

**Explanatory note on proposed Recommendation by ICCAT on mobulid rays
(family *Mobulidae*) caught in association with ICCAT fisheries**

(submitted by United Kingdom, European Union, Morocco, Brazil, Gabon, Belize, Egypt and Canada)

This proposed Recommendation would introduce a prohibition on the retention of manta and mobula rays (family *Mobulidae*) caught in association with ICCAT fisheries. It includes voluntary best handling practices for the release of any fish of these species caught, and requirements to report interactions with these species in line with ICCAT data reporting requirements. It also asks SCRS to identify options for future research and data collection to support the conservation of these species.

The proposal seeks to address a gap in RFMO coverage, noting that comparable prohibitions on the retention of mantas and mobulids have been adopted in several other RFMOs.

The proposed prohibition on retention in ICCAT fisheries is intended to strengthen the conservation of these species, several of which are considered endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and all of which are listed under Appendices I and II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) and Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

**Draft Recommendation by ICCAT on mobulid rays (family *Mobulidae*)
caught in association with ICCAT fisheries**

(submitted by United Kingdom, European Union, Morocco, Brazil, Gabon, Belize, Egypt and Canada)

CONSIDERING that manta and mobula rays of the family *Mobulidae* (henceforth referred to as mobulid rays), are caught in association with ICCAT fisheries;

NOTING that mobulid rays exhibit slow growth rates and very low fecundity, and that population growth rates are very low, making them extremely vulnerable to overfishing;

NOTING that mobulid rays are among the Chondrichthyan taxa for which there are sustainability concerns, and all mobulid species reported in the ICCAT Convention area that have been assessed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) are suspected as meeting the criteria for 'Endangered';

CONSIDERING that all species of mobulid ray are listed under Appendices I and II of the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS);

NOTING that CMS Parties "that are Range States of a migratory species listed in Appendix I shall prohibit the taking of animals belonging to such species", and that several fleets operating in the ICCAT convention area already implement measures to protect mobulid rays:

CONSIDERING that all mobulid rays are listed under Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) for which trade shall be closely controlled under specific conditions including, inter alia, that trade will not be detrimental to the survival of the species in the wild;

FURTHER CONSIDERING that comparable measures have been introduced in other tuna RFMOs – namely the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC; Resolution 19/03), Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC, Resolution C-15-04) and Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC, CMM 2019-05);

FURTHER NOTING that several scientific studies presented to the SCRS in recent years indicated that ICCAT fisheries, in particular those using purse seine gear, interact with mobulid rays and that some purse seine fleets operating in the ICCAT Convention area already implement voluntarily existing best practices and procedures for the protection of mobulid rays;

ACNOWLEDGING that mobulid rays require protection in all Oceans and that in line with UNFSA Article 5e appropriate and consistent actions are needed for ensuring that interactions with ICCAT fisheries do not undermine the conservation status of this fish species;

FURTHER ACKNOWLEDGING that the SCRS has previously advised that "Precautionary management measures should be considered for stocks where there is the greatest biological vulnerability and conservation concern, and for which there are very few data", which could reasonably apply to mobulid rays;

NOTING that in its second performance review, in the chapter 'Trends in the status of non-target species,' Panel 4 recommended that "the precautionary approach be consistently applied for associated species considering that the assessments for these species are highly uncertain and that their status is often poorly known";

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE
CONSERVATION OF ATLANTIC TUNAS (ICCAT) RECOMMENDS THAT:

1. Contracting Parties, and Cooperating non-Contracting Parties, Entities or Fishing Entities (hereafter referred to as CPCs) shall prohibit retaining onboard, transshipping, landing or storing any part or whole carcass of all species of mobulid rays (family *Mobulidae*) taken in the Convention area in association with ICCAT fisheries.

2. CPCs shall require vessels flying their flag to promptly release unharmed, to the extent practicable, mobulid rays as soon as they are seen in the net, on the hook or at the vessel, in a manner that will result in the least possible harm to the individual. CPCs should encourage their fishing vessels to implement the handling practices detailed in **Annex 1**, while taking into consideration the safety of the crew.
3. Consistent with the requirements of *Recommendation by ICCAT to Establish Minimum Standards for Fishing Vessel Scientific Observer Programs* (Rec. 16-14), CPCs shall record through their domestic observer programmes the number of discards and releases of mobulid rays caught in ICCAT fisheries and, where possible, an indication of status (dead or alive). These data shall be reported to ICCAT.

Research, capacity building and cooperation

4. CPCs shall, where possible, implement research on mobulid rays in the Convention area in order to identify potential mating, pupping, nursery, feeding and overwintering areas. Based on this research, CPCs shall consider implementing appropriate management measures, such as time and area closures, to provide additional protection for mobulid rays.
5. As appropriate, the Commission and its CPCs shall, where possible, individually and collectively engage in capacity building efforts and other cooperative activities to support the effective implementation of this Recommendation, including entering into cooperative arrangements with other appropriate international bodies.
6. Notwithstanding paragraph 1, in the case of mobulid rays that are unintentionally caught and frozen as part of a purse seine vessel's operation, the vessel must surrender the whole mobulid ray to the responsible governmental authorities, or other competent authority, or discard them at the point of landing. Mobulid rays surrendered in this manner may not be sold or bartered but may be donated for purposes of domestic human consumption.
7. Paragraphs 1-5 shall not apply to vessels operating only north of 47 degrees N or south of 47 degrees S latitude (i.e., primarily outside the geographic range of mobulid rays (family *Mobulidae*)).
8. The SCRS shall, in 2024, review existing data and information relating to the life history and conservation status of mobulid rays, and confirm whether they meet the definition of being a taxon of the greatest biological vulnerability and conservation concern for which there are very few data. Should this be the case, the SCRS shall advise on the appropriateness of applying precautionary management measures such as a prohibition on retention. The SCRS may also identify options for future research and data collection, as well as advise on other mitigation measures.

Entry into force

9. Notwithstanding Article VIII of the ICCAT Convention, CPCs shall implement this Recommendation no later than 1 January 2025.
10. If there is a consensus on the interpretation of the SCRS advice at the 2024 annual meeting of the Commission, this Recommendation will enter into force as scheduled in paragraph 9.

Best handling practices for the safe release of mobulid rays

(Taken from WCPFC CMM 2019-05 - Conservation and Management Measure on Mobulid Rays caught in association with fisheries in the WCPFC Convention area)

Purse seine

Do's:

- Release rays while they are still free-swimming whenever possible (e.g., back down procedure, submerging corks, cutting net).
- It is preferable that larger rays (>60 kg), that are too large to be lifted safely by hand are brailed out of the net and released using a purpose built large-mesh cargo net or canvas sling or similar device as recommended in document SC08-EB-IP-12 (Poisson *et al.*, 2012, Good practices to reduce the mortality of sharks and rays caught incidentally by the tropical tuna purse seiners). It is preferable that release nets or devices are prepared prior to each set.
- It is preferable that small (<30 kg) and medium rays (30-60 kg) are handled by 2 or 3 people and carried by the sides of its wings or preferably using a purpose-built cradle/stretchers while ensuring the safety of the crew.
- When entangled in netting, carefully cut the net away from the animal and release to the sea as quickly as possible while ensuring the safety of the crew.

Don'ts:

- Do not leave a ray on deck until hauling is finished before returning it to the sea.
- Do not punch holes through the bodies of rays (e.g., to pass a cable or line through for lifting the ray).
- Do not gaff, drag, carry, lift or pull a ray by its "cephalic lobes" or tail or by inserting hooks or hands into the gill slits or the spiracles.

Longline

Do's:

- For small rays, gently bring on board and remove as much gear as possible by backing the hook out. If hooks are embedded, either cut the hook with bolt cutters or cut the line at the hook and gently return the animal to the sea.
- For medium to large rays (>30 kg), leave the animal in the water and use a dehooker to remove the hook or a long-handled line cutter to cut the gear as close to the hook as possible (ideally leaving <0.5 meters of line attached to the animal).

Don'ts:

- Do not hit or slam a ray against any surface to remove the animal from the line.
- Do not attempt to dislodge a deeply hooked or ingested hook by pulling on the branch line or using a dehooker.
- Do not attempt to lift medium to large (>30 kg) rays aboard vessel.

- Do not cut the tail.
- Do not gaff, drag, carry, lift or pull a ray by its “cephalic lobes” or tail or by inserting hooks or hands into the gill slits or the spiracles.

Additional recommendation

Knowing that any fishing operation may catch rays, several tools can be prepared in advance (e.g., canvas or net slings or stretchers for carrying or lifting, large mesh net or grid to cover hatches/hoppers in purse seine fisheries, long handled cutters and de-hookers in longline fisheries).