



# Recommendations to the 19th Special Meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas

10-17 November 2014, Genoa, Italy

## Overview

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) can achieve effective conservation and management of target and nontarget species under its jurisdiction if it bases decisions on sound precautionary science that acknowledges the ecosystem impacts of fishing.

The Pew Charitable Trusts is encouraged that the Commission has taken steps in recent years toward more sustainable management of tunas and sharks and that it has improved compliance with existing management measures. But further actions are needed to restore and guarantee healthy populations of these species across the Atlantic Ocean.

ICCAT members have the opportunity at the 19th Special Meeting of the Commission to advance the organization's goals and effectiveness. To do so, they must heed precautionary scientific advice when setting catch limits. In addition, they must fully address the unsustainable catch of sharks and the impact of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing on the marine ecosystem.

Pew calls on ICCAT members to take the following critical actions:

- **Adopt precautionary, science-based catch limits for Atlantic bluefin tuna.**
- **Implement a robust electronic Bluefin Catch Documentation system without further delay.**
- **Adopt conservation and management measures to protect sharks.**
- **Adopt new measures to combat IUU fishing and ensure full transparency from all members and accountability to existing commitments.**

## Recommendations

### Adopt precautionary, science-based catch limits for Atlantic bluefin tuna

This year, ICCAT's Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) conducted updated stock assessments for the eastern and western populations of Atlantic bluefin tuna.<sup>1</sup> The results suggest that the current management regimes are allowing both populations to grow. However, the SCRS concluded that the assessment results are associated with a problematic level of scientific uncertainty, and as such, the magnitude of the increase in both populations is highly uncertain. The management advice of the SCRS provides strong support for maintaining the catch limits for both populations at current levels through 2016, when the Committee is scheduled to overhaul the bluefin stock assessment, which will reduce uncertainty and provide a more solid foundation for management decisions.

In the western Atlantic, ICCAT is 15 years into its 20-year rebuilding plan, and the population is still estimated to be at only 55 percent of the 1970 level, when it was already depleted after two decades of industrial overfishing. The SCRS also warns that the estimate may be artificially inflated by several factors, including the migration of greater numbers of eastern bluefin into western waters as the eastern stock rebuilds. Additionally, changes in management and fishing patterns in the Gulf of St. Lawrence have undermined the reliability of this index of abundance, leading the SCRS to question whether the estimated increased abundance in this region is "biologically plausible."

The Committee therefore specifically states that maintaining a quota of 1,750 metric tons would allow the population to continue to grow, and could help scientists resolve major uncertainties about stock productivity. The SCRS asserts that a quota of less than 2,250 metric tons would have a 50 percent likelihood of resulting in a population size at or above the current level by the 2019 rebuilding deadline. On the flip side, a quota of less than 2,250 metric tons also has a 50 percent chance of leading to population decline and a potential failure to rebuild.

Bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea are experiencing significant growth in abundance, with the recent assessment indicating that the population is on its way to recovery. In 2010, ICCAT fishery managers drastically reduced the quota for the eastern Atlantic stock in response to wide public concern about the population's historic low level, a decline that was largely attributed to quotas being consistently set above the scientific advice as well as high levels of illegal fishing.

Although the results of the latest eastern assessment are a promising sign that science-based quotas and the subsequent period of quota stability are working, major uncertainties related to the data used for the assessment and the model itself have led scientists to caution that the magnitude of recent growth is still highly uncertain. The SCRS advises that "maintaining current total allowable catch (TAC) or moderately and gradually increasing over recent TACs under the current management scheme should not undermine the success of the rebuilding plan." At the same time, the SCRS explains that "no agreement could be reached regarding the upper limit for such an increase that would not jeopardize the recovery of the stock" and "the SCRS scientists were not able to reach a consensus on the number of steps to complete the rebuilding plan, or on the management strategies." It is important to note that the SCRS advice does not take into account ongoing illegal fishing in the Mediterranean and the impact it could have on the recovery of the eastern population.

In 2013, the Commission showed support for the recovery of Atlantic bluefin tuna by maintaining quotas at existing levels, in line with scientific advice. Given that the current management approach appears to be working, and in light of uncertainty regarding the results of both assessments and ongoing illegal fishing in the east, the Commission should continue to maintain quotas at current levels for both the western and eastern populations, in line with the scientific advice.

