

Time is running out for bluefin tuna, sharks and other great pelagic fish

Oceana Recommendations for the ICCAT Commission meeting November 2008

Most of large pelagic species like tuna, sharks and swordfish are overfished in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, due to the extremely high prices their meat or fins can reach in most of world's markets.

Bluefin tuna is on the verge of collapse due to overfishing, mismanagement and illegal fishing, Sharks are extremely vulnerable because of slow growth and low reproduction and they have been fished in the Atlantic without any management for decades. The situation repeats itself with swordfish in the Mediterranean, where the situation can be once again summarised with overexploitation, lack of management measures, a total absence of control and catch declarations, and high rates of illegal fishing.

Oceana calls on the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) contracting parties, non contracting parties, and collaborating parties to urgently adopt effective management measures to restore and maintain the populations of tuna, swordfish and sharks at levels that will ensure a sustainable exploitation of these fisheries resources.

The global oceans have already lost more than a 90% of large predatory fish¹. Time is running out for great pelagic species.

¹R. Myers & Worm, (2003). Rapid worldwide depletion of predatory fish communities. Nature. Vol. 423, 280-283 pp. 15 may 2003. 280-283 pp. 15 may 2003.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Bluefin tuna in the East Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea (BFT)

Bluefin tuna is on the verge of collapse due to overfishing, mismanagement and illegal fishing. Despite considerable catch data limitations in many fisheries, especially in the Mediterranean Sea, results from the last BFT stock assessment² indicated that the spawning stock biomass has been declining rapidly over the past few years, raising serious concerns for the survival of the stocks.

In spite of this in 2007, the declared catch was 32,398 t for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean. However, the ICCAT Committee strongly believes, based on knowledge of the fisheries and trade statistics, that substantial under-reporting is occurring and present catches are above TAC levels (28.500 for 2007), at around 61.000 t in 2007 for both the East Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea. This is four times above the 2006 and 2008 scientific advice of 15.000 t.

Oceana calls for:

- 1. An immediate fisheries closure until recovery of the stocks is scientifically assessed.**
- 2. Following recovery of the stocks, the establishment of a “Bluefin Tuna Sustainable Management Plan” should involve the following measures**
 - Establish marine reserves for the protection of the key bluefin tuna spawning areas in the Mediterranean**

Marine reserves would protect the critical spawning season and therefore increase the stock spawning biomass up to the maximum sustainable yield recommended. Bluefin tuna spawning areas are located in the Balearic Islands, Southern Tyrrhenian Sea, Southwest of Malta as well as the eastern Mediterranean although the last have not been extensively documented up to date.

- Eliminate overcapacity in the bluefin tuna fishing fleet.**

Oceana recommends the adoption of a comprehensive capacity reduction plan aiming for a real adjustment between the fleet and the real fishing opportunities that will prevent overfishing.

² ICCAT (2008). Bluefin tuna Executive Summary. Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics. SCRS/2008/018. Madrid, Spain, September 29 to October 3 2008.

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The fleets targeting bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean are oversized. Currently hundreds of purse seiners are authorised for bluefin tuna fishing in the Mediterranean Sea. The situation can be easily simplified as “too many boats for too few fish”.

A fully authorized vessel list has been established within the ICCAT mandate, but the number of fishing licenses and their fishing capacity to catch bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean largely surpasses the TAC defined under the current recovery plan. Separately, the lack of control by Contracting Parties has led to an increased number of non-authorized vessels targeting this species in the area. Both factors lead to the current bluefin tuna catch estimate of around 61,000 t, and are the main cause of overexploitation of this species.

- **Quotas must be adjusted to scientific recommendations**

Stock assessment of the bluefin tuna is being undermined by the non-compliance of the Contracting Parties with their obligation of catch data reporting. The lack of compliance with the TAC and an underreporting of the catch will undermine conservation of the stocks.

Within this context Oceana stresses that catch data reporting as well as TAC and quotas defined on the basis of scientific advice are key factors to preserve the bluefin tuna stock.

