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## **Seminar on the European Action Plan for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears**

**Brussels - 16 May 2013**

The representative of Legambiente, Federica Barbera, participated on behalf of RAC MED in the seminar on the European Action Plan for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears, organised by DG MARE on 16th May in Brussels. The agenda of the meeting is attached.

The aim of the meeting was to examine the Action Plan for reducing incidental catches of seabirds in fishing gears.

The Action Plan includes 30 actions in the framework of five main areas of intervention:

1. identifying and evaluating weaknesses/incoherency in the measures currently implemented (7 actions)
2. monitoring and gathering data (6 actions)
3. mitigation measures (8 actions)
4. education and training (5 actions)
5. research (4 actions)

One of the actions in the Plan concerns the implementation of the Plan by all stakeholders: representatives EU, of the member States, the NGOs and the RACs.

The development of the Action Plan, which began in 2001, was slowed down by the lack of scientific data concerning the entity of the problem. This is still the case, the lack of data is a major issue and a challenge for the future: according to the data provided by Birdlife International, each year 160 000 seabirds die, but the real number could be over 320 000.

One of the most threatened species worldwide is the albatross, bycatch is responsible for the accidental capture of 17 out of the 22 species of albatross that are threatened with extinction.

The number of observers onboard fishing vessels should also be increased. Each measure should cover about 1% of the fishing effort, but the aim is to arrive at 5%, with the final objective being 20%.



Where the Mediterranean is concerned, there are several studies (Spain, Malta, Greece) however here too the scientific data are still lacking. It is particularly difficult to assess the issue in the small scale fisheries sector and, as stated by the Birdlife International data, according to the projects carried out in the Mediterranean the most damaging fishing methods would appear to be longliners, trammel nets and purse seiners.

The lack of scientific data was highlighted by almost all participants, even though the Commission recalled that it is difficult to set up research programmes for data collection due to the ever-increasing demand for access to the funds available. One of the next steps proposed by the Commission will be the creation of a database to bring together the scientific documentation and bridge this gap.

Another issue that came to light from the presentations was the need to share experience and work together with the fishers. Bycatch is a problem not only for the conservation of the different species of seabird, it also represents economic loss for many fishers whose costly bait is eaten by birds with the ensuing economic consequences (not to mention the fact that each hook that sinks without its bait is a potential fish that hasn't been caught). It is also necessary to avoid creating the conditions by which fishers consider seabirds as a genuine competitor; in general during the discussions, however, the willingness of the fisheries sector to lessen this phenomenon was stressed.

During the meeting it was also highlighted that the studies on mitigation measures need to be further enhanced, as these measures (visual and acoustic dissuaders, the closure of some areas in certain periods) have not always proved to be efficient.

Where the presence of the RACs is concerned, other than RAC MED, only the North Sea (NS) RAC participated.

RAC MED took the floor to inform the meeting that, to date, an opinion had not been expressed on the impact of accidental capture of seabirds in the Mediterranean basin because RAC MED had concentrated its work on other issues relative to the three-way dialogue underway on the reform to the CFP. In particular, efforts had concentrated on the applicative difficulties of the obligation to land discards and on the management plans. Moreover, Federica Barbera informed the Meeting that RAC MED is willing to collaborate in the future on this matter. Lastly Ms Barbera, speaking on behalf of Legambiente and not RAC MED, expressed the opinion that this Action Plan needs to become legally binding, and that it is necessary to improve scientific knowledge on this matter (this opinion was shared by all of the meeting's participants).

NS RAC intervened by underlining that fishers are beginning to comprehend that the accidental catch of seabirds in fishing nets represents a problem and it is necessary to comprehend its magnitude. Above all it is necessary to collaborate with the fisheries sector which is the prime stakeholder. One of the most efficient solutions to this problem, according to NS RAC, is the closure of some sensitive areas, this is a measure that meets with the agreement of the fishers themselves. Clearly this cannot be the only measure, it is necessary to find other ways to mitigate the phenomenon without damaging the fishers.

