

**Statement to the 25th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission
7-11 June 2021, online**

The Pew Charitable Trusts welcomes the opportunity to participate as an observer in the 25th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC). We appreciate the work of the Secretariat, Chair, and members to convene a virtual meeting due to the continuing extraordinary situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Due to the unanticipated shift to virtual meetings and subsequent restricted agenda last year, however, a number of urgent items now require a decision. We therefore urge members to hasten the introduction of management approaches that fulfill the Commission's mandate and provide greater resilience and stability to the region's fisheries, including to:

- **Revise Resolution 19/01 on yellowfin and Resolution 16/02 on skipjack to end overfishing and adhere to agreed catch limits, respectively**

Yellowfin tuna has been classified as overfished since 2015, yet the Commission has allowed overfishing to continue. Furthermore, the skipjack catch limit based on the harvest control rule has been exceeded in every year since its adoption. Despite a special session of the Commission meeting in March to address these issues, they remain unresolved. The Commission must therefore address and resolve both of these issues in the June meeting. The credibility of IOTC – and market access for these stocks – depends on it.

To comply with IOTC's mandate, including its commitment to the precautionary approach outlined in Resolution 12/01, ***the Commission should seek to revise Resolution 19/01 in a manner that will immediately end overfishing and promote the development and adoption of a management procedure for yellowfin tuna no later than 2022.*** Management procedures provide a pre-agreed framework to facilitate efficient, science-based decision-making to achieve a long-term vision for the stock and fishery. A yellowfin management procedure will provide IOTC with the tools necessary to rebuild the population and then maintain a sustainable, profitable, and predictable fishery.

The Commission must also provide clarity on how CPCs can comply with the HCR-based skipjack catch limit of 513,572 t for 2021-2023. This catch limit represents a 9% increase from the 2018-2020 limit, but recent catches still well exceed this limit. Addressing this disconnect is critical for skipjack but also has future implications for all IOTC stocks to be governed by management procedures. ***The Commission should resolve this implementation issue and provide a pathway for compliance with future IOTC management procedures and other measures.***

- **Endorse the formation of an Electronic Monitoring Working Group to develop minimum standards for electronic monitoring and move towards 100% observer coverage**

Low levels of observer coverage limit the availability of independent catch and operational data, reducing the accuracy of stock assessments and effectiveness of conservation management measures. The Commission currently requires only 5% observer coverage for longline vessels larger than 24 meters operating within its Convention Area. To increase this coverage, improve data collection, and reduce the impact of future disruptions such as COVID-19, the Commission should prioritize the development of a comprehensive electronic monitoring (EM) program that would complement the existing observers.

Draft EM standards were presented to the most recent meeting of the Scientific Committee (SC). The SC noted this work and recommended that an ad hoc working group be established to further develop this work. ***The Commission should endorse the recommendation to form an ad hoc working group on EM standards and set a timeframe for finalization and adoption of the standards.***

- **Improve monitoring, reporting and management of transshipment activities by updating Resolution 19/06**

Over the last decade the amount of fish transshipped has significantly increased with reported IOTC transshipment events rising 87% between 2014 and 2019. However, despite this upward trend, current regulatory control and monitoring of transshipment has remained relatively unchanged since 2012. The current transshipment measure contains loopholes that can facilitate illegal, unreported, or unregulated (IUU) activity such as misreporting or non-reporting of catches and make it very difficult to cross-check and verify transshipment reporting. To close these loopholes and further discourage IUU activity, ***the Commission should update Res 19/06 to holistically improve monitoring, reporting, and management of transshipping activity for all members.***

- **Strengthen monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) to reduce opportunities for IUU fishing activities**

The Commission must work to close management gaps that present opportunities for IUU fishing in the IOTC area of competence. Vessel monitoring systems (VMS) represent an essential MCS tool for fisheries management. The current VMS resolution (Res 15/03) has been recognized by the Commission as in need of updating to allow for a more centralized system. Yet the IOTC has failed to make progress in improving its VMS standards although work to do so since tasking its VMS Working Group to do so in 2019. ***The Commission must encourage the VMS Working Group to provide advice, by the Commission's meeting in 2021, for the implementation of recommendations from the February 2019 Options Paper for the IOTC Vessel Monitoring System (Document IOTC-2019-WPICMM02-VMS Study).***

Lastly, MCS tools such as port State measures are essential to limiting opportunities for IUU fishing and enable more effective management of fisheries. ***Therefore, the Commission should also continue to encourage comprehensive and robust implementation of existing measures, such as Res 16/11 on port State measures to prevent, deter, and eliminate IUU fishing. This includes members designating ports to be used for landing IOTC species.***