The island of Taiwan is, by all accounts, a maritime nation. The island is bounded on the west by the Taiwan Strait (linking the South and East China Seas), on the south by the Luzon Strait (linking the South China and Philippine Seas), and on the east by the Philippine Sea. Taiwan has 1,566 kilometers of coastline, from which its extensive domestic fishing fleet sets sail almost every day of the year. The Taiwanese fishing industry—for decades carefully nurtured by the nation—employs approximately 300,000 people, and accounts for 37 percent of Taiwan’s overall agricultural output. Taiwan’s thousands of fishing vessels are common in the South Pacific, where they ply the waters in search of the vast variety of pelagic (open sea) fish, valued by Taiwanese and other people around the world.

In spite of the maturity and vitality of the Taiwanese fishing industry, some foreign observers have recently raised questions about the industry’s standards and practices, and the overall governance of Taiwanese fishing vessels. It was with these issues in mind, and the goal of “extending cooperative relationships in diplomacy and fisheries” with other South Pacific nations, that the ICDF, the Japan Interchange Association and National Taiwan Ocean University (NTOU) sponsored the International Workshop on Fishery Policy and Management for the South Pacific Region, from July 10–23, 2001. The workshop was conducted by NTOU in Keelung City, Taiwan, and organized by Dr. Chuang Ching-ta, director of the NTOU Institute of Fisheries Economics. The workshop brought together fishing professionals from Taiwan and eight South Pacific nations to discuss industry issues and open new lines of communication. Sixteen participants from Australia, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands, Niue Island, Fiji, and the Cook Islands attended the workshop. Academics and experts from Taiwanese universities, fisheries research institutes, fishermen’s associations and other institutions gave presentations covering international and national fisheries regulation and management, environmental issues, fisheries fleet control, seafood markets, cooperative work among maritime nations and coastal development. Presenters at the workshop also explicated Taiwanese fishing
industry experience, introduced Taiwanese fishermen’s cooperatives, and outlined the nation’s fisheries industry policies and practices.

A most important misunderstanding the workshop sought to dispel was Taiwan’s policy concerning an unscrupulous practice on the high seas known as shark “finning.” At its worst, this is the method of cutting only the fins from sharks and then casting the wounded animals back into the sea, where they soon die. Shark fins have long been considered a delicacy in Asian cuisine, and their use in food is not forbidden. However, unprincipled fishermen around the world have capitalized on demand for shark fins by mercilessly overfishing and finning sharks. Because demand for shark fins is primarily in Asia, Taiwanese fishermen have sometimes been subject to suspicion about this practice. The Fishery Policy and Management workshop made it clear that illegal finning is banned by Taiwan. The practice is allowed—in accordance with international standards—only in instances where sharks have been legally caught, and only if the entire shark is used for food and other products.

Several other issues and questions about the Taiwanese fishing industry were also met head on at the workshop. The very size of Taiwan’s fishing fleet—the seventh largest in the world, according to the International Labour Office—has led some observers to wonder whether it can be effectively controlled by a nation the size of Taiwan. The workshop outlined Taiwan’s adherence to international standards, and the thorough management and oversight of the Taiwanese fishing industry. Taiwan currently abides by the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which calls for responsible use and harvesting of oceanic resources. The nation has laws prohibiting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated fishing (such as shark finning), has participated in the creation of the newly adopted Convention on the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, and is a cooperating party in the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. Taiwan has also forged fishing agreements with many nations in the Pacific, Indian and Atlantic Ocean regions, requiring extensive cooperation and adherence to their laws.

Taiwan’s current administration has promoted and enforced laws to prevent overfishing, coastal habitat destruction, pollution in maritime environments and overall improvement of Taiwan’s fisheries regulations. Other developments have included enactment of the
Law of Prevention of Marine Pollution, and the creation of a draft Law of Coast Management and National Plan for Promoting Biodiversity. Taiwan’s Fisheries Administration plays key management and enforcement roles in these areas. This organization has also been instrumental in conducting surveys and research on high seas fisheries resources, creating a Vessel Monitoring System to observe the activities of fishing vessels (as set forth in the UN Food and Agriculture Organization Code of Conduct on Responsible Fisheries), encouraging boat owners to engage in cooperation with other maritime nations, and making efforts to participate in international fisheries organizations.

Taiwan adheres to modern fishing industry standards and proactively manages its domestic fleet and maritime resources in several other important areas. The nation’s fishing vessel buyback program reduces pollution and aids in fleet management. Taiwan’s fishing industry training programs are modeled on the International Maritime Organization’s Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel. The creation of artificial reefs in Taiwan’s coastal waters has created shelter for juvenile fish, and successfully prevented illegal fishing. Three major universities—National Taiwan Ocean University, National Taiwan University, and National Sun Yet-Sen University—and numerous vocational schools and specialized institutes have marine science, fishery and aquaculture programs. Taiwan’s 38 fishermen’s cooperatives (which, with their 192,388 male and 143,819 female members, constitute a vigorous part of Taiwanese society) keep Taiwan’s fishing industry close-knit and vital.

Attendees of the International Workshop on Fishery Policy and Management for the South Pacific Region walked away with a complete view of Taiwan’s fishing industry, and many myths about perceived lack of commitment to international norms were purged. The workshop also elevated the profile of the Taiwan fishing industry and brought it into better cooperation with other South Pacific nations. It is in this area that the ICDF hopes to become even more involved in coming months and years. The ICDF has to date focused primarily on agricultural development in the South Pacific. However, given that the South Pacific countries in which the ICDF works—the Marshall Islands, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Nauru, Palau, the Philippines and the Solomon Islands—are themselves storied maritime nations, the ICDF believes now more than ever that continued development of their fishing industries are promising paths to economic development. Taiwan’s decades of modern fishing industry experience and international prominence will offer a deep pool from which to draw experience and expertise during this work. Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs agrees with this “cooperative relationships in diplomacy and fisheries” approach, and strongly supported the recent workshop. Watch the pages of IC&D in the near future for reports on other such fisheries and aquaculture workshops, and ensuing ICDF development in these areas.

* Principal Fisheries Officer Malakai Tuiloa, Fiji Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, presents a gift to ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Chiou Jong-nan.