- **Reducing the Blue Fin Tuna fattening cages capacity in the Mediterranean**

Capture-based aquaculture of top predator species is unsustainable. Tuna farming expansion in the Mediterranean Sea needs to be stopped until the live circle of bluefin tuna in captivity has been closed, and until this practice has been demonstrated to have a sustainable impact on the ecosystem.

Pelagic sharks

Sharks are extremely vulnerable highly migratory fish species, and many species have been fished in the Atlantic without management for decades. Traditionally, sharks were considered as by-catch in fisheries for highly migratory species like tuna and swordfish. As those stocks have decreased and the value of certain shark products has increased, this situation has changed. Pelagic sharks are now the targeted species of the Spanish and Portuguese surface longline fleets, among other non-EU fleets like Taiwan and Japan. They are caught primarily for their valuable fins that are sold to Asia for elaboration of the popular shark fin soup.

The main species taken by shark longliners in the Atlantic are blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) and shortfin mako shark (*Isurus oxyrinchus*), and to a lesser extent thresher shark (*Alopias* spp.) and hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna* spp.). Main shark fishing nations in the Atlantic are Spain, Argentina, France, Portugal and Brazil.

In 2008, ICCAT scientists carried out stock assessments for blue sharks and mako sharks in the Atlantic. The outcomes showed uncertainty for the state of blue and mako shark stocks, mainly

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due to data deficiencies as Member state reporting on ICCAT shark fisheries is poor. Ecological Risk Assessments³ showed high risk for depletion for several shark species caught in ICCAT waters.

Oceana calls for:

- A prohibition of all targeted fisheries in the Atlantic for vulnerable and endangered pelagic species, including thresher sharks, hammerhead sharks and requiem sharks.
- The establishment of catch limits/quotas for blue sharks and shortfin mako sharks in the Atlantic by freezing the catches of blue sharks at the current level and by reducing shortfin mako shark catches at a limit that is safely within Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY).
- The prohibition of the practice of transshipment and landing shark fins and carcasses at separate harbours.
- The establishment of a “fins attached” policy for sharks in the Atlantic Ocean. Contracting party countries shall require their vessels not to remove shark fins on board but leave the fins attached to the shark bodies until landed.
- The establishment of a list of vessels catching sharks in the Atlantic, including all vessels less than 24 metres.

Swordfish in the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean swordfish (*Xiphias gladius*) stock is overexploited⁴. Current exploitation levels are far from reaching the objectives of the Convention and the stock can face a rapid decline. Between a 50% and a 70% of the Mediterranean swordfish caught is undersized⁵.

This species is targeted in the Mediterranean by a large number of states using mainly driftnets and longlines. Since the use of driftnets for the capture of large pelagic species has been banned both by the EU and the ICCAT Recommendation [04-03], the current fishing effort with this gear has declined, but driftnetting still occurs illegally in the Mediterranean in countries such as Italy, Turkey, Morocco and Algeria. The total driftnet fleet in the Mediterranean has been estimated at 500 vessels, with Italy and Morocco being the largest fleets involved.

The problems faced by swordfish in the Mediterranean can be summarised by overexploitation, lack of management measures, a total absence of control and catch declarations, and high rates of illegal fishing.

³ ICCAT (2008). Report of the 2008 Shark Stock Assessment Meeting. SCRS/2008/017. Madrid, Spain, 1-5 September, 2008.

⁴ ICCAT(2007) 2007 Mediterranean swordfish stock assessment session. SCRS/2007/016. Madrid 3-7 September 2007.

⁵ ICCAT (2008). Report of the Standing Committee of Research and Statistics (SCRS) Madrid, Spain, September 29 to October 3 2008.

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Oceana calls for effective management measures to be put in place to restore the biomass levels that will support the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). The most urgent measures to be adopted can be summarised as follows:

- Extend the current one month swordfish fishery closure defined by ICCAT Recommendation [07-01] following the scientific advice to protect swordfish juveniles.
- Establish a Mediterranean Minimum Landing Size according to scientific data for age at first maturity.
- Establish catch limits for swordfish in the Mediterranean following scientific advice that will ensure sustainable exploitation of the stock.

Finally, Oceana stresses the need to control the swordfish fishery and landings, as well as the enforcement of current management measures, particularly with regards to the widespread use of illegal driftnets.

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