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## Global Oceans Practice

### WWF POSITION

**15th Regular Session of the Scientific Committee (SC) of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC): Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia - August 12 - 20, 2019**

#### Introduction

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) sincerely thanks the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) Scientific Committee (SC) for again allowing WWF to attend and contribute to the 15th Regular Session of the SC (SC15) as an observer and to address the important role it plays the management of the Western Central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) fisheries.

These recommendations are not comprehensive and are not meant to exclude or diminish other important work currently considered by the SC. However, WWF would like to offer the following position and recommendations to the SC regarding significant scientific issues that WWF believes to be priority.

#### Reference Points, Harvest Control Rules, and Harvest Strategies

WWF maintains its emphatic support of the WCPFC commitment to adhere to timelines for Limit and Target Reference Points (LRPs and TRPs) and Harvest Control Rules (HCRs) for all fish stocks in the WCPO, as proposed under the *Conservation and Management Measure (CMM) 2014-06: Conservation and Management Measure to develop and implement a harvest strategy approach for key fisheries and stocks in the WCPO*<sup>1</sup> and outlined further under *CMM 2017-01: Conservation and Management Measure for Bigeye, Yellowfin and Skipjack Tuna in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean*<sup>2</sup> and as amended in 2018.<sup>3</sup> WWF encourages members to aggressively pursue the revised timelines for development and continued implementation of Harvest Strategy elements.

WWF specifically recommends SC15 prioritize development and confirmation of TRP options for yellowfin (YFT) and bigeye tuna (BET) to meet WCPFC commitments in 2019. WWF also supports further development of HCRs for skipjack (SKJ) and South Pacific albacore (ALB) consistent with the Harvest Strategy Workplan (Workplan) objectives, including the provision of advice on performance of candidate HCRs based on robust Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) to which the SC and WCPFC previously committed.

The adoption of explicit TRPs for YFT and BET must be a priority for SC15 to ensure the sustainable management of these resources in the WCPO. However, SC15 must also consider additional steps to further develop and establish LRPs and TRPs for other non-tuna species under its authority.

Consistent with previous WCPFC advice, WWF encourages SC15 to review available information on this topic and provide advice on the progress toward establishing RPs and HCRs for other non-tuna species for the WCPFC's consideration.

Lastly, WWF maintains that levels of risk should be set at a sufficiently precautionary level of 10% to account for all sources of uncertainty.

#### **WWF recommends the SC:**

- **Supports the designation of TRPs as a priority for proper management of all stocks under WCPFC authority;**
- **Recommends precautionary TRPs as a benchmark for further consideration by the WCPFC in 2019, specifically recommending options for a YFT and BET TRP;**
- **Further develops and recommends proposed HCRs for consideration by the TCC and WCPFC, especially for SKJ and SPALB; and**
- **Considers the probability of breaching the Limit Reference Points and limiting this to 10% or less as a precautionary measure.<sup>4</sup>**

## Sharks and Rays

Sharks play a critical role in the WCPO marine ecosystem as apex predators and indicators of ecosystem health.<sup>5</sup> Sharks and Rays also continue to make up a large percentage of annual bycatch.<sup>6</sup> Thus, many shark species in the WCPO remain subject to high levels of fishing mortality that current stock assessment trends suggest is unsustainable.<sup>7</sup> WWF remains concerned with shark conservation and sustainability in the WCPFC region as a whole and considers responsible management, trade, and consumption where shark mortality occurs in all fishing activities, not just in circumstances where tuna fishing is occurring. Therefore, WCPFC must also recognise the needs of coastal states in the WCPFC region to manage their shark populations.

WWF is extremely disappointed by the failure of the Inter-sessional Working Group to develop agreed recommendations for a Comprehensive Shark CMM in 2018. Greater urgency is required in the face of declining shark populations, as evidenced by both the shortfin and longfin mako sharks being upgraded to Endangered globally in March this year. WWF encourages SC15 to prioritize finalizing a Comprehensive Shark CMM that ensures key shark and ray species, including those prioritized by the Convention on the International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES), are effectively managed.<sup>8</sup> WWF continues to support recommendations within proposed CMM to include methods to eliminate finning and incorporate language to encourage CCMs to land sharks with their fins naturally attached to their bodies, as well as supporting recommendations made previously by the SC and drawn from the discussion regarding a proposed comprehensive and integrated shark CMM.<sup>9</sup>

