WWF POSITION for the 30th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission

IOTC-2026-S30-NGO

Maldives

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Introduction

The Indian Ocean supports the second-largest tuna fishery in the world, characterized by the significant role of artisanal fisherieswhich contribute to more than half (55%) of total tuna catches[1]. These fisheries account for over half of the ocean's total tuna catches, with 96.5% of neritic tuna and 40.3% of tropical tuna (yellowfin, skipjack, and bigeye) catches originating from small-scale operations**.**

For many developing coastal states in the Indian Ocean, tuna may not be the primary commodity, yet it plays a crucial role in ensuring food security for coastal communities, supporting local economies, and contributing to both domestic and foreign trade. In Small-Island Developing States (SIDs) particularly, tuna holds immense significance as an ocean-sourced protein; processing for international markets; revenue generation through foreign fisheries access agreements and/or Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPAs); and employment - all of which ultimately depend on tuna populations being healthy, resilient, and sustainably managed in accordance with science-based targets and consideration of socio-economic and social indicators. These fisheries underpin the economies of numerous coastal and small-island developing states, including Indonesia, Maldives, Islamic Republic of Iran, Sri Lanka, India, Seychelles, Mauritius among others.

Despite the significance and importance of Indian Ocean tuna fisheries, their future remains at risk. In 2023, the IOTC determined that catches reached a total of 2.03 million tonnes, 58% of which comprised tropical tuna alone (Yellowfin, Skipjack and Bigeye). From 2019 to 2024, the Indian Ocean's tropical tuna fisheries recorded significantly high relative to long-term averages reported by the IOTC Scientific Committee, with tropical tuna species consistently accounting for approximately 60% of the total catch, averaging 1.22 million tonnes annually. Among the species, skipjack tuna contributed the most, averaging around 636,000 tonnes per year, followed by yellowfin tuna at approximately 440,000 tonnes, and bigeye tuna with an average of about 88,000 tonnes annually.

Despite the adoption of management measures, the total allowable catch (TAC) and/or catch limits agreed by the IOTC scientific committee have been consistently exceeded for two tropical tunas, undermining stock rebuilding efforts and conservation objectives. This persistent overharvest is exacerbated by weak compliance mechanisms, inadequate monitoring, and lack of effective enforcement, posing a continued risk to stock sustainability and the long-term viability of the fishery. At the 2026 IOTC Commission, WWF

[1] In the Indian Ocean, gillnets (28%) contribute the highest amount of catch followed by purse seine (26%), longline (19%), line (14%), baitboat (8%) and others (3.5%)

urges Contracting Parties and Cooperating Non-Contracting Parties to move decisively from agreement to implementation, prioritizing enforceable measures that deliver real reductions in fishing mortality, ecosystem impacts, and human rights risks:

WWF's Key Priorities:

1. **Strict implementation of scientific advice for tropical tunas.**
   Recommendation: *Adopt and fully implement a yellowfin tuna TAC not exceeding 421,000 tonnes for 2026–2028, in line with scientific advice and the rebuilding targets set in Resolution 21/01. Fully implement the skipjack and bigeye catch limits adopted under Resolutions 25/03 and 25/04, including corrective measures when overshooting the agreed TACs.*

2. **Accelerate and consolidate management procedures, and work towards the development of a multi-species harvest strategy for tropical tuna by 2030.**
   Recommendation: *Advance toward multispecies and ecosystem-based harvest strategies, including consideration of bycatch impacts. Address deficiencies in the harvest control rules (Res 21/03) to avoid overshooting of skipjack total allowable catch (TAC) determined through Resolution 24/07 and set catch limits for bigeye tuna based on Resolution 23/04.*

3. **Strengthen, as a matter of urgency, the conservation and management of bycatch species caught in association with tuna fisheries with a key focus on sharks and rays, cetaceans and sea turtles in the IOTC area of competence.**
   Recommendation: *Improved data collection for bycatch across all gears, including gillnets and artisanal fisheries. Adopt a requirement for all sharks landed to have their fins naturally attached without any exception. WWF notes the excellent measures have been already undertaken by other RFMOs such as NAFO (2017), GFCM (2018) and notes that despite some progress made in 2018, IOTC is still far from having an effective measure in place to address this important issue. Immediately adopt measures to reduce mortality of vulnerable shark species, including shortfin mako, hammerhead sharks (Res 25/08 and Res 25/09) and start a process to develop management strategy evaluation and associated catch limits and allocation for blueshark.*

Other Priority Areas of Action:

1. **Accelerate the adoption of a comprehensive dFAD management plan to allow recovery of depleted tuna stocks.**
   Recommendation: *Accelerate the adoption of a comprehensive drifting FAD[2] management plan, including the development of science-based limits on deployments, operationalisation of the FAD*

[2] WWF promotes sustainable fishing by advocating for non-entangling, biodegradable dFADs and a comprehensive dFAD registry. This, along with fewer dFADs and protected areas, would cut bycatch and juvenile mortality, aiding stock recovery and ecosystem preservation, and ensuring economic balance for dependent nations.

register (aligned with Resolution 24/02), robust tracking and recovery mechanisms, clear ownership and verification protocols, and a phased transition to biodegradable FADs to reduce ecological impacts and support the recovery of tuna stocks.

