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FOR CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF TUNAS

OPRT adopted a policy on bycatch issues at its General Meeting on June 15

The OPRT has been tackling mitigation of sea turtle and seabird bycatches incidentally caught by long line fishing and produced several pamphlets and brochures on how to mitigate such bycatches to raise the awareness of long line fishermen. It has, however, never established a common policy on bycatch issues. Given the ongoing work of other fishermen's organizations to address bycatch issues, the OPRT started working on this since December 2022 and the draft bycatch policy was formally adopted at the General Meeting on June 15, 2023 as follows:

Draft OPRT Policy on Bycatch Issues

1. Background

It is well-known that long line fishing methods catch sharks either intentionally or incidentally[1] as well as sea turtles and seabirds incidentally. Sharks are often retained even when they are caught incidentally while sea turtles and seabirds are usually discarded.

While the stock status of some shark species such as blue shark is good and those species can be utilized, many species of sharks are vulnerable to fishing pressure due to the low productivity.

There is a concern about the stock status of many sea turtles and seabird species. Although fishery operation may not be the main reason for it, incidental catch of such species should be minimized. Even when there is no concern on the status, incidental catch should be reduced as they are not utilized.

To address the concern on conservation of sharks as well as incidental catch of sea turtles and seabirds, FAO established in 1999 the International Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks and the International Plan of Action for Reducing Incidental Catch of Seabirds in Long Line Fisheries. FAO also produced the Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations in 2009. Regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) took measures to conserve or protect several species of sharks as well as to reduce incidental mortalities of sea turtles and seabirds in fishing operations.

2. OPRT general policy on bycatch issues

(1) Long line fishing vessels registered at the OPRT (hereinafter called "the OPRT vessels") will fully implement binding bycatch-related measures taken by tuna RFMOs (IATTC, IOTC, ICCAT and WCPFC) whenever they operate in the respective Convention area where such measures are applicable. When the OPRT vessels fish for southern bluefin tuna, they will fully implement applicable bycatch-related binding measures of the RFMOs, depending on where they operate. Those binding measures are yellow-highlighted in Attachment (please note that the attachment is not shown here as it is very long. If you want to see the attachment[2], please see the full text at the OPRT website (https://oprt.or.jp/eng/)).

(2) The OPRT vessels will collect and submit data on sharks, sea turtles and seabirds in accordance with

[1] "The term "incidental catch" is used in this document as a synonym to "bycatch."

[2] Attachment does not contain reporting obligations to make it concise.

applicable requirements of each tuna RFMO.

(3) In addition, the OPRT vessels are strongly encouraged to implement non-binding bycatch-related measures taken by those tuna RFMOs whenever they operate in the respective Convention area where such measures are applicable. Such non-binding measures are blue-highlighted in Attachment.

(4) In the case that some tuna RFMOs have already taken more stringent measures than other tuna RFMOs, the OPRT vessels will consider implementing such measures in the other tuna RFMOs on a voluntary basis.

3. Species-specific points

Sharks and rays

(1) Full utilization

Finning[3] has been prohibited for many years by all the tuna RFMOs. It is a pity that some long line fishing vessels were still alleged to have conducted finning even in recent years. The OPRT Members recognize that finning will undermine the entire tuna long line industry.

To prevent finning, IATTC and ICCAT use "5% rule"[4] while IOTC made one step further (prohibition of separating fins from bodies for shark landed fresh) and WCPFC prohibited such separation for both fresh and frozen sharks with several alternative measures. It should be recognized that although prohibition of such separation has no conservation merits if sharks caught are to be utilized, it may become necessary if finning continues to take place.

(2) Prohibition of certain gears

IATTC and WCPFC prohibit either shark lines or wire trace. WCPFC made a further step in 2022 to prohibit both gears in the area between 20N and 20S, starting on January 1, 2024 to protect oceanic whitetip shark and silky shark. This is because these species are already subject to prohibition of retention but are not recovering, and the majority of the bycatches takes place in that area.

