Albatross Task Force

Team Highlights

April 2018 – March 2019

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ALBATROSS TASK FORCE

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Introduction

The incidental capture of seabirds in fisheries, also known as bycatch, is largely responsible for the population declines observed in albatross populations worldwide. These birds spend much of their lives soaring over the ocean in search of their next meal - a lifestyle which inevitably brings them into contact with fishing vessels, lured in by baited longline hooks and discarded waste from trawl vessels. Sadly, for many of these birds, this free meal becomes their last, as they become hooked and drown or break their wings after colliding with trawl cables. Raising a single chick every year or two years, they simply can't breed fast enough to replace the numbers of individuals lost in fisheries. Today, 15 of the 22 albatross species are threatened with extinction.

Solutions to reduce seabird mortality in trawl and longline fisheries are well-established, developed by scientists and fisheries managers in the Southern Ocean in the 1980s, but remained unknown to fishing crews across the world for many years. In 2005, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and BirdLife International therefore launched the Albatross Task Force (ATF) - an international team of seabird bycatch mitigation experts tasked with bridging the gap between science and the fishing industry in some of the deadliest fisheries for albatrosses in the world.

The main objective of the ATF remains to ***reduce the bycatch of albatross and petrels in targeted fisheries, and ultimately improve the conservation status of threatened seabirds.***

With fisheries regulations requiring the use of mitigation measures in place in almost all our target fleets, ATF teams have progressed from demonstrating how to reduce seabird bycatch on vessels to working closely with governments to ensure these regulations are implemented and monitored adequately to deliver bycatch reduction at a fleet-wide scale.

The past year we have focussed on training national fisheries observers and inspectors to ensure they are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to help protect albatrosses at sea, increasing awareness of regulations among key fisheries stakeholders and ensuring that they understand the science that underpins them. The teams have also investigated seabird bycatch in a number of other potentially high-risk fleets.

This work would not be possible without the support of government agencies in-country and the generous support of the RSPB membership, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Planeterra Foundation, the Sloane Robinson Foundation plus many private donors. Thank you for your support!

ARGENTINA

Aves Argentinas
Leo Tamini, Nahuel Chavez, Ruben Dellacasa & Mikaela Vouilloz

Target fisheries

ATF-Argentina works with fisheries targeting hake *Merluccius hubbsi*, kingclip *Genypterus blacodes*, hoki *Macruronus magallanicus* and southern blue whiting *Micromesistius australis*. These include the industrial trawl fleet of 25 vessels in the ports of Mar del Plata and Puerto Madryn and the small southern mid-water trawl fleet, composed of four vessels based in Ushuaia.

Team progress

Industrial trawl fleet

Following a 12-month voluntary uptake period, vessels in this fleet have been legally required to deploy bird scaring lines to reduce seabird bycatch since May 2018. In the past year our focus has therefore been to support fleet-wide uptake of this mitigation measure. After a slow start, with only 7.5% of the fleet complying, the team worked with industry and government to move compliance up to 43% by the start of 2019. All the active vessels in the fleet have been provided with bird scaring lines, so the major push now is to work with the authorities to drive bird-scaring line use up to 100%.

Mid-water trawl fleet

Collisions with the 'third wire', or netsonde cable – which provides the skipper with information about the net position – is the primary source of albatross mortality in this fleet. The team estimates that up to 940 albatrosses and giant petrels (including up to 145 globally threatened Southern Royal albatrosses) are killed each year on the third wire in this small fleet and are pressing for the uptake of bird-scaring lines for this wire, in lieu of additional measures being introduced.

Educational outreach

In addition to demonstrating the use of mitigation measures to crew members on vessels, the team has carried out a range of educational outreach activities across 29 schools (including the National Fisheries School) in Mar del Plata to teach the next generation of fishers about seabird-safe fishing methods.

