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BirdLife International Statement to the 21st session of the WCPFC Scientific Committee (SC21)

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Submitted by BirdLife International

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August 11th-22nd, 2025, Nuku'alofa, Tonga.

BirdLife International thanks the WCPFC Secretariat for preparations of the 21st meeting of the Scientific Committee and our gracious hosts, Tonga. We also thank Members for their continued efforts to identify improved seabird bycatch mitigation measures.

BirdLife International wish to express our strong support for the recommendations put forth by New Zealand for the review of the Conservation and Management Measure to mitigate the impact of fishing for highly migratory fish stocks on seabirds (CMM 2018-03). This review, tasked by WCPFC21 in December 2024, aims to identify how the measure can be updated to better mitigate the impact of fishing on seabirds.

The conservation status of seabirds in the WCPFC Convention Area is critical and worsening. Many albatross and large petrel species are experiencing significant, long-term, and ongoing population declines. Specifically, the Gibson's Albatross and Southern Buller's Albatross, endemic to New Zealand, predominantly forage within the WCPFC Convention Area and are highly susceptible to bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries. Both populations are currently declining: the Gibson's Albatross population has seen a sustained annual decline of 5.7% from 2005 to 2020, with recent data suggesting a renewed decline from 2016. Similarly, the Southern Buller's Albatross population has experienced a significant decline in recent years. ***The Antipodean Albatross, faces a risk of global extinction by 2070 if current threats are not addressed,*** having declined 62% since 2004 and continuing to fall by 6% annually.

Bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries is a primary driver of these population declines. Estimates suggest that between 11,000 and 25,000 seabirds were killed annually in the WCPFC Convention Area during 2015-2018, with 4,000-4,600 of these being albatrosses and petrels caught south of 25°S. Fine-scale overlap analyses show that 80% of tracked Gibson's Albatross and 75% of Southern Buller's Albatross overlapped with pelagic longline fishing effort. This overlap occurred almost exclusively within the WCPFC Convention Area. The Gibson's Albatross, the more threatened and steeply declining of the two taxa, exhibited considerable overlap with High Seas fishing effort between 25°S and 30°S, with 20% of bird hours in this area overlapping with fishing vessels.

BirdLife International supports New Zealand's phased approach to improve CMM 2018-03, with the initial focus on Southern Hemisphere measures due to the higher risk to endangered species in this region. We strongly urge Members to act in good faith to address this entirely solvable crisis, before it's too late. BirdLife International strongly supports the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: **Require the combined use of two measures from the following: tori lines, branch line weighting, and night setting, or to use hook shielding devices as a standalone option in the area 25°S - 30°S.**

JUSTIFICATION: This latitudinal band is within the core habitat of four threatened seabirds, including the Antipodean and Gibson's albatrosses. Under the current CMM 2018-03, vessels in this area are only required to use one mitigation measure. Aligning these requirements with those south of 30°S would

substantially improve bycatch mitigation for these endangered species and simplify operations for vessels fishing in this region.

Observations from 2019-2023 indicate that approximately 69% of observed fishing effort in this area already reported using two or three mitigation methods (weighted branch lines, tori lines, or night setting), albeit not simultaneously. Peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that implementing these three mitigation methods has no significant impact on target catch rates. The SIDS exemption in Paragraph 4 of CMM 2018-03 should remain, as analysis continues to show minimal risk from fishing effort within their EEZs.

***Recommendation 2*: Require the combined use of three measures: tori lines, branch line weighting, and night setting, or to use hook shielding devices as a standalone option**.

JUSTIFICATION: Extensive review of mitigation studies confirms that a combination of these three methods, or the standalone use of hook shielding devices, is the most effective way to reduce seabird bycatch, particularly during the setting period when most bycatch and mortality occur. Combining these methods addresses the limitations of individual measures, ensuring comprehensive protection. Implementing this combined approach could yield a 61% improvement in seabird bycatch mitigation performance.

About a quarter of observed pelagic longline fishing effort south of 30°S already reported using the combined three mitigation methods during 2019-2023. Studies also show no significant impact on target catch rates when these methods are employed.

