



Bycatch of seabird in EU waters and necessary EU action

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1 Problem

In Europe, the incidental catch of birds is caused mainly by longline fisheries and gill-nets.

Seabirds are being killed in longline fisheries when they are attracted to baited longline hooks, get caught on the hooks, dragged underwater and drowned. According to BirdLife data, at least 300,000 seabirds are caught annually in this way around the globe. In Europe, the worst known bycatch 'hotspots' are the Mediterranean Sea and west of Ireland. As a result, species such as Cory's shearwater (*Calonectris diomedea*), Balearic shearwater (*Puffinus mauretanicus*) and Great shearwater (*Puffinus gravis*) are being killed at an alarming rate. IUCN places Balearic shearwater in the highest threat category (Critically Endangered), predicted as it is to face extinction in the next 40 years if the current rate of mortality is not checked.

Especially in shallow seas and coastal areas, gill-nets also pose a danger to seabirds which can get entangled and drowned when they dive for food. Recent studies from Baltic and North Seas show that the extent and impact of incidental catch in small-scale gill-net fisheries is much higher than previously thought, ranging from 100,000 to 200,000 birds killed per year. This toll includes species protected under international agreements, including the Birds Directive such as Steller's eider (*Polysticta stelleri*), Red-throated diver (*Gavia stellata*); Black-throated diver (*Gavia arctica*), Slavonian grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) and smew (*Mergellus albellus*).

In several parts of the world, trawling has also been found to inflict heavy mortality on seabirds. The extent of this threat in Community waters is unknown although research suggests that certain injuries suffered by seabirds in the Mediterranean are consistent with trawling gear.

2 Solution

Incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries is a readily solvable problem - by applying an appropriate combination of simple technical fixes, this needless waste of life can be virtually eliminated.

BirdLife International's Albatross Task Force (ATF) has been working closely with fishers and their managers around the world to help develop, test and promote such mitigation measures. This work has been done mainly in southern oceans where albatrosses, the most endangered group of seabird species, occur. Achievements by the ATF and related BirdLife initiatives to date include:

- In South Africa, deaths of around 18,000 seabirds in the hake trawl fishery have been reduced by some 90%, with a similar rate of reduction in the tuna longline fishery
- In Brazil the voluntary adoption by over 40% of the fleet of bird-scaring lines has helped reduce incidental capture of seabirds by 56%
- In Norway, with BirdLife support the use of bird-scaring lines is now more widespread on longline vessels, reducing the bycatch of northern fulmar

Stopping birds from dying in gill-nets is not so straightforward, but some promising mitigation measures have been tested outside Europe. They include visual barriers at the

top of nets and closures of areas where gill-nets overlap with seasonal concentrations of vulnerable birds.

3 Win-win for seabirds and fishers

BirdLife's Albatross Task Force has also been studying how the application of mitigation measures affects the fish catch. Observations show clearly that using a bird-scaring line markedly reduces seabird bycatch but at the same time can often result in an increased catch of the target fish. This is due to reduced bait loss from scavenging birds during line-setting. The fishers benefit financially in two ways, firstly by preventing wastage of costly bait, and secondly from the greater size and value of their catch. In some fisheries, the cumulative economic gains over the year are huge in relation to the modest cost of mitigation measures, serving as a powerful driver for compliance with the best available technology.

4 EU Action

In 1999 the EU committed to the development of a Community Plan of Action - an EU blueprint for tackling seabird bycatch, but has made practically no progress until recently. The EU's pledge was in response to FAO's International Plan of Action for reducing incidental catch of seabirds in longline fisheries which encouraged nations to develop and implement national or regional plans. Since then, 10 countries, (Brazil, Canada, Chile, Japan, New Zealand, Uruguay, Namibia, South Africa, USA and Australia) have developed national seabird plans. But the EU has been sadly lagging behind.

On the basis of the existing Plans of Action and taking into account new knowledge on seabird bycatch, in 2009 the FAO agreed Best Practice Technical Guidelines for the development of both existing and future Plans of Action. These guidelines represent a golden set of rules for reducing the accidental deaths of seabirds in fisheries. They extend the scope of the FAO's seabird action plan from longline to other relevant fisheries, notably trawls and gill-nets, and they also extend to assisting RFMOs in implementing such Plans.

In 2008, the European Commission renewed its commitment and commenced working on the European Community Plan of Action for Seabirds with a view to making a proposal by the end of 2009. Despite the lack of systematic data on the extent of the problem from all the EU countries, the existing data provide a solid and compelling case for urgent and comprehensive EU action, which has been confirmed by an assessment provided to DG MARE by the International Council for the Exploration of Sea (ICES).

BirdLife calls on the European Commission, Member States and the European Parliament to adopt and implement a robust and ambitious European Community Plan of Action for Seabirds that comprehensively follows the FAO Best Practice Technical Guidelines:

- 1. Ensure that the scope of the Action plan covers all relevant fisheries and gears** in which seabird bycatch occurs, including EU vessels operating in both Community and international waters; develop and implement a strategy for EU engagement with RFMOs.
- 2. Introduce emergency action for the most threatened species**, prioritising measures to be taken within 1 year for Mediterranean longline fisheries impacting on Balearic, Cory's and Yelkouan shearwaters.
- 3. Introduce minimum mitigation standards** in the areas where threatened species interact with fisheries, not least in Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Important Bird Areas (IBAs) identified by BirdLife International
- 4. Require Member States to collect and report seabird bycatch data** in longline fisheries to an agreed protocol, including a minimum of 10% on-board observer coverage of fishing effort to detect if a bycatch problem exists and at least 20% coverage once a

significant problem is detected. Amend the Data Collection Regulation to facilitate this.

5. Provide EU funds for research to **develop and test mitigation measures**, tailored to specific fisheries, and for enabling distribution of best practice mitigation to relevant fleets.
6. Establish **awareness-raising and training programmes for fishers**, and **training programmes for observers**.
7. **Facilitate collaboration** between scientists, the fishing sector, management authorities and NGOs to **review new evidence and measures**, and to **evaluate implementation of the action plan**.

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