Next steps

The big push in 2019-2020 will be with observers and compliance officers to ensure there is adequate monitoring and enforcement of the new regulations on the use of bird scaring lines. The team also plans to continue educating the future generation of fishers about albatross conservation and hopes to develop a bycatch module in the syllabus for the National Fisheries School alongside work to test other mitigation measures to reduce the risk posed by netsonde cables in the mid-water fleet.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: ARGENTINA

Up to **145** threatened Royal Southern albatross killed by 4 mid-water trawlers

1751 school children taught about albatross conservation

100% of fleet equipped with bird scaring lines

Image: Education Officer Mikaela teaches schoolchildren about albatross conservation

Nahuel Chavez, Aves Argentinas

BRAZIL

Projeto Albatroz & SAVE Brasil
Dimas Gianuca, Augusto Silva-Costa & Gabriel Canani Sampaio

Target fishery

The Brazil team works with the industrial pelagic longline fleet which targets tunas, swordfish *Xiphias gladius* and sharks and is based in Santos, Itajaí and Rio Grande. In the past year the team has also started to engage with other hook-and-line fisheries in ports across the states of Rio de Janeiro and Espírito Santo, which use a variety of gear types to target dolphinfish, tuna and swordfish.

Team progress

Industrial pelagic longline fleet

With an ongoing lack of government observer capacity, the team has been working with port inspectors to promote the uptake of bycatch mitigation measures across the fleet and to enhance the enforcement of existing regulations. As part of this, a practical step-by-step guide on how to inspect longline vessels in port was produced for law enforcement agents, which has helped to drive an increase in port inspections and appears to be at least partly responsible for a marked increase in the use of line weighting by the fleet.

Other hook-and-line fisheries

An extensive series of port visits has allowed the team to characterise the operation and gear configuration of these fleets which, until now, were poorly understood. The ATF team interviewed fishers across key ports, identifying seabird bycatch in the surface longline for dolphinfish, handline and demersal longline fleets. The self-reported data confirms that endangered seabirds such as the Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross are frequently being caught by vessels using these gear types in south-eastern Brazil, especially when lines are set during daylight hours.

Mitigation compliance

The team has been spending time at sea and in ports, providing best practice guidance to fishermen on bycatch mitigation measures. Line weighting was used in accordance with regulations on all the at-sea trips monitored by ATF instructors. However, increased compliance with the use of bird scaring lines and night setting is necessary to drive bycatch reductions in this fleet. In the light of the lack of observer coverage, we are therefore exploring ways of monitoring compliance with night setting remotely.

Next steps

After some manufacturing delays which meant work could not be conducted this year, the team will trial 20m-opening Hookpods to shed light on the potential for this mitigation measure to reduce bycatch of seabirds and turtles in our target pelagic longline fishery. As well as running more training for fisheries inspectors, the team will be taking a closer look at the demersal longline fleet operating off southern Brazil, particularly determining the sink rate of the lines and therefore the risk this fishery poses to foraging seabirds.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: BRAZIL

22 port inspectors trained in compliance monitoring

100% compliance with line weighting on observed vessels

93% reduction in seabird bycatch when fishers self-reported to be night setting in the demersal longline fleet