***Recommendation 3*: Require specific branch line weighting specifications for the Southern Hemisphere south of 30°S:**

- **≥40g within 0.5m of the hook,**
- **≥60g within 1m of the hook, and**
- **≥80g within 2m of the hook, and**
- **specify that all branch lines must be weighted when applying this method**

JUSTIFICATION: Branch line weighting is highly effective at reducing seabird bycatch by rapidly sinking hooks beyond their reach. This method reduces the time baited hooks are available to seabirds and helps keep hooks below the diving depth of birds. These proposed specifications align with ACAP Best Practice Advice, designed to achieve a rapid sink rate of 0.5m per second. Such improvements could result in a 52% improvement in relative bycatch reduction without significantly affecting target catch.

Branch line weighting is already the most widely implemented seabird mitigation method in Southern Hemisphere longline fisheries, with 52-71% of observed effort south of 25°S reporting its use between 2019-2023. While safety risks related to flybacks exist, these can be managed using sliding weights and proper crew training.

The recommendations proposed by New Zealand are robustly supported by the best available science and offer a clear path to strengthening CMM 2018-03 to address the ongoing conservation crisis facing seabirds in the WCPFC Convention Area. We strongly urge the Scientific Committee to endorse these proposed amendments.

MONITORING COMPLIANCE AND REPORTING

BirdLife International once again reiterates the urgent need for increased observer coverage using human observers and electronic monitoring to improve the accuracy and confidence in estimates of seabird bycatch rates in WCPFC fisheries, and ultimately to demonstrate progress toward responsibilities under the UN Fish Stocks Agreement.

The ongoing low levels of observer coverage are continuing to undermine the integrity of the WPCFC to demonstrate that Members are fulfilling their obligations. We have repeatedly called for an increase in observer coverage. 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 non-target species. Indeed, the probability of detecting statistically rare events, such as interactions with seabirds is hampered by ongoing low observer coverage. BirdLife has emphasized that there is a divide between Members that demonstrate ability to meet the obligations for seabird bycatch mitigation under CMM 2018-03, and those that do not (Table 1).

ANNUAL REPORTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH SEABIRD MITIGATION REGULATIONS

- BirdLife are pleased to see **Vanuatu** reporting on seabird mitigation measures now that observer coverage has been implemented. We are appreciative of the efforts by Vanuatu to improve observer coverage and implementation of mitigation measures on their flagged vessels.
- BirdLife notes that **China** reported a black-footed albatross caught 25-30 South, however, it is likely this is a misidentification. BirdLife would be happy to work with China on a seabird identification guide to assist their observers to make correct idenfications.
- BirdLife notes that **Chinese Taipei** have some errors in calculations in Tables 9-12. We have queried these and appreciate a response in regards to these errors.
- BirdLife congratualte **New Zealand** on the implementation of fleetwide electornic monitoring, we look forward to their contribution of verifiable data reporting on bycatch species, as agreed by all parties of the Commission.
- BirdLife are pleased to see the **United States** now reporting bycatch, observer coverage and mitigation use by spatial area as per the data reporting requirements under CMM2018-03.

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Table 1: Bycatch mitigation compliance in 2018 -2023. Years and areas where the CCM failed to meet the 5% observer coverage, thus where reported interactions with seabirds are unreliable, are highlighted in red. The fishing year 2022 is shaded in green.

Country	Year	Observed effort (% of total hooks)	Has mitigation use been reported according to area fished?	South of 30°S (% observed effort using 2/3 mitigation measures)	25°S – 30°S (% observed effort using 1/2 mitigation measures)	North of 23°N (% observed effort using 2/3 mitigation measures)	Total observed birds caught (+ Fisher reported when included)
Australia	2018	11.2 (south of 30° S) 10.2 (30°S-25°S) 11.2 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	14
	2019	12.1 (south of 30° S) 12 (30°S-25°S) 10.9 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	11 + 101
	2020	9.8 (south of 30° S) 10.2 (30°S-25°S) 9.8 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	11 + 42
	2021	9.9 (south of 30° S) 10.2 (30°S-25°S) 9.5 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	10 + 58
	2022	9.6 (south of 30° S) 10.2 (30°S-25°S) 10 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	10 +71
	2023	8.9 (south of 30° S) 9.4 (30°S-25°S) 9.9 (25°S-23°N)	No	100		N/A	4 + 49
	2024	**8.9 (south of 30° S) 9.4 (30°S-25°S) 9.9 (25°S-23°N)**	**No**	**100**		N/A	15
China	2018	3.48 (south of 30° S) 4.59 (23°N-30°S) 15.15 (north of 23° N)	No	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	7
	2019	0 (south of 30° S) 6.3 (23°N-30°S) 15.15 (north of 23° N)	No	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	6
	2020	8.97 (south of 30° S) 9.19 (23°N-30°S)	Yes	100	100	100	6

