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ACAP advice for reducing the impact of pelagic longline fishing operations on seabirds

WCPFC-SC15-2019/EB-IP-03

Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels¹

Abstract

Bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries is one of the greatest threats to seabirds, particularly albatrosses and petrels. The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP <https://acap.aq/>) provides a range of advice, guidelines and resources aimed at advancing the conservation of albatrosses and petrels. ACAP routinely reviews and updates its advice, most recently in May 2019, at the Ninth Meeting of the ACAP Seabird Bycatch Working Group and the Eleventh Meeting of its Advisory Committee, and this paper outlines the latest advice and resources available. ACAP Parties noted with concern the continuing conservation crisis facing albatrosses and petrels, and the need for urgent and increased efforts to counter this crisis. Despite all the research and attention devoted to the development of best practice bycatch mitigation measures, these have not been sufficiently implemented to halt the decline of many albatross and petrel populations. This included lack of compliance with measures required by regulatory bodies. Within jurisdictions where enforcement had occurred, reductions in seabird bycatch were demonstrated, sometimes dramatically so and without perceived detrimental consequences arising. ACAP is in the process of developing new and augmented areas of focus and activities for the immediate and longer term, including an ongoing emphasis on ways in which it can work with Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and others to enhance implementation of strategies and actions to reduce bycatch of seabirds in fishing operations, acknowledging that this needs to be done at a range of different scales. In addition, ACAP is working towards communicating more effectively the conservation crisis facing albatrosses and petrels, and its advice regarding how best to address the threats that these seabirds face.

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Introduction and background

The incidental mortality of seabirds in pelagic longline fisheries continues to be a serious global concern, especially for threatened albatrosses and petrels. The need for international cooperation in addressing this concern was a major reason for establishing the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP). In pelagic longline fisheries seabirds are killed when they become hooked or entangled and drowned while foraging for baits on longline hooks as the gear is deployed. Seabirds can also be hooked or entangled as the gear is hauled; however, with careful handling many of these seabirds can be released alive.

There have been significant efforts internationally to develop mitigation measures to avoid or minimise the risk of incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries. Although most mitigation measures are broadly applicable, the application and specifications of some will vary with local methods and gear configurations. ACAP routinely reviews the scientific literature dealing with seabird bycatch mitigation in pelagic longline fisheries. The ACAP review process recognises that factors such as safety, practicality and the characteristics of the fishery should also be taken into account when considering the efficacy of seabird bycatch mitigation measures and consequently in the development of advice and guidelines on best practice. The most recent review was conducted in May 2019 at the Ninth Meeting of the ACAP Seabird Bycatch Working Group and with the recommendations of the review adopted by the Eleventh Meeting of its Advisory Committee.

Since 2011, ACAP's best practice advice has been that the simultaneous use of weighted branch lines, bird scaring lines and night setting is the most effective approach to mitigate seabird bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries, and ACAP continues to recommend this approach for pelagic longline fisheries. In 2016, ACAP considered the results of research investigating the use of line-weighting as a seabird bycatch mitigation measure, and consequently updated its advice on the minimum line-weighting specifications. In addition, the effectiveness of two new hook-shielding devices at reducing seabird bycatch were assessed in 2016. On the basis of the assessments these two hook-shielding devices have been endorsed by ACAP as effective alternatives to the combined use of weighted branch lines, bird scaring lines and night setting to effectively reduce seabird bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries. Hence, ACAP's advice is that either of these best practice bycatch mitigation approaches (the three combined measures OR one of the endorsed hook-shielding devices) should be applied in areas where fishing effort overlaps with seabirds vulnerable to bycatch in order to reduce their incidental mortality to the lowest possible levels. WCPFC CMM 2018-03 incorporates hook-shielding devices into the mitigation options vessels can use when fishing south of 30°S.