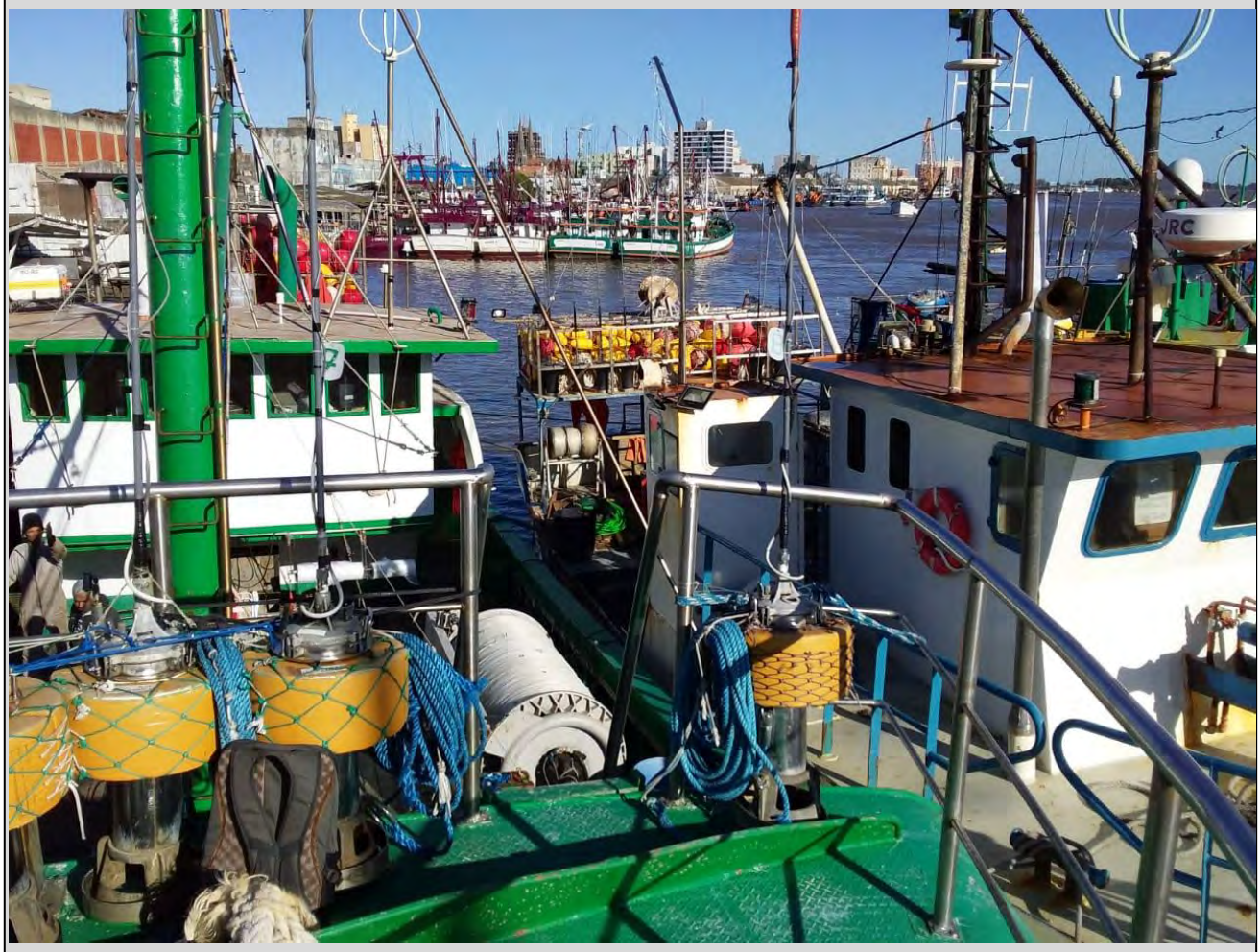

Image: Pelagic longline vessels in the southern port of Rio Grande

Gabriel Sampaio, Projeto Albatroz

CHILE

CODEFF
Cristián Suazo & Patricio Ortiz

Target Fisheries

ATF-Chile works with the small-scale purse seine fishery, comprised of around 450 vessels targeting sardine *Strangomera bentincki* and anchovy *Engraulis ringens*, as well as smaller but more industrialised trawl fleets targeting South Pacific hake *Merluccius gayi gayi* and hoki *Macruronus magellanicus.*

Team progress

Small-scale purse seine fishery
Having demonstrated net adaptations that can substantially reduce seabird bycatch, the team has kitted out five vessels in the fleet with new nets and is aiming to do the same for a further five in the coming year. A major push has been raising awareness of the modified nets, which the team has achieved not only through national workshops for industry and government stakeholders, but also by establishing modified purse seine nets as the first ever 'best practice' bycatch mitigation measure for purse seine fisheries, as defined by the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP).

South-central demersal trawl
This year saw collaboration between ATF teams in the region, with instructors from Argentina sharing their experience of mitigating seabird bycatch on a government trawl research vessel in Chile. This has led to an increased commitment to seabird conservation by Chile's government, which is currently updating the National Plan for the Reduction of Discards and Bycatch for several commercial trawl fisheries. Critically, these plans will form the basis of the mandatory use of mitigation measures in fleets that, to date, have not had seabird bycatch regulations in place. When these plans become law, it will mean that all of the original target ATF fisheries will have regulations – the foundation for sustained, fleet-wide bycatch reductions.

Next steps

The team will conduct a programme of capacity building workshops with compliance officers, observers, industry and net manufacturers to ensure widescale adoption of modified nets in seabird bycatch hot-spots. In anticipation of the new bycatch regulations, the team will deepen relations with the trawl fleet and conduct bird-scaring line demonstrations on commercial vessels. In addition, our monitoring has identified a new source of bycatch in a small number of vessels operating in highly wind-exposed fishing areas, and the team hope to identify technical modifications to resolve this outstanding issue.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: CHILE

186 fishers trained in seabird bycatch mitigation

141 fishing sets monitored in the purse seine fleet

1st transnational collaboration between ATF teams in the Southern Cone

Image: Bird-scaring lines deployed for the first time on government research vessel in Chile

Nahuel Chavez, Aves Argentinas

NAMIBIA

Namibian Nature Foundation
Samantha Matjila, Titus Shaanika & Melody Lilungwe

Target Fisheries

In Namibia our target fleets are the demersal longline and demersal trawl fleet, consisting of 13 and 56 vessels respectively, targeting Cape hake species *Merluccius capensis* and *Merluccius paradoxus*. Most of these vessels are based in Walvis Bay, with a small component of the fleets using Lüderitz as home port.

