

28th Regular Meeting of the ICCAT Commission

WWF is pleased to participate as an Observer to the 24th Special Meeting of the ICCAT Commission in Limassol, Cyprus from 11-18 November 2024. Effective fisheries management is key to ensuring progress in tuna fisheries sustainability and the conservation of marine wildlife. WWF considers the following priorities as essential milestones for this year's meeting and calls on Contracting Parties and Cooperating non-Contracting Parties (CPCs) to work together cooperatively to find consensus and make progress on fisheries sustainability in the Atlantic Ocean.

Tropical tuna

Despite the stock assessment conducted in 2024 indicating that Yellowfin tuna in the Atlantic is not overfished and overfishing is not taking place, catches continue to regularly exceed the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) of 120,000 t set by Recommendation 22-01.

The reported harvest in 2023, similar to the last 5 years, is above 139,000 t, and well beyond the TAC. The current catch limit is still not allocated to Contracting Parties, making the monitoring of the fisheries extremely ineffective.

The ICCAT Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) in 2021 assessed the stock of Bigeye tuna as overfished, indicating also that overfishing is not taking place with catches at the current level. In 2023 the reported yield (61,320 t) was below the MSY, with the stock status likely to be moving towards the green zone of the Kobe plot.

The 2022 stock assessment of the East and West Atlantic stocks of skipjack, returned a positive picture of stock status indicating the stock is not overfished and not subject to overfishing, and confirming the same result, back in 2014. The Western stock was the first tropical tuna stock to complete the Management Strategy Evaluation process in 2023.

KEY ASKS

- ✓ WWF calls on CPCs to maintain the current catch limit (120,000 t) for the **Yellowfin tuna** stock and to urgently agree on an allocation scheme for the fleets in the Atlantic, including to ensure an effective monitoring system that prevents overfishing.
- ✓ WWF fully supports the adoption of a precautionary TAC for **Bigeye tuna** that would shift the stock status towards the green zone of the Kobe plot with a high probability through 2034. According to scientific advice, maintaining a TAC around 70,000 t will allow this objective to be met with more than 70% probability.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to adopt this year a Management Procedure (MP) for the **Western Atlantic stock of skipjack** and to progress the definition of Harvest Strategies based on Management Strategy Evaluations for all tropical tuna stocks.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to mandate the working group on Integrated Monitoring Measures (IMM) to develop a **Regional Observer Program** for tropical tuna, considering the need for harmonisation and coordination of different national programs.
- ✓ In discussing a new Recommendation for tropical tuna conservation, WWF recommends maintaining the

Commission to adopt a fully transparent FAD-recovery policy, a FAD marking scheme, clear rules for FAD ownership and for activation/deactivation of FAD buoys.

Mediterranean Albacore

Mediterranean albacore was assessed in 2024. The data that are currently available, do not allow scientists to identify a precise stock status outcome, and there is unacceptable variability in the data. The projections made under different scenarios, indicate that with the current TAC of 2,500 t, the stock will continue rebuilding, however the high variability of the stock assessment outputs needs to be addressed as it is not of a standard that should be considered acceptable as the basis for accurate management.

KEY ASKS

- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to urgently mandate the SCRS to develop a plan to rebuild the historical fishery data for Mediterranean albacore in order to improve the **quality of the next stock assessment**.

Swordfish

The status of Atlantic swordfish was last assessed by the SCRS in 2022. The current (2023) yield for the two stocks (North and South Atlantic) is significantly lower than the current TAC and MSY.

While the North Atlantic stock was assessed to be not overfished and overfishing not taking place, the Southern stock is still overfished and subject to overfishing. The average reported catch for the period 2018-2023 is about 8,700 t and did not exceed the enforced TAC in any year.

The first stock assessment in June 2020, after the implementation of Recommendation 16-05, for a recovery plan for Mediterranean swordfish, highlighted the concerning picture of significant gaps in catch reports, especially for juveniles that are caught below the minimum landing size and are largely discarded dead at sea, with very limited information returned to the system for effective management. Despite the scarcity of data, the estimate provided by scientists was that the mortality of undersized fish is about 24% of the total catches, representing a real threat to the effectiveness of the rebuilding plan itself. It also risks triggering an illegal trade of undersized specimens in the region.

KEY ASKS

- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to adopt a **Management Procedure (MP) for swordfish in the North Atlantic** that was developed and tested by the SCRS working group. WWF asks the Commission to set the TAC based on that MP, for 2024 and beyond.
- ✓ WWF urges the Commission to mandate the SCRS to clearly assess **Mediterranean swordfish juvenile mortality** and the implications on the recovery of the stock. ICCAT must then take urgent action to effectively minimize juvenile mortality, to secure the recovery of Mediterranean swordfish. Reporting and traceability should also be improved as well as ensuring compliance with ICCAT Recommendation 03-04 that prohibits the use of driftnets for fisheries targeting large pelagics in the Mediterranean.