		0 (north of 23° N)					
	2021	9.42 (south of 30° S) 7.06 (23˚N-30˚S) 0 (north of 23° N)	Yes	100	100	100	0
	2022	39.33 (south of 30° S) 0 (23˚N-30˚S) 6.41 (north of 23° N)	Yes	100	100	100	0
	2023	12.94 (south of 30° S) 10.28 (23˚N-30˚S)	Yes	100	100	NA	23
	2024	**40.11 (south of 30° S) 6.33 (23˚N-30˚S)**	**Yes**	**100**	**100**	**NA**	**0**
Chinese Taipei	2018	3.6 (south of 30° S) 5.1 (30˚S-25˚S) 6.4 (north of 23° N)	Yes	93.6	100	87.6	14
	2019	6 (south of 30° S) 12.5 (30˚S-25˚S) 5.3 (25˚S-23˚N) 2.6 (north of 23° N)	Yes	70	91.1†	87.5	21
	2020	6.5 (south of 30° S) 9.8 (30˚S-25˚S) 4.7 (25˚S-23˚N) 5.3 (north of 23° N)	Yes	59.1	100	97	46
	2021	6.3 (south of 30° S) 6.6 (30˚S-25˚S) 6.9 (25˚S-23˚N) 5.2 (north of 23° N)	Yes	90	100	98.7	10
	2022	10.7 (south of 30° S) 2.6 (30˚S-25˚S) 6.5 (25˚S-23˚N) 5.3 (north of 23° N)	Yes	93.5	100	100	99
	2023	3.6 (south of 30° S) 4.4 (30˚S-25˚S) 3.9 (25˚S-23˚N) 0.5 (north of 23° N)	Yes	71.3	4.4	0.5	10
	2024	**3.6 (south of 30° S) 4.4 (30˚S-25˚S)**	**Yes**	**100**	**100**	**72.7**	**54**

		3.9 (25˚S-23˚N) **0.5 (north of 23° N)**					
Japan* Vessels >20GRT/<20GRT	2018§	2.4 / NA (south of 30° S) 4.0 / 3.1 (30˚S-23˚N) 2.8/ 1.7 (north of 23° N)	No (3.7% compliant across all areas)	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2019§	17.9 / NA (south of 30° S) 19.5 / NA (30˚S-25˚S) 4.0 / 3.9 (25˚S-23˚N) 3. 4 / 3.2 (north of 23° N)	Yes	42	6.4	74.8	1665
	2020	5.5 / NA (south of 30° S) 8.5 / NA (30˚S-25˚S) 0 / 0.4 (25˚S-23˚N) 0 / 0.1 (north of 23° N)	Yes	76.5	Unknown	5.4	Unknown
	2021	0 / NA (south of 30° S) 0.4 / NA (30˚S-25˚S) 0 / 0 (25˚S-23˚N) 0 / 0 (north of 23° N)	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2022	0 / NA (south of 30° S) 0 / NA (30˚S-25˚S) 0 / 0 (25˚S-23˚N) 0 / 0 (north of 23° N)	Yes	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2023	13.4 / NA (south of 30° S) 14.9 / NA (30˚S-25˚S) 3.7 / 3.6 (25˚S-23˚N) 5.3 / 2.2 (north of 23° N)	Yes	76.9	69.6	87.0	403
	2024	**16.8 / NA (south of 30° S)** **26.1 / NA (30˚S-25˚S)** **3.8 / 2.1 (25˚S-23˚N)** **2.0 / 2.0 (north of 23° N)**	**Yes**	**96.07**	**92.21**	**94.2**	**273**
New Zealand	2018	13.1 (south of 30° S)	Yes	95	N/A	N/A	98
	2019	8.4 (south of 30° S)	Yes	100	N/A	N/A	56
	2020	9.9 (south of 30° S)	Yes	97.8	N/A	N/A	24
	2021	11.7 (south of 30° S)	Yes	93	N/A	N/A	53
	2022	5.4 (south of 30° S)	Yes	93	N/A	N/A	60
	2023	3.2 (south of 30° S)	Yes	100	N/A	N/A	19
	2024	**88.2 (south of 30° S)**	**Yes**	**100**	N/A	N/A	**319**

