

Albatross Task Force

Team Highlights

April 2020 – March 2021



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Introduction

The Albatross Task Force (ATF) is now 16 years old, launched by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and BirdLife International in 2005. Back then, 19 of the 21 species of albatross were threatened with extinction; fast forward to 2021 and we've gained an extra species – there are 22 recognised albatrosses at present – but the number threatened with extinction has dropped to 15. While this is progress, it is still 15 species too many, and the incidental capture of seabirds in fisheries, known as bycatch, continues to cause population declines of these remarkable birds.

This past year will of course live in infamy – and our work, which is of course highly practical and all about connecting with people to solve problems – was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In spite of everything that 2020 (and 2021) has had to throw at us, great strides for seabird conservation have been taken.

Some of the biggest news this past year came from Namibia – we published a paper demonstrating a 98% reduction in seabird bycatch in the demersal longline fishery since we were successful in pushing for regulations back in 2015. That's the equivalent of over 20,000 birds saved every single year – and a great example of the ATF's main objective in action: *to reduce the bycatch of albatross and petrels in targeted fisheries, and ultimately improve the conservation status of threatened seabirds.*

A major focus of our work has been to build capacity in national observer and inspector programmes to ensure that the well-earned bycatch reductions we have achieved (or are in the process of achieving!) are hard-wired into fisheries management for the long-term. In spite of limitations to in-person events, the teams have quickly adapted and utilised online platforms and outdoor socially-distanced events to train over 400 fisheries observers, inspectors and industry managers on issues relating to seabird bycatch.

In the next couple of years, our aim is to have demonstrated >80% bycatch reductions in all of our target fisheries. This remains a bold and ambitious target, but we believe we have the right plans in place to achieve this. Our eyes are now lifting beyond that horizon to look out across the next 10 years and ponder what challenge the Task Force will take on next. Certainly, there will be more domestic fisheries to work with in some countries, notably Chile and Namibia. However, the bigger aim we have is that the knowledge, expertise, and success of the teams will be applied in fisheries where there are ongoing bycatch issues – perhaps most notably on the High Seas.

This critical work is really only possible because of the help of government agencies in-country and the generous support of the RSPB membership, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Fondation Segré, the Sloane Robinson Foundation, Under the Skin and many private donors. Thank you for all your support!

ARGENTINA

Aves Argentinas

Leo Tamini, Nahuel Chavez, Ruben Dellacasa, Cristian Marinao & Mikaela Vouilloz



Target fisheries

ATF-Argentina works with two trawl fisheries targeting hake *Merluccius hubbsi*, kingclip *Genypterus blacodes*, hoki *Macruronus magallanicus* and southern blue whiting *Micromesistius australis*. The industrial trawl fleet consists of 25 vessels, based in Mar del Plata and Puerto Madryn, whereas the mid-water trawl fleet is made up of four vessels in the port of Ushuaia.

Team progress

Industrial trawl

Coronavirus restrictions have prevented both ATF instructor and official observer access to vessels for a large proportion of the year. However, the team were able to use their relationships with captains to obtain some estimate of the extent of bird-scaring line use in the fleet: unfortunately, compliance continues to be variable, impacted by our inability to engage with stakeholders face-to-face. The good news is that the team have completed a training handbook on seabird bycatch mitigation which will be part of the training that all new captains receive at the National Fisheries School. Additionally, the strain placed on the fisheries observation system by the pandemic has resulted in some positive discussions with officials on how to substantially improve monitoring and compliance, potentially including measurable targets in the National Plan of Action for Seabirds.

Mid-water trawl

Progress with this fleet has been excellent; the team have been able to secure agreement with all four vessels to install cameras to monitor the uptake of bird-scaring lines. ATF instructors will verify the data through two in-person trips on board, and the first trip was underway in March. This project will help us properly quantify levels of compliance, and by extension seabird bycatch reductions. We will work with industry to troubleshoot any issues with bird-scaring line deployment, which can be problematic if simple guidelines are not followed. Self-reported data for the latter half of last year indicates very high compliance (>90%) with the use of bird-scaring lines, so we have high hopes.