The main outcomes of the 2019 ACAP meetings

In the first two weeks of May 2019, ACAP held in Florianópolis, Brazil, the 11th meeting of its Advisory Committee, preceded by meetings of its Working Groups on Seabird Bycatch and on Population and Conservation Status. These meetings considered activities undertaken since the

last meeting of the Advisory Committee and the Meeting of the Parties, and discussed priorities for ACAP's work programme, including its engagement with RFMOs – a key element of ACAP's work. The reports of ACAP's Advisory Committee meeting and the meetings of the working groups are available on the ACAP website:

11th meeting of ACAP's Advisory Committee ([here](#))

Ninth meeting of ACAP's Seabird Bycatch Working Group ([here](#))

Fifth meeting of ACAP's Population and Conservation Status Working Group ([here](#))

ACAP's advice for reducing the impact of pelagic longline fisheries on seabirds was reviewed and updated at the 2019 meetings. The updates were relatively minor, and the current version of ACAP's advice is available on the [ACAP website](#).

ACAP has developed and adopted new advice on improving safety when hauling branchlines during pelagic fishing operations, which can be downloaded from the [ACAP website](#). Also available on the ACAP website are guidelines for removing fishing hooks from bycaught seabirds ([here](#)). Additional information on safe handling and release guidelines for seabirds is provided in WCPFC-SC15-2019-EB-WP-10. As noted in EB-WP-10, intersessional work is underway to develop safe handling and release guidelines for birds entangled in nets. This will be relevant to capture of live birds in purse seine nets. ACAP is also in the process of updating the ACAP-BirdLife bycatch mitigation fact sheets, and the Seabird Bycatch Identification Guide, current versions of which are available on the ACAP website [here](#) and [here](#), respectively. The updated versions will be made available on the website once they have been completed.

It was clear from the evidence discussed at the 2019 ACAP meetings that albatrosses and petrels continue to face a conservation crisis, with fisheries bycatch remaining a primary threat. ACAP Parties highlighted the need for urgent efforts by all to counter this crisis, with a change of focus in some cases and taking advantage of ongoing innovations in, for example, technology. Some of these efforts will be relevant to ACAP's interaction with RFMOs such as the WCPFC, since the only way to tackle the crisis is by working together.

Some of the particular concerns and points of discussion at the meeting were:

- Disappointment that, despite all the research and attention devoted to the development of best practice bycatch mitigation measures, these have not been used sufficiently extensively to stop the decline in the numbers of many albatross and petrel species.
- The meeting considered it sufficiently important to spend considerable time discussing why there had been insufficient uptake of best practice or even implementation of required bycatch mitigation measures.

- The discussion acknowledged that many RFMOs and national authorities have put in place at least some measures to reduce seabird bycatch, but that compliance and enforcement were often inadequate.
- Within jurisdictions where enforcement had occurred, reductions in seabird bycatch were demonstrated, sometimes dramatically so and without the perceived detrimental consequences arising. This is a clear indication that the crisis can be successfully addressed.
- The need to develop innovative ways of addressing the crisis, by for example making use of new technologies.

Given these concerns and imperatives, ACAP is working towards new and augmented areas of focus and activities in the immediate and longer term. This includes an emphasis on ways in which we can continue working together with RFMOs and others to enhance implementation of strategies and actions to reduce bycatch of seabirds in fishing operations, acknowledging that this needs to be done at a range of different scales (e.g. RFMO, national, fishery, fleet, fishing operator, vessel and crew).

One of our immediate objectives is to communicate urgently the message that albatrosses and petrels are in a dire conservation state, and that urgent action is required to improve their status. ACAP is keen to work with all role players to support efforts in this regard, to overcome impediments to implementation. Unless the problem is understood and accepted, at all scales, it will not be solved.

ACAP has identified a number of ways in which it can work towards this aim. We will use our existing relationships and programmes to develop these activities, which include outreach to the broader community through an enhanced communication strategy, engagement with relevant fisheries certification schemes, especially as they update their standards, and continuing the updating and dissemination of ACAP's best practice guidelines.

Compliance with required seabird bycatch mitigation measures is an area that needs much greater attention. ACAP is keen to assist where it can to contribute ideas on how to improve monitoring and compliance, including through the development of innovative methods. Working together, we can make a difference.