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IPNLF
INTERNATIONAL POLE & LINE FOUNDATION

IPNLF POSITION STATEMENT

20th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission

La Réunion, France 23 – 27 May 2016

Pole-and-line fishing in the Indian Ocean, Maldives. Photo © IPNLF

The International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF) is an international NGO, working to develop and demonstrate the value of one-by-one tuna fisheries to thriving coastal communities. Our organisation's principal aim is to improve the wellbeing of coastal fisheries, and the people and seas connected with them through environmentally and socially responsible one-by-one fishing methods, such as pole-and-line, troll, and handline. We work across science, policy and the seafood supply chain to achieve this goal.

At this year's Annual Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (S20), IPNLF urges Members to address two critical issues. First and foremost, Members must adopt a **harvest control rule (HCR) for skipjack tuna**. This will safeguard this vitally important fishery by

implementing pre-defined management actions to keep the stock at, or above, established target levels. Coastal communities throughout the region depend on skipjack for food security and livelihoods. In the last several years, the Commission and its Members have spent significant resources to undertake management strategy evaluation (MSE) to inform a robust harvest control rule, and the time is ripe for adoption.

Secondly, Members should take immediate action to **rebuild the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna stock**. A robust rebuilding plan should include steps to address critical data gaps, improve monitoring, and reduce yellowfin catches in line with the scientific advice. A number of simple steps have been identified that can effectively reduce fishing pressure while improving the quantity and quality of data available for assessment and enforcement.

IPNLF recognises other challenges in the management of the Indian Ocean's tuna fisheries, and encourages progress in the following areas:

- Improvements in data acquisition and reporting;
- Enhance data collection and regulation of undermanaged fishing gears, including drifting fish aggregating devices (dFADs) and gillnets;
- Better understand recent technological and efficiency improvements in fishing gears (i.e. satellite technology, smart FADs, and supply vessels) to manage effort creep and avoid or reduce overfishing and overcapacity;
- Strengthen monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS), in particular via a centralised vessel monitoring system and increased observer coverage; and
- Adoption of measures to reduce by-catch and protect endangered, threatened, and protected species.

Practical improvements need to be agreed upon at the 20th Annual Session of the IOTC to ensure the vitality of the fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

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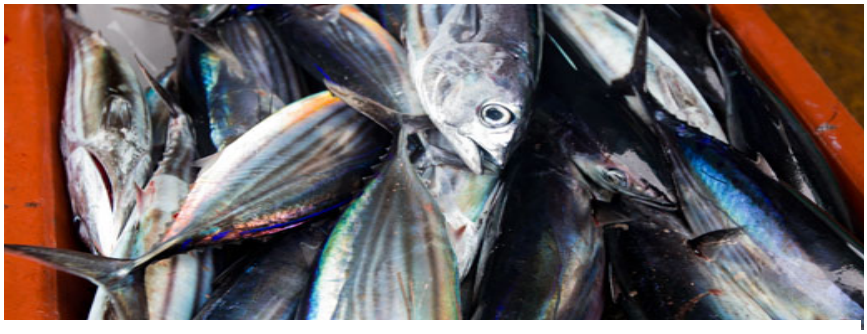
Skipjack Harvest Control Rule

A robust HCR, or harvest strategy, is a critical management step to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Indian Ocean skipjack tuna fishery. The current proposal for a HCR for skipjack tuna in the Indian Ocean draws on recommendations from the Scientific Committee, including guidance on stock-specific reference points, and has been informed by an extensive MSE process, the Management Procedures Dialogue (MPD), and the examination by the Working Party on Methods (WPM). While additional analysis and fine-tuning will always be possible, this should not be an excuse to further delay adoption. This is the very essence of the precautionary approach.

Adopting the HCR will be an important first step for the IOTC in the application of precautionary management. The fact that many members have co-sponsored the proposal shows the wide-ranging commitment to this management approach, and is a very positive sign. The adoption of an HCR for skipjack would set a precedent for forward thinking proactive management. It will be necessary to continue work on the development of alternative HCRs as more data, improved analysis methodologies and better scientific understanding of the stock are developed.

