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WWF POSITION PAPER

East Atlantic and Mediterranean Bluefin Tuna

Meeting of ICCAT, Cape Town, South Africa: 18-25 November 2013

Background:

The millennia-old bluefin tuna fishery in the Mediterranean entered a phase of rapid and intense deterioration the last decade of the 20th Century when the new practice of farming wild-caught tunas, formerly unknown in the Mediterranean, mushroomed without control. This generated a perverse overfishing spiral as the growing demand for live large tunas fuelled the massive development of the industrial purse seine fleets and their expansion over virtually all Mediterranean waters where the bluefin tuna gathered to reproduce.

WWF was first to warn about this new threat and since 2001 has led the international campaign to avoid the collapse of the bluefin tuna population and to ensure a rational and sustainable fishing activity.

After several years of open mismanagement and reacting from the clear calls from science and civil society worldwide to avert an upcoming collapse of the fishery and the stock, ICCAT adopted in 2006 a first recovery plan for the species. This first plan still fell very short from following scientific advice and it has been increasingly strengthened and refined along the years - particularly since 2009, coinciding with a proposal to list the species in the App. I of the CITES Convention. As a result, there is consensus now in ICCAT that total catches have substantially declined the last few years. ICCAT CPCs in 2012 acted responsibly and set a TAC for 2013 and the following years at the scientifically recommended level.

However, there is still concern on the potential for illegal fishing due to overcapacity and loopholes plaguing traceability and control. In 2013 ICCAT SCRS “remains concerned about current capacity which could easily harvest catch volumes well in excess of the rebuilding strategy adopted by the Commission”, in line with recent WWF studies. The analysis of bluefin tuna catch documents for the 2012 fishing and farming season submitted by WWF to both the SCRS and the Committee on Compliance (CoC) demonstrates that implementation of the current Bluefin Tuna Catch Document (BCD) is very far from ensuring traceability. It also highlights a radical overhaul of this scheme is needed, along with an improvement in the underwater quantification of fish for farming, to seriously address IUU.

In 2013 ICCAT SCRS has not performed a new stock assessment for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean stock of the bluefin tuna. Consequently, the advice based on the assessment update carried out in 2012 still holds. Accordingly, ICCAT SCRS in 2013 advises against any substantial change in the current TAC (“the Committee cannot give robust advice that would support a substantial change in the TAC”) and notes that “maintaining catches at around recent TACs” (12,900t-13,500t) will likely allow the stock to fully recover by 2022.



Recommendations:

WWF recommends ICCAT CPCs to

1. Maintain the TAC at the 2013 level (13,400t).

In the absence of new scientific data that would support otherwise, ICCAT SCRS advises against a substantial change of the TAC this year (“the Committee cannot give robust advice that would support a substantial change in the TAC”).

It’s been a long and huge concerted effort to turn the Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery from a global icon of overfishing into an international example of science-based managed fishery. The credibility of ICCAT and that of its CPCs now depends on the continued reliance on scientific advice until achieving the full recovery of the stock and beyond. Any step back now by disregarding science would bring ICCAT back to the dark years, when bluefin tuna management was called a “travesty of management”. **WWF calls on ICCAT** to keep the annual TAC at the current level (13,400t) until there is a new scientific assessment available as well as new specific recommendations issued from SCRS.

2. Review and strengthen the current fishing capacity reduction plan to bring real catch capacity down to the level of fishing possibilities.

ICCAT SCRS warns that current capacity levels “could easily harvest catch volumes well in excess of the rebuilding strategy adopted by the Commission”. ICCAT first adopted a fleet capacity reduction plan for the BFT in 2008 (ICCAT Rec. 08-05) which was further refined in 2010 (ICCAT Rec. 10-04). The current plan ends in 2013, when it’s assumed to have phased out all fishing overcapacity. However, a recent assessment (SCRS/2011/158) shows the current plan is based on average catch rates per fleet segment which are strongly underestimated, resulting in an end situation of still huge overcapacity (worth over 200% the TAC). This is consistent with the warning from the SCRS this year.

WWF calls on ICCAT to extend the current capacity reduction plan using updated, more realistic estimates of potential catch rates so as to ensure overcapacity is fully removed.

3. Radically reform the current quantification and traceability of fish from the catching purse seine vessels and throughout the farms.

According to the study WWF submitted this year to ICCAT SCRS (SCRS/2013/208) and ICCAT CoC the current implementation of the BCD scheme is highly dysfunctional as it fails to adequately trace both the origin and biomass of fish throughout the fishing and farming process. The finding that real fattening ratios can’t be derived from the analysis of BCD data clearly exemplifies the magnitude of the problem, which has a potential to result in the uncovering of unreported catches.

WWF calls on ICCAT to **1. Adopt** urgently a technical procedure that ensures the accurate quantification of fish caught and caged in farms on a routinely basis. **2. Ban** the mixing in a same farming pen of fish originating from different fishing hauls. **3. Put an end** to the current practice of using joint fishing operations (JFOs) as a way to jointly manage individual quotas irrespectively of whether the concerned vessels operate jointly in the water or not. **4.** For every vessel involved in a JFO, **adopt** the obligation to report its individual catch in every fishing haul under a unique BCD number. Currently, for a given fishing haul, catches attributed to all vessels of a same nationality belonging to a same JFO are pooled under a single BCD of such nationality while referred to a single vessel’s catch that can be of a different nationality.



- 4. Fully support ICCAT SCRS in its endeavor to developing a new methodology and gathering new data leading to a much more reliable and robust stock assessment in 2015.** In line with ICCAT SCRS in 2013, **WWF recommends** “the continuation of enhanced data collection program and the replacement of current assessment methods with appropriate approaches that take unquantified uncertainties into account”. SCRS is working hard since 2012 to put together the necessary tools to carry out a new stock assessment in 2015 based on “new assessment modeling approached and inputs”, as provided for by ICCAT Rec. 12-03. **WWF calls on ICCAT** for the maximum support to the SCRS tasks described above and **warns** against the negative effect a request for an update of the 2010 assessment in 2014 might have on SCRS to divert resources from the ambitious 2015 assessment. **WWF strongly recommends** allowing SCRS to focus all its resources in 2014 and 2015 to fulfill its mandate to deliver the more reliable stock assessment ever of this stock by 2015.

WWF’s vision for the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery is that of a stock sustainably managed to the benefit of the marine ecosystems, fisheries communities and consumers. Today we might be closer to this, something that would have seemed unthinkable only a few years ago. WWF calls on the responsibility of both ICCAT CPCs and the fishing industry to build on this momentum and keep recovery ambitions high.

Big achievements are long in the making but in only an instant can be lost.