WWF also notes that shark conservation and management is further frustrated due to poor data collection exacerbated by inconsistent bycatch definitions as well as retention policies that can prevent adequate data collection. Several RFMOs, including the WCPFC, maintain incomplete records concerning bycatch discards due in part to inconsistent definitions of bycatch.<sup>10</sup> Adequate catch information is also frustrated by poor data collection policies such as the continued use of the fin-to-carcass ratio, which scientists have repeatedly shown to be an unsuccessful deterrent to the wasteful practice of finning as well as creating poor accounting due to inconsistent application of the policy across the region.<sup>11</sup> WWF again recommends the implementation of a fins naturally attached (FNA) policy as the only method to ensure both proper catch accounting as well as compliance with shark retention measures.

While WWF supports the action of the WCPFC to adopt the Best Handling Practices For The Safe Release Of Sharks (Other Than Whale Sharks And Mantas/Mobulids), WWF again asks the SC15 and WCPFC to consider and support best practices for safe handling and release manta rays (genus *Mobula* and *Manta*) aboard purse seiners, consistent with previous action by the IATTC.

**WWF recommends the SC:**

- **Develops, endorses, and recommends adoption of a Comprehensive Shark CMM that includes efforts to:**
  - **Apply to all sharks and rays caught in association with fisheries managed under the WCPF Convention;**
  - **Includes measures to eliminate finning through recommendations to land all sharks with their fins naturally attached to their bodies;**
  - **Adopts measures to eliminate bycatch and practice safe release of sharks and rays;**
  - **Requires, through data collected from observer programs and other means, estimation of the number of captures and releases of all sharks and rays, including the status upon release (dead or alive), and reporting of this information to the WCPFC;**
  - **Reviews and amends CMM 2014-05 to prohibit vessels carrying wire trace and the use of wire trace branch lines; and**
  - **Requires, through observer programs, recording what gear is used in longline activities including the use of wire traces and any multi-monofilament traces in order to avoid bite-off by sharks;**
  - **Enact recovery plans for the most depleted species;**
- **Provides updates on the progress of including mobula and manta rays to be considered as a key shark species;**
- **Encourages the development of reference points and management for non-target species, including all shark and ray species, as envisaged under Articles 5 and 10 of the WCPF Convention;**
- **Considers developing a definition of ‘targeted shark fishing’ to include all fishing methods that catch and land any shark species;**
- **Develops uniform bycatch definitions to support comprehensive and accurate records of annual bycatch discards; and**
- **Encourages CCMs to develop NPOAs with measures to report all shark and ray catches from domestic fleets operating in territorial and archipelagic waters to assist CCMs to meet obligations for shark and ray species incorporated under CITES Appendix II, including making any non-detriment finding publicly available.**

## Pacific Bluefin Tuna

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Technical reports of all scientific and management bodies responsible for management of the Pacific bluefin tuna stock, including the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean (ISC) and the IATTC, indicate that the Pacific Bluefin tuna stock remains in extremely poor condition. The updated stock assessment by the ISC in 2018 confirmed that the fishing mortality of small Pacific bluefin tuna (<30kg) has declined and that reaching the first rebuilding target is likely ( $\geq 98\%$ ) *if* current fishing and environmental conditions continue. Additional data suggest that the three most recent recruitments (2016-2018) were larger than assumed in the low-recruitment scenario used for projections conducted by ISC in 2016 and catch could be increased while still maintaining a high probability of meeting the rebuilding targets. However, it also confirmed that the stock remains overfished and subject to overfishing. Furthermore, Japan, as the largest Pacific bluefin tuna fishing country, again failed to monitor and control the catch limit in its waters while discards of small fish were also reported in 2018.

As a result, WWF maintains deep concerns regarding the health of the Pacific bluefin tuna stock and remains committed to restoring and rebuilding this ecologically, sociologically, and economically important fishery resource. Therefore, WWF recommends the SC take a precautionary approach for rebuilding this stock and discourage proposals that modify the current CMM 2017-08 to increase current catch limits until the next full assessment of the Pacific bluefin tuna stock is conducted.

**WWF recommends that the SC:**

- **Supports establishing a precautionary Limit and Target Reference Point for Pacific bluefin tuna;**
- **Discourage increases in catch limits for Pacific bluefin tuna**
- **Support the development of a Catch Documentation Scheme (CDS) for the thorough monitoring of Pacific bluefin tuna to ensure proper stock assessment; and**
- **Encourage WCPFC to ensure deduction of over-harvest of catch limits from the applicable catch limits for the following year**

## Conclusion

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WWF calls on SC15 to continue to address scientific issues in the WCPFC such that they ensure the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of information used in management decisions. With respect to each of the agenda items addressed at the SC15 meeting, we call on the SC members to carefully and genuinely address each issue with logic, intellectual rigor, personal integrity, and an uncompromising respect for the scientific process and the truth.

The WCPFC currently maintains the ability and opportunity to chart the course towards sustainable fishery resources in the WCPO. Science plays an irreplaceable role in the WCPFC process by representing the foundation of all decision making by the WCPFC.<sup>12,13</sup> Using this science, the WCPFC and other subsidiary bodies must continually promote and adopt strong and effective conservation and management action to maintain and rebuild tuna stocks, implement appropriate monitoring and enforcement measures, promote a viable tuna industry, and support vibrant coastal communities throughout the South Pacific.

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> WCPFC (2014) Summary Report of the Eleventh Regular Session of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (Adopted version) – 29 July 2015, WCPFC, Apia, Samoa, 1-5 December 2014. Attachment T. p.264.
- <sup>2</sup> WCPFC (2017) Summary Report of the Fourteenth Regular Session of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (Adopted version) – 16 March 2018, WCPFC, Manila, Philippines, 2-6 December 2017. Attachment M. p.180.
- <sup>3</sup> WCPFC (2018) Summary Report of the Fifteenth Regular Session of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (Adopted version) – 16 March 2018, WCPFC, Honolulu, Hawaii, USA, 10-14 December 2018. Attachment I. p.168.
- <sup>4</sup> United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, 34 ILM 1542 (1995); 2167 UNTS 88. (Fishery management strategies shall ensure that the risk of exceeding limit reference points is very low. If a stock falls below a limit reference point or is at risk of falling below such a reference point, conservation and management action should be initiated to facilitate stock recovery. Fishery management strategies shall ensure that target reference points are not exceeded on average. (Annex II UNFSA 1995)).
- <sup>5</sup> See Stevenson, C., *et al.* (2007). High apex predator biomass on remote Pacific islands. *Coral Reefs* 26: 47-51; See also Friedlander, A.M. and DeMartini, E.E. (2002). Contrasts on density, size, and biomass of reef fishes between the northwestern and the main Hawaiian islands: the effects of fishing down apex predators. *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 230: 253-264.
- <sup>6</sup> Status of pelagic esasmobranchs (sharks and rays) of the Western and Central Pacific Ocean as prepared by the IUCN Shark Specialist Group at the New Zealand and Oceania Shark Red List Assessment Workshop, Auckland, (June 2017)
- <sup>7</sup> Clarke, Shelley C., *et al.* (2013). Population Trends in Pacific Oceanic Sharks and the Utility of Regulations on Shark Finning. *Conservation Biology*, Volume 27, Issue 4, pages 197–209, February.
- <sup>8</sup> Report for Project 78-Analysis of Observer and Logbook Data Pertaining to Key Shark Species in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, Joel Rice, WCPFC-SC14-2018/EB-WP-07.
- <sup>9</sup> Clarke, Shelley C. (2013). Towards an Integrated Shark Conservation and Management Measure for the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. WCPFC-SC9-2013/ EB-WP-08. WCPFC-SC, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia, 6-14 August 2013.
- <sup>10</sup> Discards by Global Tuna Fisheries, Eric Gilman, Petri Suuronan, Milani Chaloupka, *Marine Ecology Progress Series* 582: 231-252, WCPFC-SC14-2018/EB-IP-09
- <sup>11</sup> Report for Project 78-Analysis of Observer and Logbook Data Pertaining to Key Shark Species in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, Joel Rice, WCPFC-SC14-2018/EB-WP-07
- <sup>12</sup> WCPFC, Resolution 2012–01, Resolution on the Best Available Science (2012).
- <sup>13</sup> See also Chris Wold, Emi Kondo, & Erika Hamilton, A Review of the Provision of Scientific Advice in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, WCPFC-SC10-2014/ MI-IP-03 (2014).