If adopted, the HCR will ensure that the Commission has the mechanisms in place to respond to changes in stock status. A more robust management framework will benefit every Member of the IOTC, bring positive returns to fishing communities and safeguard the ocean ecosystem as a whole.



Skipjack tuna, Indonesia. Photo © Paul Hilton & IPNLF

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Yellowfin Tuna Rebuilding

Based on the latest assessment, the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna stock is considered overfished and subject to overfishing. In order to recover the stock, steps must be taken this year to rebuild and improve its overall management. These include actions to address critical data gaps, improve monitoring, and reduce yellowfin overall catches in the form of a robust rebuilding plan.

For yellowfin, and other tuna species in the region, this situation highlights the need for cross-cutting management improvements. For one, proper management requires better data. According to scientists, the yellowfin assessment results rely heavily on catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) data, which are marred by poor data recording and a reluctance of several IOTC members to share operational data required for robust analysis. Additionally, artisanal fisheries take around half of the recent yellowfin tuna catches in the Indian Ocean. These challenges have an unquantified impact on the current yellowfin tuna assessment, and should be addressed as a matter of priority. In the IOTC, compliance with data provision requirements must also be improved across all fleets. This lack of data fuels higher uncertainty in the assessments, and can lead to results like yellowfin going from “green” to “red” over the course of a single assessment cycle.

Improvements in MCS are equally important throughout the IOTC Area of Competence. While progress is being made via the IOTC Compliance Missions, further strengthening of measures will allow members to better monitor fishing activities so that management actions can be evaluated and enforced. One measure that would improve both the data and the MCS of the fishery would be the requirement for 100% observer coverage on large purse seine vessels. This is a widely-accepted practice, and most large purse seiners operating in the IOTC already carry observers. Observer coverage on longliners should also be addressed as catches from these vessels are difficult to verify as are the impacts on endangered, threatened, and protected species.

IPNLF recognises the challenges unique to this Indian Ocean fishery – chiefly that a large proportion of the Indian Ocean catch is taken by artisanal fisheries in developing coastal states. These catches are critical to local food security and livelihoods in coastal communities. In the Maldives, for instance, the average consumption of tuna is over 150kg per year per person, while the fishery supports over 20% of the total workforce, and the fishing sector is one of the largest contributors to the GDP. It should also be recognised that Article V of the IOTC Agreement, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, points to the need to evaluate the economic and social aspects of these fisheries in developing coastal states.

To this end, IPNLF recommends that the IOTC develops a holistic approach to improving the status of yellowfin tuna. This should include systemic improvements in the overall management scheme, including better data collection and provision, strengthened MCS, and science-based catch reductions that will allow the stock to recover in the years ahead. Options for reducing yellowfin catches across the range of gears should be explored taking into account the impacts on juvenile yellowfin and other vulnerable marine species of different gear types. Any reductions must also account for the vulnerability of developing coastal states, which are dependent on the tuna fisheries for livelihoods and food security. This will minimise adverse impacts to subsistence, small-scale and artisanal fishers and fishworkers, and the associated coastal communities which are utilising the more selective fishing methods. In order for any of these actions to be effective, effective MCS tools, such as fully operational vessel monitoring systems (VMS) and increased observer coverage, must go hand-in-hand.

The challenges facing the Indian Ocean tuna fishery are real, and the only way to address them will be through collaboration and commitment to strengthen the management regime. IOTC Members and the markets should work together to incentivise these much needed improvements over the next several years.

It is therefore crucial that the 20th Annual Session of the IOTC adopts an HCR for skipjack and also implements a robust yellowfin rebuilding plan. These are the first steps to ensuring a viable long-term future for the region's tuna fisheries and the communities that depend on them.

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Environmentally and socially responsible tuna fishing, Maldives. Photo © IPNLF