Team progress

Demersal longline

Data collected by ATF instructors and national fisheries observers indicate that the use of bird scaring lines is over 90% in this fleet. Analysis of data collected since the introduction of seabird bycatch regulations show that bycatch rates have been reduced by a remarkable 95% compared to those recorded before regulations were introduced.

Demersal trawl

Although our monitoring suggests that fewer birds are being killed since the introduction in 2015 of regulations requiring the use of bird scaring lines, this bycatch reduction is not yet statistically significant. We think the obstacle is that vessels are delaying deployment of their bird scaring lines during the setting operation, for fear of entanglement with warp cables. Heavy discarding of offal during setting means that large numbers of birds are potentially at risk while the crew delay bird-scaring line deployment.

National observers

The ATF team has delivered training to over 75% of all fisheries observers in Walvis Bay and Lüderitz, leading to marked improvements in the quality and amount of seabird bycatch and mitigation compliance data collected by fisheries observers. However, an outstanding issue is that national observers are yet not able to confidently identify seabird species at sea.

Next steps

In the coming year the team will be working with industry and government to tackle the issue of delayed bird-scaring line deployment in the trawl fleet. In addition, the team's focus will be to ensure that the Namibian government takes on the responsibility of enforcing bycatch mitigation regulations and that it monitors and reports on seabird bycatch mitigation in the hake fishery, as part of its standard operations. The team will provide training to relevant government staff on how to monitor and report on seabird bycatch. As part of this, national fisheries observers will be given further training in seabird identification and reference material to use when collecting seabird bycatch data onboard vessels. This will allow seabird bycatch data to be integrated into existing reporting systems and bycatch reductions achieved to date to be maintained into the future.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: NAMIBIA

95% reduction in longline bycatch rates

140 fisheries observers trained

115 days at-sea

Image: Atlantic Yellow-nosed albatross foraging off the coast of Namibia

John Paterson, Namibia Nature Foundation

SOUTH AFRICA

BirdLife South Africa
Andrea Angel, Reason Nyengera & Makhudu Masotla

Target Fisheries

The team in South Africa has been active since 2006 and has been working with the pelagic longline fishery for tuna and swordfish (26 domestic and 3 joint-venture vessels) as well as the demersal longline (25 vessels) and trawl (67 vessels) fleets targeting Cape hakes *M. paradoxus* and *M. capensis.*

Team progress

Demersal trawl

The team continues to maintain a watching brief on this fleet, which has demonstrated bycatch reductions of over 95%. Vessel-specific recommendations on how to best deploy bird scaring lines have been produced for >90% of vessels to sustain the high levels of compliance in this fleet into the future.

Domestic pelagic longline

This fleet is 100% compliant with night setting but does not always use the other mitigation measures prescribed by fisheries regulations. The team continues to monitor seabird bycatch rates in this fleet and has been instrumental in securing 20% observer coverage as part of the fishery permit conditions. The team has also worked with industry to develop a bird scaring line that is practical for use on small pelagic longline vessels.

Joint-venture pelagic longline

Pre-departure briefings on seabird bycatch mitigation were delivered to all skippers in this fleet and 100% of the fishing operations observed by ATF instructors used mitigation measures. The recorded bycatch rate for the fleet in 2018 was under the national target of 0.05 birds/1000 hooks.

Demersal longline

When targeting deep-water hake this fleet uses floated gear which poses an elevated risk to seabirds as they can more easily access baited hooks. Using time-depth recorders, the ATF has identified that hooks on floated gear sinks 3 to 9 times slower compared to those on non-floated gear. This leads to the window of opportunity for seabirds to retrieve the bait from hooks close to the surface being prolonged and hence an elevated risk of bycatch.

