fisherfolk fetch higher prices in the export markets.'*¹⁷

While many of these benefits came to pass, the higher price on the export markets has unfortunately not yet been universally achieved. One of the hopes of the Fisheries Act was that tougher regulation would lead to a premium on exports as consumers around the world would prioritise ethically and sustainably caught fish. Unfortunately there have been other barriers that have limited exports. Since 2014, the EU has imposed a tariff of 20% on imports from the Maldives. This makes fish from the Maldives more expensive than that of its close neighbour Sri Lanka which has substantially fewer sustainability requirements on fishing.

The reason for this tariff has nothing to do with sustainability. Instead it is because the Maldives has failed to meet some of the EU's tests on human rights, specifically lack of religious freedom and failure to provide same sex marriages. While the EU is right to remain ambitious on human rights and to prioritise relations with countries that share similar priorities, this has had the effect of disincentivising positive environmental practices by raising the costs of importing Maldivian fish. Tackling nature loss and climate change is a priority for the UK and EU and this should be reflected in our trade policy alongside other social and economic priorities.

The UK has had the opportunity to reverse this position following its exit from the EU in 2020 but the 20% tariff on fish imports from the Maldives remains. The reason for this is not down to human rights but because the Maldives has in recent years seen a rise in income and is now classified as a middle income country and so is no longer eligible for zero tariffs under the UK's Generalised System of Preferences as it would have been as a developing country¹⁸. The Maldives is a Commonwealth country and a country with strong ties to the UK. One of the benefits from exiting the EU is the ability for the UK to determine its own tariffs and to use them as a tool to encourage free trade with allies and to reward sustainable practices. This 20% tariff does neither.

It would send a clear message about the UK's post-Brexit priorities to support a Commonwealth nation which has managed to become a global sustainability pioneer. Many Conservative parliamentarians have already called on the Government to rectify this and reduce or remove the tariffs on Maldivian fish imports

¹⁷Waheed. H, Conserving Maldives' ocean resources for a sustainable livelihood, World Bank, February 2020

¹⁸House of Lords, Hansard, Maldives: Tariffs, Question, 14:36:00 Asked by Baroness Mobarik

to provide consumers with a fair choice¹⁹. Many conservatives lament the supposed lack of free market climate policies and fear that environmental concerns could undermine free trade. We should pursue a policy of green free trade to bring down the cost of low carbon and sustainably produced goods and services. When opportunities like this to support sustainability and the free market together arise, we should seize them with both hands.

Lessons to be learned from the Maldives Fisheries Act

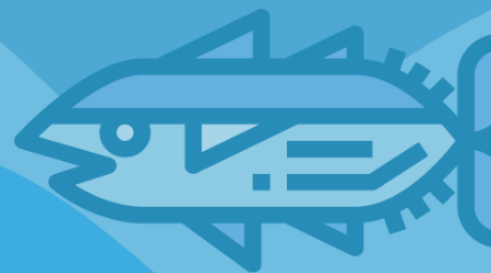
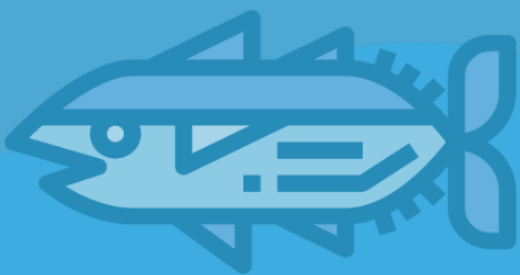
Look to history for examples of sustainable practice - Pole and line fishing had always been practised in the Maldives; by returning to it, the Maldivians have managed to reduce harm. This specific method will not work for every country but there may be other historical practices that will.

Nature and the economy benefit each other - The explosion of the tourism industry in the Maldives has been driven by the beautiful landscapes and marine life. By protecting this natural environment, the Maldives will be able to profit from the many tourists who want to experience this beauty for years to come.

Tariffs are an important tool for showcasing priorities - Targeting certain exports and reducing tariffs, such as those on sustainably fished tuna sends a powerful message about what practices a country endorses.

The Conservative Environment Network is the independent forum for conservatives who support decarbonisation and conservation. As part of CEN's international work, we are compiling case studies of successful centre-right environmental policies from across the world. If you would like to help contribute or have any further questions, please email fn@cen.uk.com

¹⁹ *Ibid*



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