



WWF

POSITION PAPER

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EAST ATLANTIC AND MEDITERRANEAN BLUEFIN TUNA

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WWF's vision for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery is that of a stock sustainably managed to the benefit of marine ecosystems, fisheries communities and consumers. Today we might be closer to this, something that would have seemed unthinkable only a few years ago. WWF calls on the responsibility of ICCAT CPCs and the fishing industry to build on this momentum and keep recovery ambitions high. Big achievements are long in the making but in only an instant can be lost.

BACKGROUND

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

After several years of obvious mismanagement and ignoring clear calls of science and civil society worldwide to avert the imminent collapse of the fishery and the stock, in 2006 ICCAT adopted a first recovery plan for the species. The plan still fell very short of following scientific advice but it has been increasingly strengthened and refined over the years – particularly since 2009, coinciding with a proposal to list the species in App. I of the CITES Convention. The current plan includes a minimum landing size matching the size at maturity for the species, an open season for purse seine fleets of just one month a year, a TAC at 12,900t (compared to 32,000t in 2006), an ICCAT Regional Observer Programme, a Catch Documentation Scheme (the BCD), a fleet capacity reduction plan and a Scheme of Joint International Inspection. As a result, there is consensus in ICCAT that real catches (including the illegal ones) have substantially declined over the past few years. Illegal fishing is still a major concern, however, due to overcapacity and control loopholes, as exemplified by the cases WWF has submitted to the ICCAT compliance committee this year and several studies based on international trade suggesting that actual catches are more than double the reported ones.

This year ICCAT SCRS has updated the 2010 stock assessment. Overall, ICCAT scientists warn that the assessment methodology currently used doesn't satisfactorily address the substantial uncertainties in fisheries and biological data. The analyses point to a likely increase in the spawning biomass of the stock over the last few years, but the magnitude and speed of this recovery is deemed as "highly uncertain". Based on forecast analyses ICCAT SCRS recommends keeping the TAC at current levels as it is likely to allow the stock to increase and is consistent with the ICCAT goal of rebuilding the stock by 2022. Besides, ICCAT SCRS recommends extending the current main management measures to the next three years (the next assessment is scheduled in 2015) because "a period of stabilization in the main management measures would allow SCRS to better estimate the amplitude and speed of recent trends in F and SSB in the coming years".

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WWF RECOMMENDS THAT ICCAT CPCs:

1. Extend the current (2012) management measures, including the TAC and fishing seasons, to the period 2013-2015.

ICCAT SCRS is extraordinarily clear in its last assessment on its advice to keep current management measures (including “catches at the current TAC or at the 2010 TAC”) to meet the goal to achieve B_{MSY} . Even if it acknowledges that a “slightly higher TAC may achieve recovery by 2022” it warns that “this outcome needs to be confirmed by future data and analyses” as “the speed and magnitude of the rebuilding of the SSB [spawning stock biomass] remains highly uncertain.” Current signs of stock increase are encouraging and show that good management pays even in apparently hopeless fisheries. It has required a huge effort from all stakeholders to reach this point. It is in the interest of the bluefin fishery, ICCAT and the global fisheries governance system to make the Atlantic bluefin a management success story after being the global icon for overfishing for the last decade.

2. Review and strengthen the current fishing capacity reduction plan to bring real catch capacity down to the level of fishing possibilities.

ICCAT SCRS warns in its last BFT assessment that current capacity levels “could easily harvest catch volumes well in excess of the rebuilding strategy adopted by the Commission”. ICCAT first adopted a fleet capacity reduction plan for the BFT in 2008 (ICCAT Rec. 08-05) which was further refined in 2010 (ICCAT Rec. 10-04). The current plan ends in 2013, when it is assumed that all fishing overcapacity will have been phased out. However, a recent assessment (SCRS/2011/158) shows the current plan is based on strongly underestimated catch rates per fleet segment resulting in still huge overcapacity (worth over 200% of the TAC). This is consistent with the warning from the SCRS this year. WWF calls on ICCAT to extend the current capacity reduction plan to the next three-year period using updated, more realistic estimates of potential catch rates to ensure that overcapacity is fully removed at the end of the period.

3. Make it obligatory for tuna farms to record size at harvest of all individual fish and to submit the information to ICCAT SCRS for stock assessment purposes.

According to SCRS, the lack of reliable size data on purse seine catches strongly affects the results of the current stock assessment as it is a source of error and uncertainty. WWF calls on ICCAT CPCs to make it obligatory for farms to routinely sample every fish for weight and length at harvest and to submit this information with catch date, gear type, flag of catching vessel/trap and area of capture to the SCRS. WWF also calls on ICCAT CPCs to make it mandatory for farms to submit complete information on length and weight of individual fish prior to caging based on stereoscopic and/or acoustic methodologies. In addition, ICCAT SCRS warns this year that “it is difficult to derive any clearer conclusion without more precise scientific information about the catch composition, effort and spatial distribution of the main Mediterranean fisheries”. Concerning this latter point WWF calls on ICCAT to ensure that up-to-date disaggregated VMS and BCD data is fully and promptly made available to ICCAT SCRS for scientific purposes.

4. Support the use of international trade data in scientific analyses and compliance assessments.

ICCAT SCRS warns that “since the late 1990s size samples cannot be obtained from Mediterranean purse seiners due to farming”. This major data limitation seriously undermines the reliability of any assessment of the stock. WWF calls on ICCAT CPCs to submit to ICCAT SCRS the most precise information available on Atlantic bluefin tuna trade fluxes to enable ICCAT scientists to include catch composition data missing for the last years. In addition, and as shown by recent studies presented to ICCAT, trade data allow the assessment of IUU catches. WWF also calls on ICCAT CPCs to mandate the ICCAT Committee on Compliance (CoC) to formally assess compliance with the TACs based on these data.

5. Fully support ICCAT Atlantic Wide Research Program for Bluefin Tuna (GBYP) and SCRS to recover data and to develop new methods leading to a much more reliable stock assessment in 2015.

WWF calls on ICCAT CPCs to endow the GBYP data recovery programme with the necessary means to contribute, as a matter of urgency, fisheries-independent indicators on stock status. Similarly, WWF calls for maximum support to SCRS to develop a new stock assessment methodology that takes unquantified uncertainties into account, in time for the next assessment scheduled in 2015.

WWF also supports the swift implementation of the electronic Bluefin Tuna Catch Document (BCD) programme as well as the strengthening of controls and compliance in the fishery. WWF notes with strong concern ICCAT’s reduced attention to compliance issues in the past year, including the elimination of the intersessional CoC meeting prior to the start of the East Atlantic bluefin tuna fishing season and of the CoC two-day annual meeting traditionally scheduled to take place at the beginning of the annual ICCAT meeting. The strong commitment by ICCAT CPCs to fight IUU has been one of the main pillars of the incipient recovery of the stock. Any relaxation on this matter would risk returning tuna fisheries to their darkest hour and destroying the achievements of years of productive collective work.



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.

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