Educational outreach

Schoolchildren have, of course, experienced much disruption this year, but ATF Argentina were able to reach 160 students as restrictions eased for a short period. Making the most of the time at home, our education lead, Mikaela, produced a comprehensive course for teachers so that they can deliver our conservation messages confidently themselves.

Next steps

The team's major priorities in the coming year will be to get to sea and conduct training for observers, inspectors and industry to drive up bird-scaring line compliance across all fleets, but particularly on hake vessels.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: ARGENTINA

100% of the midwater trawl fleet agree to trial on-board cameras

Self-reported bird-scaring line compliance >90% in the midwater trawl fleet

First training handbook on seabird bycatch mitigation created and distributed to all trainee captains at National Fisheries School



Image: Crew preparing a bird-scaring line aboard a mid-water trawl vessel
Nahuel Chavez, Aves Argentinas

BRAZIL

Projeto Albatroz & SAVE Brasil

Dimas Gianuca & Augusto Silva-Costa



Target fishery

The ATF team in Brazil primarily focuses on engaging with the industrial pelagic longline fleet in Itajaí and Rio Grande, which targets tunas, sharks and swordfish *Xiphias gladius*. In recent years the team has also started to work with the demersal longline fleets targeting tilefish, groupers and sandperch *Pseudoperca numida* in southern and southeastern Brazil (nine vessels operating out of Rio Grande and Itajaí and ~55 vessels in Cabo Frio).

Team progress

Industrial pelagic longline

This year, the team focused on analysing and writing up almost 20 years of Projeto Albatroz and ATF data from this important fleet. This analysis demonstrates that bycatch is not likely to have changed from concerning levels – in spite of a long-term education and outreach effort, highly successful practical demonstrations and adoption of regulations in 2011. The absence of an observer programme and low levels of at-sea enforcement are likely to be strong contributory factors to a lack of compliance with night setting and bird-scaring line use. We will publish this work in the peer reviewed literature to bring focus on addressing this issue.

Demersal longline

The team analysed self-reported data, previously collected by ATF and Projeto Albatroz staff, to estimate total annual seabird bycatch in demersal longline fisheries off southeast and southern Brazil. Set-by-set information from skippers (2017-2019) in three ports across southern Brazil comprised 109 fishing trips, 2,031 sets and nearly four million hooks. The results show high levels of seabird mortality in Brazilian demersal longline fisheries, estimated to kill around seven thousand birds per year. Bycatch occurs mostly during winter and was significantly reduced with night setting. Existing regulations do not cover this fleet, but this evidence makes it clear that efforts to mitigate bycatch are sorely needed.

Mitigation compliance

After a successful port inspector training event last year, the team carried out an additional online training event in 2020 for three head agents from the Brazilian environmental authority IBAMA, responsible for fisheries enforcement. In the absence of an official observer programme in Brazil, equipping the authorities with information to enforce seabird bycatch mitigation regulations is a crucial part of driving up compliance.

Next steps

Given some of the long-standing challenges to improving compliance in Brazil, we are pausing ATF-style engagement in the immediate term, and will instead focus on higher level advocacy. We shall utilise the experience and knowledge of Dimas Gianuca (former team leader) in support of our work to reduce albatross bycatch in high seas tuna fisheries.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: BRAZIL

Three head agents from the Brazilian Environmental Authorities trained in bycatch mitigation compliance

Almost 20 years of bycatch data analysed

First systematic assessment of seabird bycatch in Brazilian demersal longline fisheries



Image: Fishers in Cabo Frio reading about how to prevent albatross bycatch

Dimas Gianuca, Projeto Albatroz

CHILE

CODEFF

Cristián Suazo & Patricio Ortiz



Target Fisheries

ATF-Chile works with the industrial demersal trawl fleets targeting South Pacific hake *Merluccius gayi gayi* and hoki *Macruronus magellanicus* in south-central Chile, as well as the small-scale purse-seine fishery targeting sardine *Strangomera bentincki*, anchovy *Engraulis ringens*, and industrial purse-seine for Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*.