USA*	2018	20.4 (across all areas)	No	N/A	N/A	100	249
	2019	21.03 (across all areas)	No	N/A	N/A	100	226
	2020	18.4 (north of 23° N)	Yes	N/A	N/A	100	681
	2021	21.9 (north of 23° N)	Yes	N/A	N/A	100	688
	2022	25.2 (north of 23° N)	Yes	N/A	N/A	100	709
	2023	19.4 (north of 23° N)	Yes	N/A	N/A	100	269
	2024	**17.2 (north of 23° N)**	**Yes**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**100**	**160**
Vanuatu	2023	1.00 (across all areas)	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	249
	2024	**6.00 (across all areas)**	**Yes**	**100**	**100**	**22**	**226**

* Reports effort north of 23° N and 23° N – 30° S areas combined, only reported for Hawai'i fleet.

§ Japan report no mitigation use in the 25˚N – 30˚S area because bycatch mitigation requirements for this area came into force in January 2020 under CMM 2018-03.

Table 2. Effort observed and reported seabird captures in 2018 - 2023 [South of 30˚S]. Entries in red do not meet WCPCF observer coverage requirements for 5% observer coverage or spatial representation.

Country		*Fishing effort*			*Observed seabirds hooked*		
	Year	Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)	Raised Mortalities
Australia	2018	37	3084	11.2	8	0.02	71
	2019	33	2537	12.1	8	0.03	66
	2020	30	1721	9.8	9	0.01	9
	2021	30	1890	9.9	7	0.00	8
	2022	31	2071	9.70	3	0.02	31
	2023	28	2338	8.9	4	0.01	23
	2024	**30**	**2838**	**10.1**	**7**	**0.024**	**68**
China	2018	19	5025	3.48	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2019	22	2312	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2020	26	3121	9.42	1	0.00	9
	2021	23	6511	8.97	0	0.00	0
	2022	52	2286	39.33	0	0.00	0
	2023	47	572	12.94	0	0.00	0
	2024	**6**	**187**	**40.11**	**0**	**0.00**	**0**
Chinese Taipei	2018	44	6508	3.6	0	0.00	0
	2019	41	9577	6.0	7	0.01	125
	2020	58	10172	6.5	4	0.01	81
	2021	38	4852	6.3	1	0.00	15
	2022†	21	5394	10.7	3	0.01	27
	2023	22	6061	3.6	8	0.04	224
	2024	**22**	**6061**	**4.1**	**0**	**0.00**	**Unknown**
Japan (vessels > 20 GRT)	2018	27	7003	2.4*	37	0.22	1520
	2019	27	5388	17.9	1140	1.19	6385
	2020	21	3705	5.5	13	0.063	236
	2021	23	4036	0.0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2022	22	2476	0.0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2023	24	3675	14.5	46	0.086	317
	2024	**20**	**3017**	**16.8**	**13**	**0.026**	**78**
New Zealand	2018	33	2233	13.1	98	0.34	750
	2019	28	1978	8.4	56	0.34	671
	2020	28	1949	9.9	24	0.12	242
	2021	28	1535	11.7	53	0.30	454
	2022	22	1271	5.4	60	0.87	1107
	2023	20	1591	3.2	19	0.37	595
	2024	**20**	**1570**	**88.2**	**316***	**0.201***	**316***

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

† Preliminary data

* Fisher reported data only

Table 3. Fishing effort observed and reported seabird captures 2018- 2023 [between 25˚S - 30˚S]. Entries in red do not meet WCPCF observer coverage requirements for spatial representation. *Very high bycatch rates (>0.05) are highlighted in yellow.*