Prohibition of both shark lines and wire trace mean that all the shark species should be protected regardless of the stock status and negate the sustainable utilization of sharks such as blue shark whose stock status has no concern. As in the case of the WCPFC, however, if there are scientific needs for such prohibition, which does not impact the catches of other shark species whose stock status is good, this could be considered.

(3) Oceanic whitetip shark

All the RFMOs prohibit retention of oceanic whitetip shark on board fishing vessels.

(4) Hammerhead sharks

ICCAT prohibits retention of hammerhead sharks on board fishing vessels. It should be noted that scalloped hammerhead and smooth hammerhead are least vulnerable based on the 2012 ICCAT ecological risk assessment (ERA). If prohibition of retention of hammerhead sharks is proposed by other tuna RFMOs, its scientific justification should be closely checked.

(5) Thresher sharks

ICCAT prohibits retention of bigeye thresher shark on board fishing vessels while IOTC prohibits retention of three species of thresher sharks (bigeye thresher, common thresher and pelagic thresher) on board fishing vessels. It should be noted that bigeye thresher shark was ranked most vulnerable in the 2012 ICCAT ERA. WCPFC has no management advice for this species while indicating that some of the median F exceed some of the reference points (WCPFC Stock status and management advice for Pacific bigeye thresher shark). In the 2019 IATTC ERA, bigeye thresher and pelagic thresher were categorized as most vulnerable.

(6) Silky shark

IATTC, ICCAT and WCPFC prohibit retention of silky

[3] Practice of retaining only fins and discarding bodies

[4] The weight of the fins must be no more than 5% of the sharks on board up to the first point of landing.

shark on board fishing vessels. IOTC has no measure on this species due to considerable uncertainty, but silky shark is ranked second most vulnerable for long line fishing gear in the 2018 IOTC ERA (IOTC Status Summary for silky shark).

(7) Porbeagle shark

ICCAT prohibits retention of porbeagle shark on board fishing vessels. This species is found in the north Atlantic and high latitude areas of the southern hemisphere. There is a very low risk for Pacific southern hemisphere stock (WCPFC assessment). The 2019 IATTC ERA indicated that this species is least vulnerable.

(8) Blue shark

ICCAT introduced TAC and allocations for north Atlantic blue shark and TAC for south Atlantic blue shark. Other tuna RFMOs have no measure. The WCPFC Stock status and management advice for both north Pacific stock and south Pacific stock indicates that the stocks are not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The 2019 IATTC ERA indicated that this species is most vulnerable, but the indication of WCPFC based on stock assessment should be respected. IOTC also confirms that the stock is not overfished and no overfishing is occurring (IOTC Status Summary for blue shark). Although the stock status of blue shark is good in the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean, introduction of TACs and allocations could be easier when the stock status is good than otherwise. OPRT Members should avoid the situation that they will be forced to accept conservation measures after the stock has declined.

(9) Shortfin mako

ICCAT introduced measures for shortfin mako. Other tuna RFMOs have no measure. The WCPFC Stock status and management advice for north Pacific stock indicates that the stock is not overfished and overfishing is not occurring. The 2019 IATTC ERA indicated that this species is most vulnerable, but the indication of WCPFC based on stock assessment should be respected. In the IOTC area, the stock status is unknown due to considerable uncertainty, but shortfin mako shark is ranked first most vulnerable for long line fishing gear in the 2018 IOTC ERA (IOTC Status Summary for shortfin mako shark).

(10) Mobuild rays

IATTC, IOTC and WCPFC introduced measures for mobuild rays, including prohibition of retention. No information on mobuild rays is available in ICCAT.

Sea turtles

All the tuna RFMOs have measures for sea turtle bycatch mitigation, and require long liners using shallow-set to use either circle hooks or finfish baits except IOTC where the use of whole finfish bait is encouraged.

Seabirds

IATTC requires the use of one measure from Column A and another from Column B. ICCAT and IOTC changed this practice to the use of two measures out of three measures: tori line, night setting and weighted branch lines. WCPFC applies different measures in different areas, depending on the risk level of bycatching sea birds in each area. In addition, WCPFC lists up hook shielding device as a stand-alone measure. The OPRT vessels should consider aligning the IATTC measures with the WCPFC measures or at least those of ICCAT and IOTC.