Team progress

South-central demersal trawl

After the introduction of seabird bycatch regulations across all trawl fleets in late 2019, a major task for the team has been to support industry in a rapid transition to seabird-friendly fishing. This has included kitting out nine vessels with bird-scaring lines (and Tamini Tablas, a device which helps to stabilise lines in strong winds, designed by our Argentinean team leader Leo Tamini!). Perhaps most impressively, though, was the team developing a device ('the cable guide') aimed at reducing the aerial extent of the netsonde cable or 'third wire'. These cables provide the captain with information about the net position and fish entering the net, but are banned in many fisheries because of the large number of seabird mortalities they can cause due to entanglement and collisions; our expectation is that this device will pull the third wire down, bringing it under the protection of the bird-scaring lines that flank the trawl warp cables.

Purse-seine

With face-to-face activities postponed, the Chile team quickly pivoted their efforts to work that could be completed remotely, with remarkable success. In addition to comprehensive paper and video guides on the production of seabird-saving modified purse seines, and seabird handling guides for the fleets, the team trained **more than 400 staff** in Chile's key fisheries management and compliance agencies in bycatch monitoring and mitigation. In addition, 69 industry representatives received similar training, supported by social media outreach (WhatsApp and Facebook) outreach to the small-scale fleet which do not have access to online training platforms. For all the challenges of 2020/21, pandemic-enforced online working has actually helped the team reach a much larger audience than would normally be possible face-to-face in a country the size of Chile.

Next steps

For the team's work with the purse-seine fleet, training remains a strong focus – in the next year ATF-Chile hope to be able to conduct both at-sea work and hold workshops with netmakers and small-scale fishery associations to secure the sustainability of our interventions with the artisanal fleet. In the trawl fleet, the team will be working with the authorities to assess compliance with the bird-scaring line regulations and commencing trials of the 'cable guide' on a commercial vessel. Finally, training workshops in mitigation compliance and best practices onboard will be delivered next year for government compliance officers (SERNAPESCA) and the Chilean Navy Authority (DIRECTEMAR).

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: CHILE

Over 400 government agency staff trained in seabird bycatch monitoring and mitigation

Brand new seabird-saving device developed for trawl fisheries

Nine trawl vessels kitted out with bird-scaring lines



Image: The brand new 'cable guide', aimed at reducing seabird bycatch, which went from concept to design and prototype in less than year!

Cristián Suazo, ATF Chile

NAMIBIA

Namibian Nature Foundation

Samantha Matjila & Titus Shaanika



Target Fisheries

In Namibia our team works with the hake demersal longline and trawl fisheries, targeting *Merluccius capensis* and *Merluccius paradoxus* and consisting of 13 and 56 vessels respectively, based in the ports of Walvis Bay and Lüderitz.

Team progress

Demersal longline

The big news from Namibia was the team publishing a multi-year analysis demonstrating a reduction in seabird bycatch of >98% in the demersal longline fleet compared with levels prior to the adoption of bycatch regulations. This equates to ~20,000 seabirds saved every year! This news brought extremely well-deserved recognition for the efforts of the Namibian team and was reported on the BBC World Service, Radio France Internationale, in *The Guardian*, *BBC Wildlife Magazine* and in *The Namibian*. The paper was also vital in the fishery's Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification, identifying progress as well as ongoing issues to tackle. Namibian hake is now a good choice!

