



# POLICY BRIEF

SOUTH WEST INDIAN OCEAN  
REGIONAL PROGRAMME • 2024

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## NOW IS THE TIME TO START REBUILDING THE INDIAN OCEAN'S TUNA STOCKS

*With yellowfin tuna stocks in the Indian Ocean declining after nearly a decade of persistent overfishing, IOTC member countries need to consider adopting a long-term plan to rebuild this vital stock. This starts by reducing catch levels by at least 30% against a 2020 baseline, together with a strong rebuilding plan.*

### THE STATUS OF KEY INDIAN OCEAN TUNA STOCKS

Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna has been recognised as overfished since 2016. Bigeye tuna breached the overfished boundary in 2022, during which time skipjack tuna catches continued to exceed their total allowable catch. While this does not make skipjack an overfished species, it is nonetheless noteworthy and points to a need for more rigorous tuna management in the Indian Ocean as a whole.

Yellowfin tuna - *Thunnus albacares*

**OVERFISHED**



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Bigeye tuna - *Thunnus obesus*

**OVERFISHED**

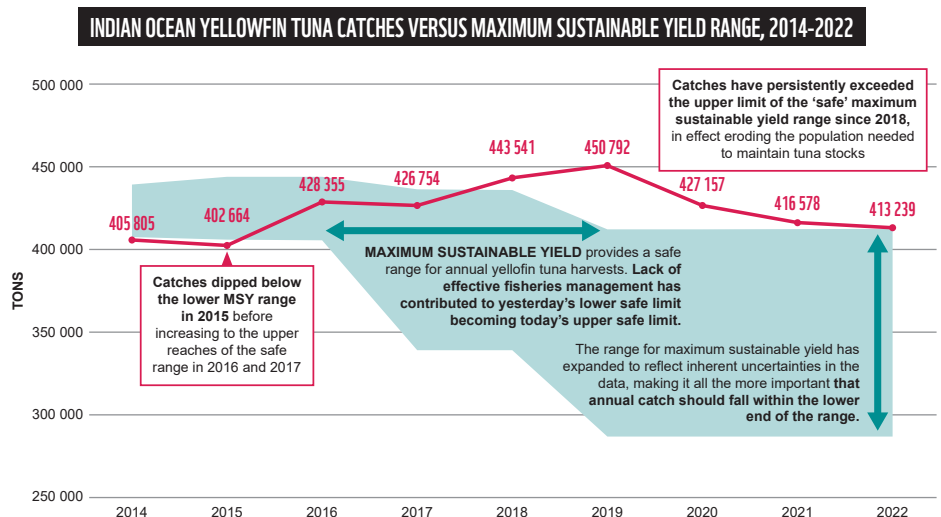


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### YELLOWFIN TUNA PERSISTENTLY BREACHING 'SAFE' CATCH LIMITS

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission's Scientific Committee specifies the maximum sustainable yield (MSY) for how many tons of yellowfin tuna can be harvested from the Indian Ocean. MSY is presented as a range with an upper and a lower limit. This range acknowledges the variability of data quality as well as the many uncertainties inherent in making recommendations on a system as vast and variable as the ocean, especially in the context of a changing climate.

Because of these uncertainties, and to provide room for the unforeseen, it is advisable to target an annual catch that is below the lower end of the range to act as a buffer against unforeseen stock reductions for whatever reason (such as natural or man-made events impacting recruitment). **The annual catch of Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna has exceeded the cautious lower MSY range since 2015 and the optimistic upper MSY range since 2018.** In effect, this means that the Indian Ocean's yellowfin tuna fisheries are eating into their available tuna "capital", leaving those dependent on healthy stocks in an extremely vulnerable position.



## WHERE TO FROM HERE?

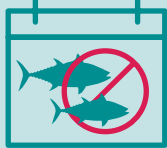
It will take at least two generations of tuna – that is, 10 years – of rigorous fisheries management to rebuild yellowfin stocks in the Indian Ocean. Failing to do so could have severe long-term consequences for this high-value fish stock that plays a vital top-predator role in the ecosystem, and the Indian Ocean states that depend on it for export income and local food security.


In 2022, the IOTC Scientific Committee recommended a 30% reduction in yellowfin tuna catch against a 2020 baseline, which gives yellowfin tuna a 67% chance of recovering by 2030. Although the Scientific Committee has not updated these projections, it is mathematically certain that, with each year that actions to adopt and thoroughly implement a clear and decisive reduction in allowable catch are deferred, the chance of this stock recovering in the medium term declines.


More worryingly, there are many unknown variables at play, and the species might reach a tipping point – currently pinned at 2027 – beyond which the decline in yellowfin tuna numbers will accelerate as stocks are no longer able to replenish themselves.


## WWF RECOMMENDATIONS

WWF urges the 28th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission to collaborate, compromise and take a long-term perspective to managing yellowfin tuna fisheries in the region. This will benefit both the region's developing coastal countries as well as the global fishing industry over the long term. WWF recommends the adoption of the following primary measures:

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**1**  
**Adopt a multi-year yellowfin tuna rebuilding plan** with a three-year management cycle.
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**2**  
**Specify a 2024 catch that is at least 30% lower than 2020 catch levels.** This number may be revised based on the upcoming stock assessment.
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**3**  
**Adopt immediate spatio-temporal closures to allow recovery of depleted tuna stocks.** A three-month closure period should be agreed upon and implemented to reduce fishing mortality of key stocks (yellowfin, bigeye and skipjack tuna).
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**4**  
**Set reduction targets based on fairness, equality and transparency** to avoid unfairly burdening developing nations with the consequences of historical overfishing.

## FURTHER WWF RECOMMENDATIONS



**Continue to monitor skipjack catches and address over-catch scenarios by adopting an appropriate harvest strategy.** WWF asks the IOTC to address the deficiencies in the harvest control rules (Res 21/01) to avoid overshooting of skipjack total allowable catch (TAC).



**Improve onboard observer coverage (human or electronic, or a combination of both) to 100% by 2025** in the industrial tuna fisheries.

## YESTERDAY'S LOWER LIMIT IS TODAY'S UPPER LIMIT

WWF urges IOTC member states to follow the scientific evidence and resist lodging objections that may be politically expedient but will ultimately make policy decisions more challenging for future decision-makers.



### For more information

Umair Shahid

Senior Indian Ocean Tuna Manager

WWF South West Indian Ocean Seascape  
Regional Programme

[ushahid@wwf.org.pk](mailto:ushahid@wwf.org.pk)



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WWF, 28 rue Mauverney, 1196 Gland, Switzerland. Tel. +41 22 364 9111

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