Sharks & rays

The adoption of Recommendation 21-09 establishing a comprehensive rebuilding program for the endangered shortfin mako shark in the North Atlantic was a significant milestone towards stopping the decline of the stock and starting recovery. Although for 2022 retention was not allowed, reported catches, landings and discards, in the North Atlantic were still above 800 t, and the estimated fishing mortality including dead discards and post-release mortalities continues to exceed the acceptable fishing mortality that would allow rebuilding the stock. The SCRS also noted that the reporting of dead discards and live releases need to be improved significantly.

In 2023 the SCRS assessed the status of blue shark in the North and South Atlantic and advised that the current TAC for both stocks need to be reduced significantly to ensure a high probability of maintaining the stocks in the green quadrant of the Kobe plot.

There is increasing evidence that the Mediterranean blue shark population should be treated as a separate management unit from the Atlantic one ¹. There is a concerning lack of data for this stock and no scientific assessment, despite the critical status of the species as per IUCN² and the negative non-detrimental finding for CITES by the EU for Mediterranean Blue shark.

KEY ASKS

- ✓ **Maintain the current TAC of zero for shortfin mako sharks.** In addition, introduce measures aimed at reducing pelagic sharks mortality due to interactions with the fishing gear, such as prohibiting wire leaders, shark lines and other catch mitigation techniques to immediately reduce the mortality rate of pelagic sharks. This is of particular relevance to shortfin mako sharks for which current mortalities still exceed a level that would allow rebuilding the stock, noting also that the catches consist mostly of juveniles with a higher risk of at haul and post-release mortality.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to revise and reduce the current **TAC for the North Atlantic stock of blue shark** (39,102 t), following scientific advice and reducing the current catch limits to levels that will maintain the stock in the green quadrant of the Kobe plot with a high probability. The current yield reported in 2023 is 24,773 t. WWF notes that with this level of catches there will be more than 90% of probabilities to achieve the management objectives by 2033.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to reduce the **TAC for the South Atlantic stock of blue shark** (27,711 t). A TAC set at around 25,000 t will ensure to meet the management objectives with a probability higher than 60%.
- ✓ WWF urges the Commission to consider management measures for **blue shark in the Mediterranean** and the SCRS to provide management advice in 2025 considering also a zero TAC policy following the precautionary approach.
- ✓ For all shark species, WWF asks all CPCs, as a matter of priority, to adopt a **fins naturally attached policy**. WWF notes the excellent measures already undertaken by other RFMOs such as NAFO (2017), GFCM (2018) and partially IOTC (2018), and notes that ICCAT is lagging badly behind other RMFOs on this important issue.
- ✓ WWF urges CPCs to follow the scientific advice and support that the Commission give full effect to the Recommendations for the conservation of **whale sharks** (*Rhincodon typus*) and **mobulid rays** (family mobulidae) caught in ICCAT fisheries to enter into force in 2025.
- ✓ WWF recommends that the SCRS advises on prohibition of retentions and better data reporting of bycatch of additional species including **basking sharks** and **great white sharks** and management measures for frequent bycatch species such as **pelagic stingrays**.
- ✓ WWF also underlines the importance of collaboration with other conventions and Regional Fisheries Management bodies, including in particular CITES, CMS and GFCM.
- ✓ WWF urges parties to support the research on the in the identification of critical habitat including mating and nursery areas, to inform spatio-temporal management measures and reduce bycatch rates.

¹ Dolfo, V., Boissin, E., Lapinski, M., & Planes, S. (2024). New insights into population structure, demographic history, and effective population size of the critically endangered blue shark *Prionace glauca* in the Mediterranean Sea. *PLoS one*, 19(6), e0305608.

² Biton-PorSmoguer, Sebastián, and Josep Lloret. "Potentially unsustainable fisheries of a critically-endangered pelagic shark species: The case of the Blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) in the Western Mediterranean Sea." *Cybium* 42.3 (2018): 299-302.

Sims, D., Fowler, S.L., Ferretti, F. & Stevens, J. 2016. *Prionace glauca* (Mediterranean assessment). *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2016: e.T39381A16553182. Accessed on 29 October 2024.

- ✓ WWF welcomes the proposals of CPCs to improve the management of sharks and rays in ICCAT fisheries and the attempt to reduce complexity in merging recommendations. Throughout this process CPCs to take care to ensure that existing recommendations are not weakened.

Fleets management and monitoring

The fishing fleet operating in the Atlantic Ocean is growing constantly and overcapacity represents a major risk factor for the overexploitation of fish stocks.

Observer coverage and electronic monitoring is essential to ensure effective fisheries management, compliance and reporting. The current minimum of 10% coverage for Atlantic longline vessels does not ensure effective monitoring and independent verification of fishing operations at sea.

KEY ASKS

- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to agree on a mechanism to **limit the capacity** of the fishing fleet operating in the Atlantic Ocean through the adoption of closed vessel registries and to harmonize the metrics to measure capacity of different fleets.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to require that all industrial fisheries, including supporting vessels and all those engaged in at sea transshipment are covered by 100% **observer coverage** (human and/or electronic) and adopt a timeline for implementation by 2027.
- ✓ WWF asks the Commission to revise ICCAT Recommendation 21-15 to strengthen the regulation of **at-sea transshipment** requiring a near real-time electronic reporting, carrier vessels to be only flagged to ICCAT CPCs and that AIS data are reported in addition to VMS data.

For more information

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