



POSITION PAPER

2014

EAST ATLANTIC AND MEDITERRANEAN BLUEFIN TUNA

Meeting of International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) Genoa, Italy 10-17 November 2014

BACKGROUND

The millennia-old bluefin tuna fishery in the Mediterranean entered a phase of rapid and intense deterioration in the last decade of the 20th Century when the new practice of farming wild-caught tunas, formerly unknown in the Mediterranean, mushroomed without control. This generated a perverse overfishing spiral as the growing demand for live large tunas fuelled the massive development of the industrial purse seine fleets and their expansion over virtually all Mediterranean waters where the bluefin tuna gathered to reproduce.

WWF was first to warn about this new threat and since 2001 has led the international campaign to avoid the collapse of the bluefin tuna population and to ensure a rational and sustainable fishing activity.

After years of mismanagement, finally in 2006 ICCAT reacted to the clear calls from science and civil society worldwide to avert an upcoming collapse of the fishery and the stock and adopted a first recovery plan for the species. This first plan still fell very short of following scientific advice and it has been increasingly strengthened and refined along the years – particularly since 2009, coinciding with a proposal to list the species in the App. I of the CITES Convention in 2010. In 2012 and 2013 ICCAT Contracting Parties (CPCs) acted responsibly and set the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) at the scientifically recommended level. There is consensus that total catches have substantially declined in the last few years.

In 2014 ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) performed an update of the last stock assessment for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna. Scientists concluded that the management efforts conducted over the last years have resulted in a substantial increase in population size, including even the possibility that a full recovery of the stock to the so-called Maximum Sustainable Yield level (MSY) might be reached soon. However, scientists strongly warn of the huge uncertainties surrounding the assessment exercise which have prevented an agreement being reached on robust advice to ICCAT regarding quotas and other aspects. Consequently the SCRS suggests a precautionary approach implying either keeping the current Total Allowable Catch (13,500 t) or, as an option, raising it moderately over several years up to the most conservative estimate of the MSY level (around 23,000 t).

However, there is still concern about the potential for illegal fishing due to overcapacity and loopholes plaguing traceability and control. In 2014 ICCAT SCRS "remains concerned about current capacity which could easily harvest catch volumes well in excess of the rebuilding strategy adopted by the Commission", in line with recent WWF studies.

A new WWF study led by an international expert concludes that the current Bluefin Tuna Catch Document (BCD) scheme does not deliver real traceability and is plagued with shortcomings that compromise its ability to keep illegal bluefin products off the market. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that ICCAT's BCD does not meet the minimum traceability standards required under the European Union IUU Regulation, Europe's legal instrument to keep illegal fish products off the market.

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WWF RECOMMENDS THAT ICCAT CPCs:

1. Maintain the TAC at around the current level (13,500 t); in case of increase, keep the TAC below the most conservative estimate of the MSY and avoid any annual increases above 10% (e.g. a maximum final TAC of up to 20,000 t and reached over 5 years). The latter recommendation on TAC increase is conditional upon the adoption of new measures ensuring a full traceability of the fish, as detailed in point 2 below.

SCRS scientists have concluded that the management efforts developed in recent years have resulted in an increase in population size, even including the possibility that the stock might soon recover to the MSY level. However, they strongly warn of the huge uncertainties surrounding the assessment exercise, which have made it impossible to agree on robust advice to the Commission. It should be kept in mind that even the most conservative estimate of the MSY itself (the 23,000 t figure) is subject to a considerable margin of error, and precaution dictates not taking this central figure as a management target but rather as an upper limit that should not be reached.

WWF calls on ICCAT to adopt a highly precautionary approach and to make any decision on the TAC this year conditional to annual scientific validation from the SCRS and, particularly, to the results of the full stock assessment scheduled for 2015/2016. The urgent reform of the BCD scheme to ensure full traceability (see below) should be a prerequisite for any moderate increase in the TAC.

2. Urgently reform the current BCD scheme.

ICCAT's Bluefin Tuna Catch Document (BCD) aims at ensuring a full traceability of Atlantic bluefin tuna from catch to market. The successful implementation of this scheme is vital to eradicate the illegal practices that have been plaguing this fishery, by ensuring only legal fish enters the global markets.

An important effort has been made by ICCAT Secretariat and ICCAT CPCs to put in place the BCD scheme. However, as WWF reports have repeatedly demonstrated in recent years, the way in which the BCD scheme is currently implemented it cannot avoid the laundering and marketing of fish obtained in contravention of ICCAT management rules.

A rigorous technical analysis produced by WWF identifies a number of serious shortcomings in the current BCD scheme that severely hampers its efficacy. Current loopholes, besides compromising the ability of the BCD scheme to keep illegal bluefin products off the market, are also found to make the current system discriminatory against other sectors of the fishing industry subject to more stringent traceability requirements. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the current ICCAT BCD does not meet the minimum standards required under the EU IUU Regulation – the EU legal instrument to keep illegal fish products off the EU market.

In view of the above, WWF's analysis includes almost 50 detailed proposals to improve the current BCD scheme and to eliminate the shortcomings that still allow illegal bluefin tuna to reach the markets.

WWF calls on ICCAT to undertake, among others, the following key reforms that are deemed crucial to ensure full traceability as a matter of utmost urgency:

- To provide for the compulsory, physical segregation of the fish upon arrival at a fattening farm on the basis of the principle **1 fishing vessel/1 catch/1 BCD/1 cage** (including for every vessel involved in Joint Fishing Operations, see below)
- To ensure that the BCD requires in all its relevant sections the precise identification of any farmed fish on the basis of the principle **1 fishing vessel/1 catch/1 BCD/1 cage**
- To restrict BCD verifications to public authorities only, having at their disposal the legal means and expertise for conducting such activities.

The proposed improvements should be given priority over the further development of the electronic version of the current BCD scheme (the e-BCD), as they address fundamental aspects undermining the efficacy of the overall approach.

3. Overhaul the figure of the Joint Fishing Operations (JFOs).

The generalized use of JFOs in purse seine fishing activities can be considered a circumvention of the general principles that apply to all actors and negatively impacts on traceability controls.

WWF calls on ICCAT to take into account in particular the following aspects:

- As JFOs mean derogations from the general rules, their authorization and implementation should be subject to additional conditions to ensure a level playing field.
- Case per case JFO authorizations should be conditional on appropriate justification as to why it is necessary to conduct the proposed JFO.
- In all cases, all fishing vessels declared under a given JFO should actually contribute to the catch activities.
- Strict cooperation procedures between ICCAT CPCs and Flag States involved in JFOs should be established as a prerequisite for authorization.
- The principle **1 fishing vessel/1 catch/1 BCD/1 cage** should apply to every vessel in a JFO.

4. Fully support ICCAT SCRS in its endeavor to develop a new methodology and gather new data leading to a much more reliable and robust stock assessment in 2015/2016.

In line with ICCAT SCRS in 2014, **WWF recommends** “the continuation of enhanced data collection program and the replacement of current assessment methods with appropriate approaches that take unquantified uncertainties into account”. SCRS has been working hard since 2012 to put together the necessary tools to carry out a new stock assessment in 2015/2016 based on “new assessment modeling approaches and inputs”, as provided for by ICCAT Rec. 12-03.

WWF's study on ICCAT's bluefin tuna traceability is available at

http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/wwf_assessment_of_iccat_bluefin_traceability_scheme.pdf



Why we are here

To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.