

Statement to the 4th Special Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission

March 2021

Greenpeace welcomes that the IOTC is holding a Special Session of the Commission to address the serious overfishing of the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna population.

We remain deeply worried about the inability of this Regional Fisheries Management Organisation to address the overfishing of yellowfin tuna, as well as several other important fish¹ vital to the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people in the region, as well as marine ecosystems.

The current overfishing of yellowfin tuna is the result of many years of failure by IOTC parties to cooperate for the common good, follow the advice of the IOTC Scientific Committee and fulfill their obligations under international agreements and declarations. This is notably the case of key provisions of the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement, including on the application of the precautionary approach; the assessment of the impacts of fishing on all species (target and associated); on minimizing waste and loss of fishing gear; protecting biodiversity; managing fishing capacity; or adopting and enforcing precautionary target and limit reference points.

The fact that despite a rebuilding plan for yellowfin tuna has been in place since 2016 the IOTC SC identifies "*the 2018 catch being the largest since 2010 (440,833 MT) and exceeding the MSY range*"² is quite telling of the lack of accountability by the Indian Ocean fishing fleets in relation to the conservation of marine ecosystems in the region.

The calls for the adoption of precautionary measures have been consistently met with fierce resistance, particularly from some of the parties responsible for the greatest share of tropical tuna catches. Resolutions agreed at past IOTC sessions were known at the very time of adoption to be far from what was needed, even resulting in changes in fishing strategies that led to higher catches of juvenile tunas.

The IOTC and other tuna RFMOs continue to fail to take into account the multispecific nature of tropical tuna fisheries. **For decades fishing nations have allowed the ecosystem impacts of tuna fishing to continue to increase, putting short term profits before long term conservation interests**, hand in hand with more intensive tuna fishing, the rapid expansion of fishing techniques such as drifting fish aggregating devices (FADs) or the continued use of non selective fishing gear, such as large-scale gillnets.

Greenpeace notes with concern that:

- **the continuous resistance to take precautionary action** has resulted in this situation. Exemptions and bargaining on catch limits, FAD allowances and other provisions, will not allow to successfully address the overfishing of yellowfin tuna and other important stocks.

1 Yellowfin tuna is not the only fish population in trouble in the Indian Ocean, with the IOTC continuing to fail to address the overfishing of other important fish such as bigeye tuna, albacore, striped marlin, blue marlin, and others, let alone the dire status and/or uncertainty around the status of several species of sharks in the region.

2 IOTC (2020). Report of the 23rd Session of the IOTC Scientific Committee. IOTC-2020-SC23-R[E].

Fifty per cent probabilities of rebuilding a population are not in line with a precautionary approach;

- **uncertainty in the yellowfin tuna stock assessment**, as identified by the IOTC scientific committee, **is being used to question ambitious measures. This is inconsistent with international standards.** The 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement clearly states that “*States shall be more cautious when information is uncertain, unreliable or inadequate*” and that “*the absence of adequate scientific information shall not be used as a reason for postponing or failing to take conservation and management measures*”;³
- the number of stocks overfished and/or subject to overfishing and the status of many populations of vulnerable species caught in fisheries under the purview of the IOTC, such as many sharks, is a **damning indictment of the performance of the IOTC.**

Greenpeace therefore calls on IOTC parties at this Special Session to:

- respond to the overfishing of yellowfin tuna and the uncertainty identified by the IOTC SC by adopting **ambitious cuts on fishing pressure on yellowfin tuna**, to fishing mortality levels lower than those recommended in past IOTC SC advice;
- **protect juvenile tunas** of all three tropical species through strong limitations on the use of drifting FADs;
- **eliminate exemptions** in the rebuilding plan so as to ensure that measures apply to all fleets, irrespective of size and of where they fish;
- therefore **support the most ambitious proposals tabled for adoption at this Special Meeting** of the Commission, both in terms of **lower catch limits, bigger share of the catch reductions applied to the most industrialised fleets** and **decreased impacts on juvenile tuna through ambitious reductions in FAD use** (through limits on FAD numbers, time/area closures and a ban on the use of supply vessels).

States parties to the IOTC must be reminded that their commitments to protect and restore marine biodiversity go beyond their status as members of a regional fisheries management organisation and include many international declarations, other conventions and international law, the UN Sustainable Development Goals being an example.

These obligations don't lie with ensuring high levels of exploitation. They do with ensuring long term conservation and the continuous contribution of Indian Ocean fish to the well being of coastal communities, global food security and the health of the oceans.

Greenpeace calls on parties to support the fundamental reform of RFMOs so that they can effectively protect marine ecosystems and fish populations, in conjunction with finalising a strong new Global Ocean Treaty to improve cooperation among different management bodies, to minimise harm from industrial activities on the high seas and act collectively to restore ocean health.

The world's fisheries need to be conducted in a manner that ensures a low risk of depletion of fish populations, or, in those cases where populations have been already overexploited, a high probability of recovery in the shortest time frame possible. They must also be managed to ensure that the structure of tuna populations and the integrity of the ecosystem is preserved.

The Commission needs to take immediate and bold steps to ensure the swift recovery of the yellowfin tuna and other fish populations.

³ Art 6. 2. of the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement.