

Birdlife International Statement:

Electronic Monitoring must be prioritised to ensure improved data collection on the bycatch of seabirds

18th session of the WCPFC Scientific Committee – August 2022, online.

Birdlife International thanks the WCPFC Secretariat for continuing progress to improve fisheries management in the WCPO. We recognise the ongoing difficulties of the circumstances caused by COVID-19 and sincerely appreciate the efforts that have been made to continue work and hold meetings.

Birdlife International re-emphasizes the responsibilities of the WCPFC and its Members to minimise bycatch on populations as established under the UN Fish Stocks Agreement and committed to in member's National Plans of Actions for Seabirds. The members 2021 fishing year annual reports highlights worrying levels of observer coverage, which is severely impacting consistent data collection for target catch as well as ecologically related species (ERS). There is clearly a failure by some Members to meet their data collection obligations of the Convention and it must be addressed urgently.

THE CONCERN

Ongoing low observer coverage is undermining the integrity of the WCPFC to demonstrate it is minimising harm to ecologically related species.

The 2021 annual reports again highlight the pressing need for the observer programme to be supplemented with Electronic Monitoring to ensure data collection requirements are met, including those related to ERS.

Several Members reported observer coverage rates lower than in previous years, and in particular we would highlight that Japan reported 0% observer coverage in all areas overlapping with seabirds. This is ~50 million hooks in the North Pacific (the second highest fishing effort in this area), and >4 million hooks south of 30°S (see Tables 1-3).

This is highly concerning considering Japan's previously reported high seabird bycatch rates, over >1600 observed seabird captures in 2019.

Similarly, Chinese Taipei have reduced their observer coverage south of 30°S from 5% in 2020 to just 0.4% in 2021. The areas south of 30°S are highly important areas for seabirds and fishing effort in this area represents the greatest risk to threatened species.

North of 23°N, both China (for the second year running) and Japan had no observer coverage, and Chinese Taipei had just 1.4% coverage.

Covid-19 is cited as the reason for this temporary reduction in observer coverage, however, Australia, China, New Zealand and the USA have all maintained observer coverage levels above 8% [8.97% - 11.7%] South of 30°S. Chinese Taipei deployed over 50 observers in 2021 (noting that the distribution of coverage remains low in areas with high seabird abundance: south of 30°S – 0.4%, 25-30°S – 5.4% and N of 23°N – 1.3%), and in the North Pacific Hawaiian fishery the USA had observer coverage > 19%.

The recent annual reports highlight the urgency needed in implementing Electronic Monitoring (EM) to supplement data collection when human observation is disrupted.

Question for Members that have reduced or halted observer coverage (Japan, Chinese Taipei). Why were you not able to maintain at least 5% observer coverage in 2021, particularly in areas overlapping with seabirds, when other Members did, and in some cases surpassed the 5% significantly?

THE SOLUTION

Observer coverage (human and electronic review rate) of WCPFC fleets should be increased to a minimum of 20% by 2023.

The best available scientific evidence indicates that even a consistently applied level of 5% coverage is statistically and practically useless to effectively achieve most management objectives.

At 5% -- the current observer coverage requirement will not produce the quality or quantity of data necessary to properly manage the fishery and its impacts to ERS. Indeed, the probability of detecting rare events, such as interactions with seabirds is hampered by ongoing low observer coverage – again well below the 5% threshold for the reporting year 2021 in areas of high seabird abundance.

Further, low observer coverage exacerbates self-reporting bias because fishers modify their fishing practices (e.g., bycatch rates, handling, and release practices) and gear use (e.g., mitigation measures use) in the presence of an observer. The higher the observer coverage rate, the more integrity there is in data reporting.

BirdLife International once again reiterates the urgent need for increased observer coverage using human observers and electronic monitoring to improve the estimates of seabird bycatch rates in WCPFC fisheries.

