

Recommendations to the 23rd Regular Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)

18-25 November in Cape Town, South Africa

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) is pleased to be participating once again as a Canadian civil society observer to ICCAT. The EAC has worked proactively at Regional Fisheries Management Organizations 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 continued progress towards ecosystem based and precautionary management measures.

The Ecology Action Centre calls on ICCAT parties to continue to set precautionary catch limits for Atlantic bluefin tuna and address bycatch issues in the ICCAT convention area, especially the management of shark species through the following actions:

Maintain current quotas for western Atlantic bluefin tuna

Recent indicators suggest that recovery of western Atlantic bluefin tuna may be beginning; however the stock is still at only 36% of 1970s levels. Increasing fishing mortality at such a critical time may undermine conservation efforts.

Since there is no new stock assessment, the management recommendations for 2013 remain the same as for 2012, and in fact are even stronger—do not increase the western bluefin quota. The 2013 management advice shows that maintaining catch at current levels of 1,750 metric tonnes (MT) or lower would be expected to protect the 2003 year class, allow the spawning biomass to increase, and allow scientists to develop a clearer understanding of the population growth and recovery trajectory.

In the absence of certainty regarding the correct recruitment scenario, the SCRS has deemed the high recruitment and low recruitment scenarios equally plausible. Making management decisions only based on the low recruitment scenario may prove to be disastrous for the stock and would go against the scientific advice. Further, the 2013 SCRS report noted that a quota of 1,750 MT would allow scientists to discern the correct recruitment hypothesis by 2024, and a lower quota of 1000 MT could do so by 2018. The report also notes that any total allowable catch should include any scientific research quota.

Given the strong scientific advice, and the possibility of resolving the high and low recruitment debate, **we urge the Commission to maintain the current catch limit at 1,750 MT for the Western Atlantic bluefin tuna population, inclusive of any scientific research quota.**

Marine Program

2705 Fern Lane • Halifax, Nova Scotia • Canada B3K 4L3
Phone: (902) 446-4840 • Fax: (902) 405-3716 • Email: marine@ecologyaction.ca
www.ecologyaction.ca/content/marine



Maintain current quotas for eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna

ICCAT adopted a 2014 eastern quota in 2012 and there is no new stock assessment on which to base an increase. The SCRS has reiterated in 2013 that there is substantial uncertainty about the speed and magnitude of recovery estimated in the 2012 stock assessment, and has concluded that there is not enough certainty to support a substantial change in quota. In addition, the SCRS notes that management actions taken in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean likely impact the recovery of the western Atlantic. As the eastern population is much larger than the west, even small rates of mixing from east to west could have considerable effects on the population. Strong management of the eastern Atlantic bluefin stock is critical to population recovery of the eastern stock and also to the health of western bluefin.

To ensure that the eastern bluefin population continues to grow and that ICCAT management continues to be science-based, ICCAT parties must not increase the quota until the new stock assessment model is in place in 2015 and the existing uncertainty is addressed. **We urge the Commission to follow scientific advice on the eastern Atlantic bluefin quota and once again maintain the quota at 13,400 MT for 2014 and 2015.**

Fully implement the eBCD by March 2014 to track all catch of bluefin tuna, including fish caught in recreational fisheries

The current paper-based system used by ICCAT to track catch is outdated with many flaws. ICCAT put forward a plan at the 2010 meeting to implement an electronic version of the Bluefin Catch Document (eBCD) system to replace the paper-based system. The eBCD has the potential to help combat the serious problem of illegal fishing in the eastern Atlantic bluefin fishery as well as non-reporting of recreational catch in the east and west.

Recreationally-caught bluefin should be reported in the new eBCD system. It is necessary that the amount of bluefin caught from recreational fisheries, for all ICCAT parties, is properly accounted for in catch records and subsequent stock assessment.

The eBCD implementation has already been postponed twice, and members have had the opportunity to trial the eBCD system in 2013. Implementing the eBCD by 2014 is essential to enforce quotas and eliminate fraud and misreporting in the ICCAT bluefin tuna fishery. **We urge the Commission to remain committed to the March 2014 eBCD implementation deadline and agree to track all catch, including recreational fisheries, regardless of origin or destination.**

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Prohibit the retention of porbeagle sharks in the ICCAT convention area

The SCRS Ecological Risk Assessment has named the porbeagle shark one of the most vulnerable sharks in the ICCAT area and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature has assessed the species as critically endangered in the North East Atlantic and Endangered in the North West Atlantic. In March 2013, porbeagle sharks were included in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

Current fishing mortality, mostly from bycatch fisheries, in the North West Atlantic adds decades to the already slow recovery trajectory pushing it to upwards of 100 years for this vulnerable shark. While admirable research and management efforts have been made, estimates of dead discards, post release mortality or environmental changes over the possible century of recovery time are not accounted for, and there may be unregulated and unreported high seas catch not represented in abundance models. **We urge the Commission to take the most precautionary action possible to ensure the shortest recovery time for porbeagles by prohibiting retention in the ICCAT convention area.**

Establish science based catch limits for shortfin mako and blue sharks

The SCRS continues to recommend fishing mortality does not increase for shortfin mako. Catch should be limited to historical average catches that ensures mortality is below current levels until such a time as scientifically based catch limits can be established.

The SCRS Ecological Risk Assessment has also identified blue sharks as vulnerable and recommends measures to ensure catches stay within the Convention Objective. The Commission needs to act with precaution to ensure sustainable harvest of blue shark is maintained before this shark becomes as depleted as other shark species in the convention area. Establishing precautionary catch limits based on historic averages that maintain mortality below current levels is the first step until such time as scientifically based limits can be established.

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 with the 5% rule that mean illegal shark fins are still being landed. Requiring sharks to be landed with fins attached at the first point of landing is the most straightforward way of enforcing the finning ban and will greatly improve species-specific data collection for sharks. **The Ecology Action Centre urges the Commission to support a proposed 'fins attached' regulation.**

For more information, please contact:

Katie Schleit

Marine Campaign Coordinator, Ecology Action Centre

kschleit@ecologyaction.ca

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