## Implement the electronic Bluefin Catch Documentation (eBCD) system for Atlantic bluefin tuna without further delay

Any recent gains in the eastern bluefin population will be jeopardized if fishery managers fail to put effective controls in place to end illegal fishing and ensure that actual catch remains at or below the science-based catch limit. While the exact extent of illegal fishing is unknown, there is evidence of a continued market for illegally caught eastern bluefin. According to an analysis of media reports, 78 separate seizures were reported in Italy and Spain over the past year, totaling 175 metric tons of illegally caught bluefin.<sup>2</sup> Because of the nature of illegal fishing, which takes place in the shadows of legitimate markets and too often skirts the reach of current monitoring and enforcement efforts, these reports are likely to capture just a fraction of the total illicit activities occurring in the Atlantic bluefin fishery.

In the past five years, the Commission has worked to develop the eBCD system to replace the outdated paper forms, noting that the old system “suffered from a number of shortcomings” that limited its ability to stem illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.<sup>3</sup> The electronic system would ensure real-time submission of data and reduce opportunities for misreporting and fraud. However, there have already been multiple delays in the development of the eBCD system and, as the latest implementation deadline nears, ICCAT is now debating whether the eBCD system will track all points of trade, particularly among European Union member states. Given that the European Union holds 59 percent of the eastern quota and oversees a significant amount of Atlantic bluefin trade, any move to minimize electronic tracking in this region and to allow continued use of the ineffective paper system would reduce the efficacy of the eBCD and potentially undermine the recovery of the eastern bluefin population.

The Commission should ensure full implementation of a robust eBCD system by the March 2015 deadline, which must include trade within the European Union. Additionally, ICCAT should maintain quotas without increases for eastern bluefin until the eBCD is fully operational and reduce the chance that science-based catch limits will be exceeded as a result of undocumented, illegal catch.

Pew urges the Commission to:

- **Maintain the western Atlantic bluefin quota at 1,750 metric tons for 2015 and 2016, including any scientific research quota, in line with the scientific advice.**
- **Maintain the eastern bluefin quota at 13,400 metric tons for 2015 and 2016, including any scientific research quota, in line with the lower bound of the scientific advice.**
- **Ensure that the eBCD system is fully operational and implemented by all Parties by the March 2015 deadline and that it electronically tracks all catch and trade, including intra-European Union trade and trade of ranched fish.**

## Adopt conservation and management measures to protect sharks

Every year, about 100 million sharks are caught and killed in commercial fisheries, an unsustainable number.<sup>4</sup> Whether this catch is unintended, unwanted, or highly sought after, the ultimate effect on ocean ecosystems is serious and demands urgent action.

Until measures are in place to ensure that the targeted and incidental catch of sharks is sustainable, their capture in fishing gear should be avoided and they should be released alive whenever possible. Gear that increases shark catch, such as wire leaders and shark lines, should be prohibited. Additional research should be undertaken to determine the best means of avoiding this catch.



If ICCAT members continue to target sharks, or to retain shark bycatch, management measures must be enacted that take into account the precautionary principle. That would ensure that all shark catch in the Convention Area is sustainable and that ICCAT fisheries are not contributing to the global overfishing of sharks.

Action on sharks is urgently needed this year. The Commission must, as a matter of priority, agree on strong measures to safeguard porbeagle, shortfin mako, and blue sharks.

Porbeagle sharks (*Lamna nasus*) have a poor conservation status in the Convention Area and are vulnerable to ICCAT fisheries.<sup>5</sup> The International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species has assessed porbeagles as Critically Endangered in the northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean, Endangered in the northwest Atlantic, and Vulnerable globally. In March 2013, porbeagle sharks were included in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

The “Expanded Ecological Risk Assessment of Pelagic Sharks Caught in Atlantic Pelagic Longline Fisheries,” conducted by several members of ICCAT’s Shark Species Group, showed that the shortfin mako (*Isurus oxyrinchus*) is one of the sharks most vulnerable to ICCAT fisheries because of its low productivity and high susceptibility to catch.<sup>6</sup> As a precautionary approach, the SCRS recommended in 2012 that the fishing mortality of shortfin mako sharks should not be increased until more reliable stock assessment results were available for both the northern and southern stocks, but no action has yet been taken by the Commission. The committee reiterated the need for this mortality limit in the new report.<sup>7</sup>

The blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) is one of the most susceptible to being caught in ICCAT fisheries<sup>8</sup> and is both targeted and caught as bycatch in the ICCAT Convention Area. This has resulted in significant increases in mortality since the last full assessment in 2008 from approximately 54,000 metric tons to over 62,000 metric tons in 2012.<sup>9</sup> But no management is in place to ensure that this catch is sustainable.

