News and notices

SAVING SEABIRDS FROM LONGLINES: A CAMPAIGN OF BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL

In every ocean of the world, longline fishing vessels set and haul their lines, bringing aboard halibut, tuna, swordfish and toothfish - and seabirds. Longlining has been commonly regarded as an 'environmentally friendly' fishing technique. Yet, it now has the attention of international NGOs such as Greenpeace International, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Reports in the early 1990s emanating from Australia of tens of thousands of albatrosses being killed in the Southern Ocean by tuna longliners first led to this attention. A resolution *Incidental Mortality of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries* adopted by IUCN at its First World Conservation Congress in Montréal, Canada in October 1996 led BirdLife International to inaugurate its Seabird Conservation Programme in 1997, with a global review of seabird mortality caused by longline fisheries as its first major project.

Seabirds are being killed in large numbers in the North Atlantic, north-eastern Pacific, South Atlantic and Southern Oceans. Only in the warm seas of the tropics, where seabirds are generally few in number, are reports of mortality few or lacking. In the Pacific Ocean the species of greatest conservation concern is the Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*, an IUCN Endangered species because of its very small population, breeding on only one Japanese island. U.S. regulations allow for fishery closure if four birds are hooked within two years by the groundfish and Pacific Halibut fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea. Numbers of Laysan *P. immutabilis* and Black-footed Albatrosses *P. nigripes* are killed in these fisheries, as well as by the pelagic swordfish and tuna longline fisheries operating out of Hawaii. In the North Atlantic, the species most affected is the Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*. However, because of its large and expanding population, it does not seem to be at risk.

In the Southern Hemisphere, apart from the albatrosses, large numbers of petrels are killed, especially the White-chinned Petrel *Procellaria aequinoctialis*. Its large and widespread population means that is not currently Endangered but nevertheless the kill rates are of serious concern. A closely-related and only very recently described species, the Spectacled Petrel *P. conspicillata* of the South Atlantic, has a population of only about a thousand breeding pairs that breeds on only one island (Inaccessible, next to Tristan da Cunha), and the hundreds that have been killed by longliners off Brazil suggest this Endangered species may be in grave danger. Inaccessible Island is a nature

reserve, which protects the petrel ashore at its breeding sites, but it requires international protection while it is at sea as well.

In both hemispheres seabird mortality has encouraged research into mitigation methods. Early work was conducted in Australia, pioneered by Nigel Brothers of the Tasmanian Parks & Wildlife Service. New Zealand, Norway, South Africa and the United Kingdom are all experimenting with underwater-setting devices that are designed to keep baited hooks out of the sight of scavenging seabirds. Since every hooked bird is one less fish potentially caught (and much bait are taken by seabirds without themselves becoming hooked) fishers should be quick to see the economic advantages of reducing bird bycatch. Mitigation measures (such as weighting lines to make them sink more quickly, setting lines only at night when few seabird species forage, and deploying bird-scaring steamer lines above the longline) should thus be readily adopted by longline fishers keen to retain their clean image.

In 1997 the Committee on Fisheries (COFI) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), with the United States and Japan taking the lead, agreed to hold a *Consultation on Reduction of Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Fisheries*. A Seabird Technical Working Group drafted a Plan of Action in Tokyo, Japan in March 1998 for adoption by COFI. Three members of the working group, Nigel Brothers of Australia, John Cooper from South Africa and Svein Løkkeborg of Norway, have written a monograph, due to be published in its final form in late 1999 by the FAO, that describes in detail longline fishing and fisheries, seabird bycatch on a global scale and recommended mitigation measures. The February 1999 meeting of COFI unanimously adopted an *International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Longline Seabirds* (IPOA-Seabirds). Endorsement by the FAO Council in June 1999 means it is now official policy, so longlining nations are now expected to proceed with their own National Plans of Action and report back to the FAO on progress in reducing seabird mortality in 2001 when COFI meets again.

Another important development is the intention to negotiate a "Regional Agreement" for southern albatrosses under the Bonn Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals. Such an Agreement, in which Australia is taking a lead through the seven-member Valdivia Group of Temperate Southern Hemisphere Countries on the Environment, would require signatory nations to improve the conservation status of their breeding albatrosses, and so further control of longliner-caused mortality would be expected.

Although the above activities should go a long way to reducing seabird mortality from longline fisheries, there remains one area of serious concern: pirate fishing. In the Southern Ocean especially, many illegal, unregulated and

unreported longliners, often sailing under flags of convenience, have greatly overfished the Patagonian toothfish *Dissostichus eleginoides* stocks, killing huge numbers of seabirds in the process. Recent estimates by the Convention for the Conservation of Marine and Antarctic Living Resources (CCAMLR) have been of up to 100 000 birds killed a year by the pirate fishery. This is a level which computer modelling has shown is clearly not sustainable, leading to the very real possibilities of extinction of some of the larger albatrosses within decades if nothing is done to halt the slaughter. Only concerted international efforts, with trade restrictions, catch certification, penalties imposed at home and unloading ports, as well as spy satellites tracking and naval patrols arresting miscreant vessels, will result in the fishery being managed sustainably and in far fewer birds being killed.

With the collaboration of inter-governmental bodies such as the FAO and the Bonn Convention, governments, environmental NGOs such as Birdlife International and its national partners, and the fishing industry, it is hoped that come no more than a decade into the next millennium longlining will once more be able to regarded as an environmentally friendly fishing technique, and the world's seabirds will be able to fly their oceans without risk of being hooked. To achieve this aim, Birdlife International intends commencing a global campaign involving its partnership in the year 2000. It is intended that the campaign will concentrate on persuading governments of longlining nations to adopt National Plans of Action, as recommended by the FAO.

BirdLife International's Seabird Conservation Programme is based in the Avian Demography Unit, Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa. It receives funding from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds via BirdLife South Africa, with which it closely works. A free issue of the illustrated magazine *World Birdwatch* describing the Programme may be obtained by contacting the Co-ordinator. Further information can be found on the Programme's web site at www.uct.ac.za/depts/stats/adu/seabirds.

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