Country	*Fishing effort*				*Observed seabirds hooked*		
	Year	Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)	Raised Mortalities
Australia	2018	27	2,917	10.2	5	0.017	50
	2019	26	3,264	12.0	3	0.008	26
	2020	22	3,990	10.2	2	0.005	20
	2021	21	2,607	10.2	1	0.004	10
	2022	22	2,583	9.3	6	0.025	65
	2023	21	3,386	9.4	2	0.006	20
	2024	**22**	**3,613**	**9.5**	**8**	**0.023**	**83**
China*	2018	335	140,011	4.59	1	0.00015	21
	2019	339	159,311	6.3	6	0.0006	96
	2020	349	152,900	7.06	5	0.00046	70
	2021	308	140,511	9.19	0	0	0
	2022	263	122,494	6.41	0	0	0
	2023	335	86,500	10.28	23	0.00259	224
	2024	**324**	**146,299**	**6.33**	**2**	**0.00022**	**322**
Chinese Taipei	2018	61	11982	5.1	5	0.008	96
	2019	45	6637	12.5	11	0.013	86
	2020	99	15393	9.8	0	0	0
	2021	38	4672	6.6	1	0.003	14
	2022	27	3776	2.6	0	0	Unknown
	2023†	27	3326	4.4	0	0	Unknown
	2024	**27**	**3326**	**3.4**	**0**	**0**	Unknown
Japan (Vessels > 20GRT)	2018*	154	20,655	3.1	7	0.011	227
	2019	9	844	19.5	4	0.0005	0
	2019	9	844	4	4	0.005	4
	2020	14	1563	8.5	0	0	0
	2021	12	938	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2022	9	702	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2023	11	995	14.9	1	0.007	7
	2024	**10**	**1308**	**26.1**	**0**	**0.00**	**0**
Japan (Vessels < 20GRT) 23˚N – 25˚S only	2018	-	-	-	-	-	-
	2019	148	13940	3.9	1	0.001	21
	2020	130	16083	0.4	2	0.039	500
	2021	114	13849	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2022	124	13847	0	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
	2023	114	15083	3.6	3	0.006	83
	2024	**105**	**15891**	**2.1**	**0**	**0.00**	**0**

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

† Preliminary data

Table 4. Fishing effort observed and reported seabird captures in 2018 – 2023 [North of 23˚N].

Non-compliant observer coverage rates are in red.

Country		*Fishing effort*			*Observed seabirds bycaught*		
	Year	Number of vessels	Number of hooks ('000s)	% of hooks observed	Capture number	Capture rate (birds/1000 hooks)	Raised Mortalities
China	2018	10	779	15.15	6	0.05	39
	2019	9	144	8.33	0	0	0
	2020	10	745	0	0	0	0
	2021	17	959	0	unknown	unknown	unknown
	2022	9	183	0	unknown	unknown	unknown
	2023	0	0	0	0	0	0
	2024	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Chinese Taipei	2018	521	26173	6.4	5	0.003	79
	2019	603	31792	2.6	2	0.002	64
	2020	205	28843	5.3	46	0.03	865
	2021	109	16724	5.2	59	0.068	1137
	2022	122	18134	5.3	88	0.092	1668
	2023†	161	23315	0.5	0	0	0
	2024	**161**	**23315**	**4.4**	**54**	**0.067**	**1562**
Japan (Vessels > 20GRT)	2018	36	11842	2.8	61	0.186	2203
	2019	36	11239	3.4	83	0.223	2506
	2020	42	13724	0	Unknown	unknown	unknown
	2021	37	11624	0	Unknown	unknown	unknown
	2022	33	9669	0	Unknown	unknown	unknown
	2023	24	11402	5.3	150	0.247	2,830
	2024	**25**	**10409**	**2.0**	**17**	**0.082**	**850**
Japan (Vessels < 20GRT)	2018	209	50681	1.7	55	0.064	3244
	2019	208	49639	3.2	437	0.278	13,800
	2020	216	46726	0.1	28	0.703	28,000
	2021	189	34350	0	Unknown	unknown	unknown
	2022	212	35658	0	Unknown	unknown	unknown
	2023	196	43311	2.2	208	0.216	9,455
	2024	**195**	**53947**	**2.0**	**242**	**0.221**	**12,100**
USA (Hawai'i only)	2018*	142	54630	20.5	192	0.02	1093
	2019*	137	19732	17.6	166	0.05	987
	2020	142	26330	18.4	148	0.03	790
	2021	137	23689	21.9	159	0.03	801
	2022	131	20533	25.2	201	0.04	821
	2023	139	25305	19.4	77	0.02	506
	2024	**144**	**22010**	**17.2**	**99**	**0.03**	**660**

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

† Preliminary data