Pew urges the Commission to:

- **Ensure that all targeted and incidental shark catch in the ICCAT Convention Area is sustainable. If there isn't scientific evidence guaranteeing sustainability, shark capture in fishing gear should be avoided through bans on wire leaders and shark lines, with sharks released alive wherever possible.**
- **Prohibit the retention of porbeagle sharks by fishing vessels to allow the stock to recover. This will help ICCAT members that are also Parties to CITES ensure successful implementation of the Appendix II listing, which took effect Sept. 14, 2014.**
- **Ensure that populations of shortfin mako and blue sharks are not overfished by establishing concrete, precautionary catch limits for these species.**

## Increase efforts to combat IUU fishing and to ensure full transparency and accountability from all members and accountability to existing commitments

ICCAT has taken important steps to improve compliance with its recommendations to combat illegal fishing. However, these practices continue. To effectively manage its resources, ICCAT must require complete transparency from all members and accountability to existing commitments. ICCAT can make progress on this front by improving its Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) requirements, harmonizing its vessel records, strengthening the IUU vessel list, and banning transshipment at sea.

VMS is the most appropriate and commonly used tool to track authorized fishing vessels and to determine whether their activities are in compliance with requirements, such as fishing authorizations, as well as whether they are fishing in permitted areas and seasons. But ICCAT's system has significant gaps. It does not cover all fishing activity in the Convention Area, and VMS data are not effectively used for compliance and scientific purposes. ICCAT would benefit from expanding VMS requirements to be more in line with the procedures already in place for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna<sup>10</sup> and, as recommended by the SCRS in 2014, the Commission should increase the frequency of VMS data polling to one hour or less.<sup>11</sup>

Last year, it made important strides toward improving the identification of fishing vessels by requiring International Maritime Organization (IMO) numbers for large vessels. The Secretariat also has continued to improve the quality of the existing Record of Vessels. This record could become more effective if vessel data requirements were harmonized across all ICCAT vessel records—including mandating IMO numbers for vessels covered under the recommendations on transshipment,<sup>12</sup> vessels fishing for bigeye and yellowfin tuna,<sup>13</sup> and chartered vessels.<sup>14</sup> Members should also be required to add information to the record on any enforcement action taken against a vessel as soon as it becomes available.

Placing a vessel on ICCAT's IUU vessel list serves as an essential step in deterring unacceptable practices in the Convention Area. The list's effectiveness, however, is diminished because under current rules IUU vessels can only be added to the list once a year. That allows some IUU vessels to operate unhindered until action is taken by the Commission at its annual meeting. On the other hand, ICCAT has established procedures that permit delisting of vessels from the list on an intersessional basis. Procedures should be established, therefore, so that vessels can be listed on an intersessional basis. In addition, ICCAT should take steps to ensure that the IUU vessel list is updated whenever a vessel changes name, flag, or other identifying feature.

Finally, transshipment at sea continues to provide opportunities to avoid proper catch reporting and to launder illegally caught fish. ICCAT should ban all forms of transshipment at sea until it can be verified that these operations cannot assist IUU fishing. This would require a robust monitoring system to guarantee full transparency.



Pew urges the Commission to:

- **Require all authorized fishing vessels to have fully operative, tamper-proof Vessel Monitoring Systems to transmit required data to the ICCAT Secretariat in a centralized way. These data should be made available to relevant ICCAT bodies and concerned states.**
- **Harmonize vessel data requirements across all ICCAT vessel records. IMO numbers should be required for vessels covered under recommendations on transshipment, vessels fishing for bigeye and yellowfin tuna, and chartered vessels. Additional information should be included by members, such as the details on any enforcement action taken on a vessel, as soon as it is available.**
- **Establish a procedure that permits the listing of IUU vessels intersessionally, and act to ensure that the IUU vessel list is updated whenever a vessel changes name, flag, or other identifying element.**
- **Ban all forms of transshipment at sea until the Commission can verify that transshipment operations cannot assist IUU fishing.**

## Improve data collection

ICCAT Recommendation 2011-15 established a system under which countries that fail to report catch data for a particular species, including sharks, would be prohibited from retaining such species until the data are provided to the ICCAT Secretariat. This recommendation was adopted nearly three years ago but has yet to be fully implemented.

