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Recommendations to the 11th Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission

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The Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission is responsible for managing all highly migratory fish stocks, including tuna and sharks, in the western and central Pacific Ocean. Although it was established over a decade ago by a convention based on relatively modern principles of fisheries management, the Commission's management of these stocks continues to be inadequate. The world's largest tuna fishery has been fished unsustainably, in contradiction to strong scientific and management advice, and fishing capacity continues to grow. Today, 50 more large-scale purse seine vessels are fishing these waters than 10 years ago, and two of the six commercial tuna stocks in the Convention Area are classified as overfished.

The Commission must take steps to ensure that the fisheries under its jurisdiction are managed responsibly and sustainably. Ensuring healthy fisheries in this region requires strong conservation and management actions and strict compliance. The Pew Charitable Trusts calls on all Commission Members, Cooperating non-Members, and Participating Territories, known collectively as CCMs, to cooperate and compromise in order to:

- **End overfishing, rebuild overfished populations of tuna, and strengthen management to ensure ongoing sustainability.**
- **Adopt conservation and management measures to protect sharks and other vulnerable species.**
- **Strengthen measures to end illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and ensure compliance by increasing the transparency of fishing operations and the accountability of CCMs.**



Turn around tuna management

In 2013, several records were broken by the still growing western and central Pacific tuna fishery, which last year accounted for 57 percent of the global tuna catch. The haul of skipjack tuna was the largest on record (1.8 million metric tons), and the purse seine catch of bigeye tuna reached an all-time high (82,151 metric tons). More than 90 percent of individual bigeye were captured as small juveniles on fish aggregating devices (FADs), helping to diminish the future spawning potential of the population.¹ One of the factors driving these catch records is capacity creep. New purse seine vessels are entering the fishery, and the technology associated with drifting FADs—human-made floating objects that attract fish—is evolving rapidly. This leads to more tuna—and non-tuna species attracted to the FADs—being caught in a “fishing day” and makes clear the need for management to adapt to, and account for, these changes.

With one-third of the commercially exploited tuna populations in these waters in need of rebuilding, critical actions must be taken now to ensure the future of the fishery. CCMs must implement target and limit reference points for all tuna populations, adopt a robust rebuilding plan for Pacific bluefin, and effectively limit the catch of small bigeye in the FAD fishery.

Adopt and implement target and limit reference points

To reverse concerning declines in some species, and to prevent others from suffering similar fates, the Commission should rapidly fulfill its obligation to develop and implement target and limit reference points for all tuna species. An agreement on harvest control rules must be reached to ensure that limits are not

exceeded and overall objectives of the fishery are achieved. This year, the Commission's Scientific Committee has recommended steps to avoid further increases in fishing mortality for skipjack and to maintain this stock near current levels. The Parties to the Nauru Agreement and Tokelau are developing a target reference point for skipjack equivalent to twice the biomass that would produce maximum sustained yield. Members of the Forum Fisheries Agency are proposing the adoption of a harvest strategy approach that would specify timelines for the adoption of reference points and harvest control rules for South Pacific albacore and skipjack, and establish a process for doing so for other stocks. This work is supported by civil society, some industry members, and the scientific community, which have called on WCPFC to tighten purse seine controls and adopt target reference points and harvest control rules.

Given the broad support and increasing threats to the tuna populations, WCPFC should adopt a target reference point for the skipjack fishery this year and agree on a process to implement reference points and harvest control rules for all tuna species.

Take concrete steps to rebuild Pacific bluefin or suspend the fishery

The 2014 stock assessment update for Pacific bluefin tuna, conducted by the International Scientific Committee (ISC), found that the population remains severely depleted, at just 4 percent of its unfished biomass. As part of the assessment, the ISC analyzed the potential effects of seven catch scenarios. Only one predicted significant population growth under current recruitment conditions, which define the potential productivity of the population and therefore its ability to grow. At its 2014 meeting, the WCPFC Northern Committee recommended a measure that would implement short-term catch cuts in line with the ISC analysis, but the committee could agree only to a 10-year rebuilding target of 8 percent of historic biomass. As such, the population will remain severely depleted, at best, for at least another decade.

WCPFC should call on the Northern Committee to revisit and strengthen the rebuilding target for Pacific bluefin tuna at its 2015 meeting and to cooperate with the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission on Pacific-wide management measures that will rebuild the Pacific bluefin tuna population to at least 25 percent of its historic biomass within 10 years.

Rebuild the bigeye population and adopt FAD set limits

The 2014 stock assessment determined that fisheries in the western and central Pacific have reduced the bigeye tuna population to 16 percent of its unfished biomass. This level threatens the viability of the fishery, and urgent action is needed to rebuild this population. Clearly, current management measures are not effective, and a new approach to limiting bigeye catch is critical. Temporary FAD closures aimed at reducing the mortality of small bigeye tuna in purse seine FAD sets have proved ineffective. Even with longer FAD closures—from two months in 2009 to four months more recently—the catch of bigeye by purse seine vessels has reached new highs.

Because more than 90 percent of individual bigeye caught on FADs are juveniles that have not had a chance to reproduce, the future of the fishery is bleak. To effectively limit the purse seine catch of bigeye, the Scientific Committee recommended FAD set limits, but they have not been adopted fully by the Commission.

This year, WCPFC delegates can improve management of the purse seine fishery by adopting FAD set limits in line with the scientific advice that calls for a 36 percent reduction in fishing mortality from 2008-11 average levels. A 2012 study showed that FAD fishing can be effectively tracked and monitored because the vast majority of the drifting devices have satellite beacons. As a first step, the WCPFC should work with CCMs that have built FAD monitoring systems in order to verify FAD sets across the Convention Area.

Ending bigeye overfishing is not a technological or scientific challenge. The information and tools exist. It is a matter of political will. With more vessels fishing in the region and with continuing developments in FAD technology, the WCPFC must act to protect the future of this billion-dollar fishery.

WCPFC should amend CMM 2013-01 to further reduce bigeye tuna mortality across all fishing gears and, in particular, should replace ineffective FAD closures with FAD set limits in line with the scientific advice.

Stop the influx of fishing vessels and the rise in FAD use

Purse seine capacity continues to increase. A record 297 vessels fished in the western and central Pacific in 2013. Even more, 305 vessels, are expected to fish in 2014. In addition, technological developments are leading to increases in the number of FADs used and their efficiency. These factors are driving increases in catch across a range of target and non-target species, and current management measures cannot account for these efficiency gains. This jeopardizes the future of western and central Pacific tuna fisheries and is an issue that the Commission can and should take action on this year.

As specified by CMM 2013-01, parties other than small island states agreed to submit to the 11th Regular Session of the WCPFC a scheme to reduce capacity to the level of 31 December 2012. These schemes should include reductions in the numbers of vessels in use and FADs deployed.

Strengthening conservation and management of sharks

Every year, about 100 million sharks are caught and killed in commercial fisheries, an unsustainable number.² Whether this catch is unintended, unwanted, or highly sought after, the impact on ocean ecosystems demands urgent action.

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

If WCPFC members are to continue to target sharks, or retain shark bycatch, the precautionary principle must be taken into account and management measures must ensure that all shark catches in the Convention Area are sustainable. WCPFC fisheries must not contribute to the global overfishing of sharks that has led to severe declines wherever they are found.

A conservation and management measure for sharks

A dedicated conservation and management measure (CMM) to reduce shark mortality is urgently needed to ensure that robust and enforceable measures are in place to protect sharks caught in fisheries covered by the convention.

In 2013 and 2014, the Scientific Committee highlighted continuing concerns over the effectiveness of, and compliance with, existing shark conservation and management measures. Meeting reports noted the impact of continued use of wire leaders and shark lines to target sharks in longline fisheries, the lack of observer coverage in those fisheries, and the limited effectiveness of CMM 2010-07 in eliminating shark finning.

In 2013, the Ninth Regular Session of the Scientific Committee noted, "Given the current growing public concern over global shark overexploitation, most CCMs consider that there is a need for the WCPFC to adopt more robust and enforceable measures for sharks to reduce mortality in both the longline and purse-seine fisheries."



In line with this advice, the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency tabled an important measure to reduce and control shark mortality at the 10th Regular Session of the WCPFC in 2013. CCMs could not reach a consensus on the proposal, and it was not adopted.

WCPFC cannot delay taking action. A new CMM must be adopted that ensures that shark catches are either mitigated through bans on wire leaders and shark lines or managed in line with precautionary scientific advice to ensure species sustainability.

Enforcing existing shark measures

CMMs 2013-08 and 2011-04 prohibit the retention of oceanic whitetip and silky sharks. These overfished species require drastic mortality reductions if they are to recover. The measures mandate that all CCMs release any oceanic whitetip and silky sharks caught in the Convention Area as soon as possible after a shark is brought alongside a vessel and that it be done in a manner that results in as little harm to the shark as possible. Pew strongly supports recent actions by the Republic of the Marshall Islands to effectively enforce CMM 2013-08 by prosecuting a vessel that retained silky sharks. Pew encourages all CCMs to do the same.

WCPFC11 should analyze implementation of CMM 2013-08 and 2011-04 and ensure that all CCMs comply with their obligations under these measures for purse seine and longline fleets.

Blue sharks

Blue sharks are caught in targeted fisheries and as bycatch in WCPFC fisheries. Nearly 40,000 metric tons have been caught annually over the last three years in the North Pacific alone. Still, no management measures are in place to control this catch and ensure sustainability. The 10th Regular Session of the Scientific Committee in

2014 assessed the status of the North Pacific blue shark stock and noted that there is “significant/substantial uncertainty associated with the level of current fishing mortality from the target fishery for blue shark and the ongoing sustainability of the stock.”

WCPFC11 must ensure that precautionary, science-based management measures are adopted for North Pacific blue sharks, to ensure that both targeted fisheries and bycatch for this species are sustainable.

The status of blue sharks in the South Pacific remains unclear. It should be a priority to ensure that the status of South Pacific blue sharks is fully understood, so appropriate, effective management can be put in place.

Data collection

Efforts to assess shark stock status in the western and central Pacific make clear that data recording and reporting on the catch of shark species is limited and that this information gap significantly hampers development of comprehensive scientific advice.

The WCPFC should adopt a “no data, no fish” measure for sharks, similar to the measure put in place by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. This would prevent CCMs from retaining or landing any of the 14 key shark species identified by WCPFC if they had not submitted landing data on any catch of that species from the previous year.

Enhance CCMs’ transparency and accountability

As in other parts of the world, IUU fishing remains a threat in the WCPFC Convention Area. The Commission has taken important steps to improve compliance with its management measures, but the WCPFC cannot do its job effectively unless it requires complete transparency from all CCMs and imposes serious consequences for any lack of compliance with these requirements. To further limit IUU fishing, the Commission should:

Adopt minimum standards for port inspections

Port State measures, or PSMs, are cost-effective tools to monitor compliance with management arrangements and prevent illegal fish from entering the market. WCPFC has repeatedly considered adoption of such measures, and the WCPFC performance review has recommended their adoption.³

Following steps taken at its 10th Regular Session, the Commission should formally agree to the development of a regional scheme of PSMs by adopting minimum standards for port inspections and providing adequate support to developing States for their implementation.

Harmonize WCPFC vessel records and improve transparency

WCPFC substantially enhanced the ability to identify fishing vessels in its waters by agreeing last year to mandate that all vessels weighing at least 100 gross tons or 100 gross registered tons have International Maritime Organization numbers. Moreover, the WCPFC secretariat has continued to improve its Record of Fishing Vessels by making it more informative and user-friendly. To ensure greater transparency of fishing operations, additional vessel information should be included in the Record.

The Commission should require that as of 1 January 2016, CCMs provide to the secretariat information on any enforcement action taken on vessels operating in the Convention Area as soon as the information becomes available. This information should be published as part of the Record.



Enhance the effectiveness of the IUU vessel list

Placing a vessel on WCPFC's IUU vessel list is a necessary step to highlight and deter unacceptable practices in the Convention Area. The effectiveness of this list is diminished, however, because IUU vessels can be added only once a year. As a result, these vessels are able to operate unhindered until the Commission meets and agrees to list them. At the same time, the WCPFC permits the removal of vessels from its IUU vessel list intersessionally.

CCMs should establish a procedure that allows IUU vessels to be listed between sessions. The IUU vessel list also should be updated continuously—whenever a vessel changes its name, flag, or other characteristic.

Ban transshipment at sea

Transshipment at sea continues to be an opportunity to avoid proper catch reporting and to launder illicitly caught fish. Transshipment at sea should not be allowed to occur until it can be ensured that these operations do not contribute to IUU fishing. This would require having a robust monitoring system that ensures full transparency, mandating observers and/or fisheries officers on board the offloading and receiving vessels, and complete oversight by the Commission of all transshipment operations in the Convention Area.

WCPFC should ban all forms of transshipment at sea until it can be ensured that these operations do not contribute to IUU fishing.

Endnotes

- 1 Based on the average size of bigeye tuna caught in purse seine-associated sets (6 kilograms) and longline fisheries (50 kg) in 2013 from the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, *Summary Report: Scientific Committee, Tenth Regular Session*, Figures 62 and 63. <https://www.wcpfc.int/meetings/10th-regular-session-scientific-committee>.
- 2 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>.
- 3 Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, *WCPFC Performance Review Recommendations_rev1* (2012), 44, section 6.2, <https://www.wcpfc.int/system/files/WCPFC-TCC8-2012-20-rev1-WCPFC-Performance-review-recommendations.pdf>. The performance review recommended that "in considering Port State Measures, the Commission should take into account minimum standards in the PSMA, measures and practices of other RFMOs in implementing such standards, and developments in the broader system of Port controls," 1, section 3.2.5.

For further information, please visit:

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