

Joint statement in advance of the 25th Session of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission

20 May 2021

Background

Yellowfin tuna in the Indian Ocean is overfished and subject to continued overfishing, with scientists warning that the stock could collapse within the next five years if fishing pressure is not reduced¹. A stock rebuilding plan was put in place by the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) in 2016 to significantly reduce catches, based on 2014 catch levels. However, this has proved ineffective, with catches increasing by over 10% between 2014 and 2019, according to new catch figures².

A Special Session of the Commission was held in March to deal specifically with the sustainability of the yellowfin tuna fishery. However, an unwillingness to negotiate, primarily on the part of the EU and other distant water fishing nations, resulted in the meeting ending without the adoption of an updated rebuilding plan for the overfished stock.

The 25th Session of the IOTC is being held virtually from 7-11 June 2021 and two proposals on an interim plan for rebuilding the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna stock have been tabled – one submitted by the EU and another submitted collectively by Maldives, Kenya, South Africa and Comoros.

There is also an urgent need to improve the management of fish aggregating devices (FADs) in the Indian Ocean, primarily to reduce catches of juvenile tropical tunas, but also to help mitigate the other ecological impacts associated with drifting FADs, including marine plastic pollution, ghost fishing and the bycatch of turtles, sharks and marine mammals.

To this end, a proposal on the management of FADs in the IOTC area of competence has been submitted by Kenya, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mozambique, Pakistan, Somalia, South Africa, Indonesia, and Tanzania.

Recommendations

Blue Marine Foundation (BLUE) and the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF) hereby confirm their support for the following two conservation and management measure (CMM) proposals:

- IOTC-2021-S25-PropF “On an interim plan for rebuilding the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna stock in the IOTC area of competence”, submitted by Maldives et al.³; and
- IOTC-2021-S25-PropE “On management of fish aggregating devices in the IOTC area of competence”, submitted by Kenya et al.⁴.

¹ <https://www.bluemarinefoundation.com/2020/04/06/leading-scientists-take-on-eu-over-yellowfin-overfishing/>

² <https://www.iotc.org/data/datasets>

³ <https://www.iotc.org/documents/interim-plan-rebuilding-indian-ocean-yellowfin-tuna-stock-iotc-area-competence-maldives-et>

⁴ <https://www.iotc.org/documents/management-fish-aggregating-devices-iotc-area-competence-kenya-et-al-cf-res19-02>

It should be noted that the fishing mortality of yellowfin tuna in 2017 was 20% above the target reference point, and that the spawning biomass was 17% lower than the target. The proposal tabled by Maldives et al. acknowledges this and correctly notes that a reduction in catch of **16.7% compared to 2017 levels** is required to ensure the timely recovery of the stock. This would necessitate a catch limit of roughly 341,000t. BLUE and IPNLF agree with this reduction and support this catch limit.

However, having tried and failed to ensure that a yellowfin catch limit of 346,438t was adopted at the Special Session of the Commission earlier this year⁵, Maldives have submitted a new proposal with a new, higher total allowable catch (TAC) of **383,000t**. In addition, the Maldives proposal provides a significant catch “buffer” of over 20,000t, by assigning 2,000t catch limits to IOTC members who have fished very little or not at all in the past.

Given the uncertainty and ambiguity contained within the IOTC Scientific Committee’s most recent report⁶, and the failure of the Scientific Committee to provide adequate advice to IOTC members at the Special Session of the Commission in March, there is a clear risk of no new stock rebuilding plan being adopted at the upcoming Commission meeting. The proposal put forward by Maldives and its co-sponsors is equitable, removes all exemptions, is gear type neutral and takes into account the needs of developing coastal states and small island developing states. Importantly, it would bring about the IOTC’s first formal TAC for yellowfin tuna, and an almost 15% reduction from 2019 catch levels.

Therefore, while acknowledging that a lower catch limit more closely in line with the 16.7% reduction from 2017 levels should be a priority, **BLUE and IPNLF support the proposal tabled by Maldives**. As the most ambitious proposal tabled, we encourage all IOTC members to use this as a starting point for negotiations at the upcoming Commission meeting.

In contrast, the proposal tabled by the EU is based heavily on the joint proposal *IOTC-2021-SS4-PropE* tabled at the IOTC Special Session in March and, given that this proposal was rejected at the Special Session, BLUE and IPNLF encourage the EU to withdraw its current proposal and support the more ambitious proposal put forward by Maldives. Similarly, although the EU did not provide a catch limit within its CMM proposal, our simulations estimate it to be roughly 395,000t – significantly higher than that of the Maldives proposal.

The proposal tabled by Kenya and its co-sponsors aims to reduce the number of drifting FADs per vessel from 300 to 150, calls for greater transparency in how these FADs are deployed, tracked and retrieved, and further calls for a three-month ban on fishing around drifting FADS and a phasing out of supply vessels. **BLUE and IPNLF recognise the importance of improved FAD management in the region and therefore support the proposal tabled by Kenya**.

Lastly, BLUE and IPNLF would like to emphasise that the 25th Session of the IOTC represents IOTC members’ last chance to adopt an interim yellowfin tuna stock rebuilding plan for 2022 that is both equitable and in line with IOTC Resolution 12/01 on the implementation of the precautionary approach.

⁵ <https://www.bluemarinefoundation.com/2021/03/12/statement-on-the-failure-of-the-iotc-special-session/>

⁶ See: <https://www.bluemarinefoundation.com/2021/01/29/iotc-takes-step-back-on-yellowfin-tuna-recovery-plan/>