Pew urges the Commission to:

- **Resolve any ambiguity with regard to implementing this recommendation during this year's meeting and then to ensure that it is fully implemented.**

## Modernize the ICCAT Convention text

As ICCAT members work through the process to amend and modernize the Convention text, they must expand the list of species explicitly covered, and ensure that the new text fully embraces the precautionary approach and ecosystem-based fisheries management.

As a matter of priority, the ICCAT Convention text should be amended to make all sharks listed in Article 64 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Annex 1)<sup>15</sup> official ICCAT-managed species. This would allow for proper management of shark species caught in all gear types in the Convention Area, whether bycatch or targeted.

To truly modernize and bolster the ICCAT Convention, the amendment should include the principles of ecosystem-based management and the precautionary approach as outlined in the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement and the Food and Agriculture Organization Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. Ecosystem-based management is the scientifically grounded, holistic approach to fisheries management that accounts for key ecosystem components—not just target species. This sort of approach takes into account impacts on nontarget species, habitats, and the broader ecosystem. The precautionary approach strives for cautious management in the face of uncertainty, such as limited data on stocks, to avoid irreversible harm to ecosystems and target stocks.

Pew urges the Commission to amend the Convention text to include:

- **All sharks listed in Article 64 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (Annex 1) as official ICCAT-managed species.**
- **The ecosystem-based management and precautionary approaches.**

## Endnotes

- 1 International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (2014), [http://www.iccat.es/Documents/Meetings/Docs/2014-SCRS-REP\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.iccat.es/Documents/Meetings/Docs/2014-SCRS-REP_ENG.pdf).
- 2 Based on a review of media reports from January 2013 through May 2014 by the Pew Charitable Trusts, in cooperation with MedReAct.org.
- 3 The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, "Recommendation by ICCAT on an Electronic Bluefin Catch Document Programme (eBCD)" (Paris, Nov. 19-27, 2010), ICCAT Doc. No. 10-11, 1-5, <http://www.iccat.int/Documents%5CRecs%5Ccompendiopdf-e%5C2010-11-e.pdf>.
- 4 Boris Worm et al., "Global Catches, Exploitation Rates, and Rebuilding Options for Sharks," *Marine Policy* 40 (2013): 194-204, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2012.12.034>.
- 5 E. Cortés et al., "Expanded Ecological Risk Assessment of Pelagic Sharks Caught in Atlantic Pelagic Longline Fisheries," Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (2012), SCRS/2012/167.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, *Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics* (2014).
- 8 E. Cortés et al., "Expanded Ecological Risk Assessment."
- 9 The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) (2014).
- 10 Among other VMS requirements for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna: Tracking is mandatory for vessels longer than 15 meters. VMS data are to be transmitted to the ICCAT Secretariat and made available to Contracting Parties or Cooperating non-Contracting Parties, Entities, or Fishing Entities with an active inspection presence, and also to the SCRS, even with a three-year delay for the latter. See Recommendations 13-07 and 07-08.
- 11 International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, *Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics*, 317.
- 12 The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, "Recommendation by ICCAT on a Programme for Transshipment" (Agadir, Nov. 12-19, 2012), ICCAT Doc. No. 12-06, 1-9, <http://www.iccat.int/Documents%5CRecs%5Ccompendiopdf-e%5C2012-06-e.pdf>.
- 13 The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, "Recommendation by ICCAT on a Multi-annual Conservation and Management Program for Bigeye and Yellowfin Tunas" (Istanbul, Nov. 11-19, 2011), ICCAT Doc. No. 11-01, 1-10, <http://www.iccat.int/Documents%5CRecs%5Ccompendiopdf-e%5C2011-01-e.pdf>.
- 14 The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, "Recommendation by ICCAT on Vessel Chartering" (Bilbao, Oct. 28 to Nov. 4, 2002), ICCAT Doc. No. 02-21, 1-2, <http://www.iccat.es/Documents/Recs/compendiopdf-e/2002-21-e.pdf>.
- 15 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982, *Highly Migratory Species*, Part V, Article 64, Annex I, [http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention\\_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/closindx.htm).

---

## For further information, please visit:

[pewenvironment.org/ip](http://pewenvironment.org/ip)

---

**Contact:** Paulus Tak, senior officer, international ocean policy

**Email:** [ptak@pewtrusts.org](mailto:ptak@pewtrusts.org)

**Project website:** [pewenvironment.org/ip](http://pewenvironment.org/ip)

---

The Pew Charitable Trusts is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. Pew applies a rigorous, analytical approach to improve public policy, inform the public, and invigorate civic life.