Next steps

Our focus in the next year will be to increase the use of mitigation measures on small longline vessels, including demersal vessels using floated gear. We will train members of the Ocean View Association for Persons with Disabilities to construct the new bird-scaring line design and continue to train fisheries observers and compliance officers to ensure that fishery permit conditions are appropriately enforced across target fleets.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: SOUTH AFRICA

0 birds caught in the demersal trawl fishery

100% compliance with bird scaring lines in trawl fleet

Sink rates up to 9 times slower on demersal longlines with floats

Image: Fishers processing hake onboard a demersal longline vessel in South Africa

Reason Nyengera, BirdLife South Africa

CONCLUSIONS

In the past year, the Albatross Task Force has demonstrated once again that our efforts can make a real difference for seabirds. Perhaps the most exciting result this year was in Namibia, where we have been able to achieve a bycatch reduction of an astounding 95% in the demersal longline fleet - previously estimated to be killing over 20,000 birds each year. Alongside similar reductions achieved in the South African hake trawl fleet, big leaps have clearly been made for albatrosses and petrels in southern African fisheries.

In South America, things are moving in a similarly positive direction. With new Argentinean regulations in force, we have seen an increase in the use of bird scaring lines in the trawl fleet, which is leading to thousands of birds being saved a year. However, our focus now must shift strongly to compliance and working with fisheries inspectors to ensure that all vessels are using the prescribed mitigation measures. With Chile on the cusp of introducing regulations for their trawl and purse seine fleets, we are close to a 'full set' of bycatch laws across our target fisheries.

Across all our target fisheries, the Albatross Task Force has used an approach of demonstrating simple bycatch mitigation measures, giving grassroots support to industry, pressing for the introduction of regulations and working collaboratively with government agencies to ensure these regulations are implemented and monitored adequately to deliver bycatch reductions. With all this progress, it is now more important than ever that we invest in capacity building with government scientists, observers and inspectors to ensure the hard-won gains of over a decade of work are sustained into the future.

This critical transitional phase means that the teams now apply much of their expertise in the 'classroom' - providing extensive training to ensure the necessary systems are in place for bycatch monitoring and reporting long after the ATF pack up their life jackets and move on to the next challenge. Not all of these classrooms are on land – ATF instructors from Argentina travelled to Chile to demonstrate the use of mitigation measures on-board a government research vessel and share their experience of supporting their national fleet in the uptake of these mitigation measures. This transnational collaboration was a vital step in cementing increased commitment to seabird conservation by Chile's government, in particular through the aforementioned forthcoming regulations.

Next steps for the ATF

Much work remains to be done to ensure bycatch reductions in our existing target fisheries are sustainable, and technology may play a key role in this. Remote electronic monitoring, including the use of cameras, is playing an increasing role in fisheries. A study led by the RSPB in collaboration with Global Fishing Watch (www.globalfishingwatch.org) in 2018 demonstrated that existing satellite data can be used to determine whether fishing vessels are setting their lines at night or not. Such technology presents a powerful tool for enforcing existing seabird bycatch regulations in fleets with low observer coverage. Electronic monitoring may also enable bycatch rates to be monitored on vessels in the absence of human observers. Indeed, the Chilean government has made a strong commitment to kitting out their domestic fishing fleet with cameras; and some vessels in the Argentinean midwater trawl fleet are already employing this technology for catch monitoring. This means that,

moving forward, our approach must encompass new ways of collecting and analysing data to harness these tools and the opportunities that they present.

The ATF is also looking to the future in terms of our focal fisheries – we previously identified a number of midwater trawl fleets worthy of attention and have made progress with these in Argentina and Chile. Bycatch issues have also become apparent in artisanal fleets: in Chile, where we have had made substantial progress in the purse-seine fleet; and in Brazil where the highly migratory hook-and-line vessels have a potentially substantial impact on albatrosses, particularly in the south. The seabird bycatch issue in midwater trawlers and pelagic longliners in Namibian waters has not been fully elucidated, and information from observers suggests some potential issues. This year we will be developing a plan for what comes next for the ATF – and we hope you'll come along with us. Watch this space!

For updates and more info visit: www.rspb.org.uk/albatrosstaskforce

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With thanks to the South Georgia Heritage Trust, Friends of South Georgia Island and the Darwin Initiative for funding the #AlbatrossStories educational social media campaign.

Front cover: Black-browed albatross by Derren Fox

Back cover: Light-mantled albatross chick on South Georgia by Derren Fox