2. **Ensure the safety, security and human rights of crew members and observers.**
   Recommendation: *WWF calls on all IOTC Contracting Parties to demonstrate their commitment to decent work, safety at sea and human rights in fisheries by becoming parties to the ILO Work in Fishing Convention (C-188) and the Cape Town Agreement. Ratification and effective implementation of these instruments are essential to ensure safe vessels, fair working conditions for fishers, and a level playing field across the Indian Ocean tuna fisheries.*
   Within this framework, we call the Commission to adopt a CMM for Observer Safety and Security similar to WCPFC (CMM 2017-01 and, building on the Resolution 2018-01). Develop binding Labour Standards for Crew on industrial tuna fishing Vessels to ensure safe, fair and humane working conditions

3. **Accelerate the adoption of spatio-temporal closures, including the identification of high-risk areas (hot spots), to support recovery of depleted tuna stocks.**
   Recommendation:
   WWF calls on all IOTC Parties to actively support and operationalize the BBNJ Agreement, its objectives within the IOTC mandate. This includes strengthening cooperation on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction. Effective implementation will be essential to enhance ocean governance and safeguard highly migratory species and their ecosystems.
   In this framework, WWF calls on the Commission, to mandate the Scientific Committee to identify high-risk areas and periods where targeted, evidence-based spatial or temporal measures, including conditional or dynamic interventions are demonstrably effective and do not result in effort displacement. This would be a first step to operationalize area-based management tool that are coherent with the BBNJ provisions.

4. **Continue the development and adoption of management procedures for both tuna and non-tuna species.**
   Recommendation: *Continue the development and adoption of MPs for both tuna and non-tuna species, and proceed with the adoption of those identified as priorities by the Commission, in accordance with the framework established under Resolution 25/10. This includes monitoring the implementation of the swordfish MP and assessing localized depletion risks, including those associated with specific gears such as gillnet fisheries.*

5. **Tackle IUU fishing, improve monitoring, transparency and onboard observer coverage (human or electronic, or a combination of both) to 100%.**
   Recommendation:

WWF urges all IOTC Contracting Parties that have not yet done so to accede to and effectively implement the FAO Port State Measures Agreement (PSMA). Full participation in the PSMA is essential to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, strengthen port controls, and enhance compliance across the Indian Ocean tuna fisheries and global supply chains.

We call to the Commission to ensure effective implementation of the Regional Observer Scheme established under Resolution 25/06, including coverage requirements and monitoring of artisanal fisheries through field samplers and continue to adopt measures to achieve 100% observer coverage (human, electronic, or a combination of both) in industrial tuna fisheries by 2026 to improve data quality, ensure compliance and enhance transparency. *Encourage CPCs to develop implementation plans and alternative data collection mechanisms that enable participation of small-scale fisheries in monitoring and reporting efforts.*

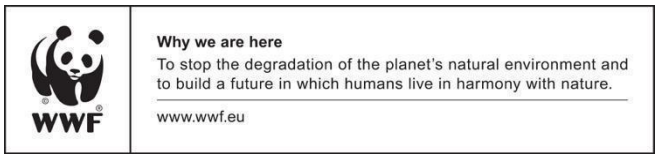
6. **Improve the conservation outcomes of bycatch in the Indian Ocean through enhanced scientific data collection and strengthened monitoring of gillnet and driftnet fisheries.**

   Recommendation: *Ensure full compliance with existing prohibitions and limitations on large-scale driftnets, including the enforcement of maximum net length requirements, through strengthened monitoring, observer coverage and compliance actions. Authorise LED/artificial light trials for scientific purposes under Resolution 16/07 to explore their potential in reducing bycatch, and initiate a phased approach to reduce and eliminate the use of large-scale driftnets by 2030, in line with international commitments and the objectives of the Global Biodiversity Framework.*

Conclusion

WWF remains deeply concerned about the widening gap between conservation commitments and effective implementation in the Indian Ocean. In recent years, repeated overshoots of agreed catch limits for key tropical tuna stocks, particularly bigeye and skipjack tuna, demonstrate that the primary challenge is no longer the absence of management measures, but weak compliance, inconsistent data reporting, and insufficient corrective action. Despite recent progress in adopting Conservation and Management Measures, including steps toward drifting FAD regulation, outcomes on the water continue to fall short of scientific advice. WWF calls on all CPCs to urgently implement robust, science-based measures that are developed through transparent management procedures, rather than ad-hoc decisions to secure sustainable tuna stocks, protect vulnerable species, and uphold international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

These urgently required measure are essential not only for ecosystem resilience and ocean health, but for ensuring livelihoods, food security, and long-term economic benefits for developing coastal states, and all those who depend on a healthy, well-functioning Indian Ocean ecosystem. WWF remains committed to supporting all States in strengthening fisheries data systems, improving monitoring and compliance, reducing the impacts of destructive practices in line with existing IOTC measures, and advancing ecosystem-based fisheries management across the Indian Ocean.



For further information:

Lalaina Rakotonaivo
Fisheries Coordinator
WWF - Madagascar
lrakotonaivo@wwf.mg

Raul Garcia Rodriguez
Senior Fisheries Officer
WWF - Spain
pesca@wwf.es