
Recommendations to the 20th Special Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

14-21 November, 2016 in Vilamoura, Portugal

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) is pleased to be participating once again as the only Canadian civil society group to attend ICCAT. The EAC has worked proactively at Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) and the United Nations General Assembly for many years lending expertise in fisheries science and experience working with sustainable fishing industries. At ICCAT, we work to support sustainable fisheries and continued progress towards ecosystem-based and precautionary management measures.

The EAC calls on ICCAT parties to take the following actions at the 20th Special Meeting:

- Roll over the existing western Atlantic bluefin tuna measure, including the 2016 quota, for one year;
- Maintain the total allowable catch (TAC) for eastern bluefin tuna to the level agreed in Rec. 14-04;
- Advance the process for developing harvest strategies for priority species, including Atlantic bluefin tuna, to ensure the long-term sustainability of ICCAT stocks;
- Reduce the TAC for bigeye tuna to stop overfishing, and continue the Fish Aggregating Device (FAD) Working Group to address juvenile bigeye mortality;
- Establish science-based catch limits for shortfin mako and blue sharks;
- Improve the existing finning ban by moving to a 'fins naturally attached' rule;
- Amend the ICCAT Convention text to include current best practices.

Maintain the current quotas for Atlantic bluefin tuna

Western Atlantic Bluefin tuna

In 2014, ICCAT Parties raised the quota for Western Atlantic bluefin tuna (WABFT) from 1,750 metric tonnes to 2,000 tonnes for the 2015 and 2016 fishing years. The updated stock assessment has also been postponed until 2017. With no new stock assessment, there were no significant changes to the Management Recommendation of the SCRS this year, stating that "new information received this year did not warrant any change to the advice given in 2014." However, some of the new and updated indices point to a worrying trend in the stock. Several of the indices, including the updated US Gulf of Mexico longline, Japanese longline, and two of the three US rod and reel indices showed decreases in abundance, with the rod and reel index for medium fish declining to "near a historic low in recent years". A new fisheries-independent index for Canada's Gulf of St. Lawrence (GSL) shows "less annual variation and smaller recent increases in recent abundance" as compared to the GSL rod and reel index. With less than three years left to meet ICCAT's rebuilding deadline for Western Atlantic bluefin tuna, it does not seem likely that the rebuilding objectives will be met. **The Ecology Action Centre urges ICCAT to extend the current quota for WABFT to the 2017 fishing year by rolling over Recommendation 14-05 to allow the**

stock to continue to rebuild.

Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin tuna

The case of the Eastern stock is similar to that of the western stock. There has been no new stock assessment, and the management advice for the East has not substantively changed from the previous advice. **The most prudent course of action for the Eastern stock would be to stick to the TAC decision laid out in Rec. 14-04, which already includes a 20% increase for 2017.**

Advance the process for developing harvest strategies for priority species, including Atlantic bluefin tuna, to ensure the long-term sustainability of ICCAT stocks

ICCAT continues to move forward on fulfilling the commitments laid out in Recommendations 15-04 and 15-07. However, more work is needed in a timely fashion to ensure that robust harvest strategies can be adopted for priority stocks. Establishing harvest control rules for priority species informed by Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) can offer particular advantages over the traditional approach to fisheries management. Under the MSE approach, management objectives are determined at the outset, when the priority can be placed on objectives such as stability, abundance and yield. Scientists, managers and stakeholders work together throughout the process.

Albacore tuna

Much work has been done in developing an MSE for albacore in accordance with Recommendations 15-07 and 15-04 that set a 5- year deadline for Harvest Control Rule (HCR) development. With albacore serving as the pilot, the work on this species needs to be completed so that bluefin and other priority stocks can follow in a timely manner.

At this Commission meeting, ICCAT Parties should formally adopt the 2017 deadline for albacore HCR adoption proposed in the 2016 SCRS report, and at the same time, adopt a detailed timeline for decision making to ensure the Commission is in the position to meet this deadline. Further, the Commission should adopt the performance indicators for albacore that came out of the Panel 2 intersessional meeting.

Bluefin tuna

The Atlantic-wide Research Programme for Bluefin Tuna (ICCAT GBYP) Core Modelling group for bluefin tuna has also made progress on advancing the development of harvest control rules for bluefin tuna, in accordance with Recommendation 15-07. At this meeting, the Commission should adopt a 2018 deadline for HCR adoption for both bluefin stocks, consistent with the timeline envisioned by the Core Modeling Group and the 2016 SCRS Report. The Commission should also agree to a detailed timeline for MSE and HCR completion in order to ensure that the 2018 deadline can be met.

As a way to ensure that scientists and managers have ample time to discuss management objectives and candidate HCRs, the Commission should schedule a scientist-manager intersessional dialogue in early 2017. This will enable additional stakeholder input from industry and NGOs in line with the timeline for adoption.

Reduce the total allowable catch (TAC) for bigeye tuna to stop overfishing and continue the FAD Working Group to address juvenile bigeye mortality

The 2015 assessment for bigeye tuna indicated that the stock was overfished with overfishing occurring. The Commission adopted Recommendation 15-01 last year in response; however, the measure does not do enough to end overfishing, let alone rebuild the stock, with the current TAC having less than a 49% chance of recovering the stock in the next 13 years. Furthermore, the current measure does not go far enough to address the increased take of juvenile tunas, which is undermining recovery and potential productivity of the stock. **At this meeting, the Commission should re-open Rec. 15-01 to reduce the quota to a level that has a high probability (i.e., at least 70%) of achieving recovery by 2024 and to improve existing FAD management measures.**

The FAD Working Group is an important gathering to address FAD management concerns. However, the Working Group has not yet addressed the already high and growing level of juvenile bigeye mortality, a driver of both continued overfishing of the stock and continuing declines in maximum sustainable yield, according to the SCRS. FAD fishing in the Gulf of Guinea is the primary source of juvenile bigeye mortality. **The Commission should commit to ensuring that the FAD Working Group continues to meet on a regular basis and that its mandate is extended to ensure it can provide critical management recommendations on reducing juvenile bigeye mortality moving forward.**

Establish science-based catch limits for shortfin mako and blue sharks

The SCRS continues to recommend that fishing mortality should not increase for shortfin mako. Specifically, the “Committee reiterates, as a precautionary approach, that catches of shortfin mako sharks should not be increased with respect to the 2006-2010 levels until more reliable stock assessment results are available for both the Northern and Southern stocks.”

The SCRS Ecological Risk Assessment has also identified blue sharks as vulnerable and recommends measures to ensure catches stay within the convention objective. This year, the SCRS recommends that “methods for mitigating shark by-catch by these fisheries also need to be investigated and applied.” Further, the Committee recommends that recent catch levels (2009-2013) should not be increased for the South Atlantic stock of blue sharks. While the Committee could not reach a consensus on a specific management recommendation for the North Atlantic stock, the Commission needs to act with precaution to ensure a sustainable harvest of blue shark is maintained before this shark becomes as depleted as other shark species in the Convention Area.

New research published in 2016¹ found that there is a very high overlap between pelagic longliner activity and hotspots for pelagic shark species like blue shark and shortfin mako in the North Atlantic, and that fishing activity effectively “tracks” the movement of sharks seasonally. The study raised questions about the future sustainability of the North Atlantic pelagic longline fleet given the proclivity of the fishery to operate on important or preferred oceanic shark habitats, and suggested that the implementation of international catch limits would be the simplest option to regulate pelagic shark catches in international waters.

We urge the Commission to establish precautionary catch limits for both shortfin mako and blue sharks, based on the SCRS recommendations and recent scientific findings so that recent catch levels are not increased.

¹ Queiroz, N., Humphries, N. E., Mucientes, G., Hammerschlag, N., Lima, F. P., Scales, K. L., Miller, P. I., Sousa, L. L., Seabra, R., & Sims, D. W. (2016). Ocean-wide tracking of pelagic sharks reveals extent of overlap with longline fishing hotspots. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(6), 1582-1587.

Improve the existing finning ban by moving to a 'fins naturally attached' rule

ICCAT was the first RFMO to ban shark finning, but loopholes exist within the current 5% ratio rule, which means illegal shark fins are still being landed and there remains uncertainty in the landings data. Fin-to-body ratios have been widely criticized as being difficult to enforce and as creating significant issues for accurate data collection. Ratio policies allow room for high grading, and species identification is often heavily reliant on a sharks' fins—if they are removed from the body there can be less confidence that the species is being identified and recorded properly. In addition, the 5% rule can be interpreted differently from place to place, and not all sharks' proportions fit perfectly within the 5%, meaning that additional, illegal fins can be landed and still be within the allotted ratio.

Requiring sharks to be landed with fins attached at the first point of landing is the most straightforward and simplest way of enforcing the finning ban and will greatly improve species-specific data collection for sharks. The North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) and Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) have already adopted such a rule. At ICCAT, support for a fins naturally attached rule has been growing each year, with an increasing number of co-sponsors.

The EAC urges the Commission to support a proposed 'fins naturally attached' regulation this year to strengthen the safeguard for sharks.

Amend the ICCAT Convention text to include current best practices

The EAC applauds the efforts so far to modernize the ICCAT Convention text. We urge ICCAT to adopt the recommendations from the Working Group at this year's meeting. As part of this process, we urge members to expand the list of species covered explicitly by the Convention. Specifically, all shark species listed in Article 64 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Annex 1) should be officially managed by ICCAT.

In addition, the EAC requests that the Commission integrate the precautionary approach and ecosystem-based management, as outlined by the Food and Agriculture Organization Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, when amending the Convention text. Furthermore, the amended Commission Convention should provide the Commission with the authority to make recommendations aimed at maintaining or restoring the abundance of ICCAT species above levels capable of producing maximum sustainable yield.

For more information, please contact:

Katie Schleit
Senior Marine Campaign Coordinator
kschleit@ecologyaction.ca
+1-902-488-4078

Heather Grant
Marine Communications Campaigner
heatherg@ecologyaction.ca
+1-902-446-4840