By continuing to fail to secure a scientifically or statistically valid level of observer coverage, particularly on longline vessels, CCMs will never meet the mandate of the WCPF Convention to generate and use the best available scientific information. The SC must take action to improve observer coverage across all longline vessels operating in the WCPO.

Table 1. Effort observed and reported seabird captures in 2018 - 2021 [South of 30°S]

Country	Year	Fishing effort			Observed seabirds hooked	
		Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)
Australia	2018	37	3,084	11.4	8	0.023
	2019	33	2,537	12.1	8	0.026
	2020	30	1,721	9.8	9	0.005
	2021	29	1,801	9.4	7	0.004
China	2018	19	5,025	3.48	0	0
	2019	22	2,312	0	0	0
	2020	26	3,121	9.42	1	0.003
	2021	23	6,511	8.97	0	0
Chinese Taipei	2018	44	6,508	3.3	0	0
	2019	41	9,577	5.6	7	0.013
	2020	58†	10,172	5.0	4	0.008
	2021	32†	4,852†	0.4†	0†	0.000†
Japan§	2018	27	7,003	2.4*	37	0.217
	2019	27	5,500	17.5	1140	1.185
	2020	21	3,706	17.9	13	0.063
	2021	23	4,036	0	Unknown	Unknown
New Zealand	2018	33	2,233	13.1	98	0.34
	2019	28	1,978	8.4	56	0.34
	2020	28	1,949	9.9	24	0.124
	2021	28	1,535	11.7	53	0.296

*Observer coverage may be low due to some data having been removed.

† Preliminary data

§ combined data for vessels larger than 20GRT (>=24m) and less than 20GRT (<24m)

Table 2. Effort observed and reported seabird captures 2018- 2021 [between 25°S - 30°S]

Country	Year	Fishing effort			Observed seabirds bycaught	
		Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)
Australia	2018	27	2,917	10.2	5	0.017
	2019	26	3,264	12.0	3	0.008
	2020	22	3,990	10.2	2	0.005
	2021	20	2,600	10.2	1	0.000
China	2018	335	140,011	4.59	1	0.00015
	2019	339	159,311	6.3	6	0.0006
	2020	349	152,900	7.06	5	0.00046
	2021*	308	140,511	9.19	0	0
Chinese Taipei*	2018	870	148,857	4.72	8	0.008
	2019	45	6,637	12.5	11	0.013
	2020	99	15,393	7.4	0	0
	2021	38†	4,672†	5.4†	1†	0.004†
Japan§	2018	228	42,889	3.58	7	0.251
	2019	214	43,548	4.03	5	0.200
	2020	14	1,618	8.2	0	0.00
	2021	12	938	0	Unknown	Unknown

* Combined data for 23°N – 25°S and 25°S – 30°S

† Preliminary data

§ combined data for vessels larger than 20GRT (>=24m) and less than 20GRT (<24m)

Table 3. Effort observed and reported seabird captures in 2018 - 2021[North of 23°N]

Country	Year	Fishing effort			Observed seabirds bycaught	
		Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% of hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)
China	2018	10	779	15.15	6	0.05
	2019	9	144	8.33	0	0
	2020	10	745	0	0	0
	2021	17	959	0	unknown	unknown
Chinese Taipei	2018	521	26,173	5.5	3	0.002
	2019	603†	31,762†	2.2†	2†	0.003†
	2020	205	28,843	4.8	42	0.031
	2021	109†	16,724†	1.3†	9†	0.041†
Japan§	2018	241	61,994	2.25	116	0.125
	2019	233	63,373	3.08	520	0.249
	2020	256	70,906	0.06	28	0.703
	2021	211	49,840	0	Unknown	Unknown
USA* (Hawai'i only)	2018	142	54,482	20.40	249	0.02
	2019	146	63,350	21.03	226	0.02
	2020	143	58,763	15.87	188	0.02
	2021	143	64,985	19.12	184	0.01

* Reports effort north of 23° N and 23° N – 30° S areas combined.

† Preliminary data

§ combined data for vessels larger than 20GRT (>=24m) and less than 20GRT (<24m)