

# COLLABORATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

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## COLLABORATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

*Conservation faces unique challenges in international waters, where vessels from many countries vie for valuable fish stocks, and can also catch and kill large numbers of non-target species, including seabirds. Over the last decade there has been progress in incorporating seabird protection into international policies and fishing practice.*

Bycatch (accidental capture) in commercial fisheries is a significant issue for marine biodiversity. It has had a severe impact on many species groups, including albatrosses, cetaceans, sharks and sea turtles. Many of these, including the seabirds, are long-lived, and slow to mature and reproduce, increasing the impact of bycatch on their populations.

Bycatch is the main threat to albatrosses - every year longline and trawl fishing fleets kill an estimated 300,000 individuals, driving some albatross species towards extinction. In longline fisheries, albatrosses and petrels get caught on baited hooks at the surface of the sea as the longlines are being set. On trawl vessels, albatrosses can be killed by warp cables, or can become entangled in the nets. Half of all seabird species are declining, and 15 of the 22 albatross species are Globally Threatened.

### FINDING ROUTES TO ENGAGE

Governance and management of these distant waters is a major challenge, as no single nation has jurisdiction on the high seas (that is, the high seas don't belong to any single country). It is, therefore, crucial that international cooperation and countries' commitments within existing international or regional agreements are strengthened.

BirdLife International's Marine Programme has identified engagement with intergovernmental agreements as strategic, and an effective way to mainstream biodiversity into fishing on the high seas<sup>1</sup>.

This work has two main strands. Firstly, strengthening of international policy: Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) are important targets, as they have

a central role in the sustainable management of oceans. Secondly, supporting distant-water fleets to encourage uptake of the simple measures (such as using bird scaring devices or night setting) that, if correctly implemented, significantly reduce seabird bycatch.

For information on how BirdLife International addresses the bycatch issue in areas under national jurisdiction, consult the factsheet *The Albatross Task Force: Finding Solutions to Save Ocean Wanderers*.

### ADVOCATING GLOBAL ACTION - TOWARDS THE BYCATCH MITIGATION MEASURES

RFMOs are international organisations formed by countries interested in finding appropriate management measures for fishing in a particular geographical area. There are around 20 RFMOs in various areas of the globe, each operating under its own formal agreement. All have duties outlined under the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, under which fishing states must cooperate to set appropriate conservation and management measures, especially for migratory species and including some of the most highly-prized fish stocks, such as tuna.

In 2004, BirdLife International assessed the environmental approach of the existing RFMOs. The review found that most were not yet addressing bycatch effectively, with the exception of the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which had already reduced the number of albatrosses being caught as bycatch in its fisheries by 95%. This motivated BirdLife International and the seabird conservation community to act.

Initially, BirdLife prioritised the five tuna RFMOs whose combined geographical scope overlaps with four-fifths of global albatross distribution. BirdLife gathered and analysed available data on albatross distribution and bycatch, presenting the results to the RFMO scientific working groups. This was often done in collaboration with national scientists, and, increasingly, the Agreement for the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP), which is an agreement under the Convention on the Conservation of

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Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS). The information included identification of areas of greatest seabird bycatch risk, and results from trials of bycatch mitigation measures. Collaborative working between BirdLife, ACAP and member states led to conservation measure proposals at RFMO commission meetings, where the decision-making takes place.

Long term studies on albatross population trends and demography, provided by national scientists (especially from the UK and France), played an important role in creating a compelling conservation case to reduce albatross bycatch. Demonstrating solutions to the problem was very powerful.

## AN ACT OF MULTIPLE PLAYERS

Establishing national bonds and working closely with stakeholders was vital. In 2012, South Korea was initially minded to reject a seabird conservation proposal at the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, on the basis that the measures had not yet been proven effective within the South Korean fleet. As a result of BirdLife-Republic of South Korea's commitments to joint working to ensure the effectiveness of measures, South Korea then supported the resolution, committing to help its fleet transition to best-practice bycatch mitigation measures.

Other multilateral agreements, additionally to the RFMOs, have also been important in strengthening integration between fisheries and the environment. Jointly with ACAP, BirdLife led the production of bycatch mitigation factsheets, and identified Internationally Important Sites for ACAP species.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), another key player, has a mandate to support and promote sustainable fisheries. The voluntary FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, adopted in 1995, consists of a collection of principles, goals and elements for action, complemented by Technical Guidelines for Responsible Fisheries, including reducing bycatch. In 1998, the FAO developed the International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries (IPOA-Seabirds) and a similar plan for sharks (IPOA-Sharks). Together with ACAP and the binding UN Fish Stocks Agreement, these voluntary measures provided key leverage for change.

## REGIONAL AND GLOBAL RESPONSES

Since the start of discussions about integrating biodiversity concerns into the fisheries sector, major policy changes have taken place. All RFMOs whose areas overlap with global albatross distribution have recognised the bycatch problem and have adopted measures to reduce it, such that all tuna longline vessels in areas overlapping with albatrosses are now required to use bycatch mitigation measures (with a few exceptions). The five tuna RFMOs have also strengthened requirements for data collection and set

up data collection systems, although they are not yet fully operational. All five tuna-related RFMO have approved the need for a seabird ecological risk assessment.

## SUSTAINING THE CHANGES – ACHIEVING GOALS

Broadly speaking, RFMOs have not yet established penalties for non-compliance with bycatch management measures, other than issuing letters of concern.

Ongoing needs include:

- ensuring full implementation of existing measures
- embedding good practice in national fleets to ensure sustainability of improvements
- improving the consistency of compliance monitoring and bycatch reporting across RFMOs globally
- further strengthening seabird conservation regulations as research identifies improvements that can be made.

BirdLife's goal is that, by 2020, conservation prospects will be improving for those albatross species that are impacted by bycatch; populations will be stabilising, and some species may be downlisted on the IUCN Red List. Another goal is that seabird bycatch avoidance is seen as a central component of fisheries management.

The decade of BirdLife International's engagement in these efforts is a relatively short time period to show significant positive impacts on seabird populations, especially given the long lifespans of albatrosses. An assessment to be carried out in 2016 and 2017 will review the effectiveness of the RFMO measures.

More information at:

- [www.fao.org/docrep/005/v9878e/v9878e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/v9878e/v9878e00.htm)
- [www.fao.org/fishery/publications/technical-guidelines/en](http://www.fao.org/fishery/publications/technical-guidelines/en)
- [www.birdlife.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Regional-Fisheries-Management-RFMO\\_report.pdf](http://www.birdlife.org/sites/default/files/attachments/Regional-Fisheries-Management-RFMO_report.pdf)
- [www.rspb.org.uk/forprofessionals/policy/marine/international/advocacy/](http://www.rspb.org.uk/forprofessionals/policy/marine/international/advocacy/)

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