Demersal trawl

Our analysis also found a substantial – though not as dramatic – reduction in seabird bycatch in the trawl fishery, estimated at 60-80%. As highlighted in last year's report, we believe this is related to compliance issues around the timing of bird-scaring line deployment on trawl vessels – some vessels were encountering issues with the lines entangling on trawl cables when nets are being dropped to fishing depth. To resolve this, two vessels have welded 'extension arms' for their bird-scaring lines, designed to prevent entanglements and improve compliance with the measure. At the time of writing, at-sea trips are underway to assess these.

Outreach activities

Another success story this year has been the excellent relationship that ATF-Namibia has built with the Inspectorate – the agency tasked with ensuring vessels comply with fisheries rules and regulations. Having trained very few inspectors historically, the team were able to train 67 in the past year, equipping them to look out for bird-scaring lines during inspections. In addition, the team helped set-up a sustainable business model for Meme Itumbapo, the women's group that build bird-scaring lines. They are now in direct collaboration with local fisheries supply company Walvis Trawl, with direct access to industry in port.

Next steps

The certification of the fishery has resulted in conditions to improve data collection systems, reporting and compliance on seabird bycatch. The team will continue to train government agencies on these matters and have signed a memorandum of understanding with the Namibian Hake Association to continue supporting industry to resolve outstanding issues.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: NAMIBIA

98.4% reduction in seabird bycatch in the longline fleet

Over 20,000 seabirds saved each year

67 inspectors trained in seabird bycatch compliance monitoring



Image: Members of Meme Itumbapo building bird-scaring lines at Walvis Trawl

Benguela Current Commission

SOUTH AFRICA

BirdLife South Africa

Andrea Angel & Reason Nyengera



Target Fisheries

In South Africa, the ATF team has been working with 20 domestic and 3 joint-venture (inactive in 2020) pelagic longline vessels targeting tuna and swordfish, as well as 82 demersal trawl and 35 demersal longline vessels targeting Cape hakes *M. paradoxus* and *M. capensis*.

Team progress

Demersal trawl

The team has maintained a watching brief on this fleet, which was the first of the ATF target fisheries to demonstrate substantial bycatch reductions (>90%). In the offshore sector of this fleet, bycatch remains low and compliance with the use of bird-scaring lines is high, and this is generally maintained through South Africa's 'Responsible Fisheries Alliance'. The inshore sector only needs to use bird-scaring lines when fishing in certain areas, so compliance is less straightforward to monitor here, but the team are working through an MSC-funded project to examine this.

Domestic pelagic and demersal longline

The biggest ongoing bycatch concerns in South Africa are most probably with these two fleets. Compliance with bird-scaring lines is variable, and driving this upward would likely prevent the majority of bycatch events, at least in the pelagic fleet. To this end, ATF-South Africa team have worked with local consultancy Imvelo Blue Environment in a project funded by the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels to test their bird-scaring line remote compliance device, which works by tracking the tension on the bird-scaring line during fishing events. While the device is still under development the tests show that it is able to track compliance, and the pelagic longline sector is interested in its implementation.

Bycatch in the demersal longline fleet is trickier to track, because vessels switch between gear without floats (which sinks relatively quickly) and gear with floats (which hangs around at the water's surface and is more likely to catch birds). The team have conducted a detailed study of gear sinking behaviour, and as part of the fishery's ambition to achieve MSC certification, are in the process of establishing an agreement to collaborate on data sharing and identifying solutions to seabird bycatch.

Next steps

Alongside ongoing training efforts with observer agencies and industry, the team will be working to embed seabird bycatch expertise and training resources within these groupings to support the sustainability of our interventions. Another key issue for maintaining low bycatch in South African fisheries is improving data transparency – the team have already established agreements on this with observer agencies, industry and government. In particular, the team are planning a workshop to develop guidelines that support the rollout of electronic monitoring in South African fisheries to ensure they are seabird-safe.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: SOUTH AFRICA

Successful trialling of a bird-scaring line compliance device in three fleets

Signing of data sharing agreement with Demersal Longline fleet

Start of a project to implement mitigation in all Inshore Demersal trawl vessels



Image: One of the novel bird-scaring line compliance devices being set-up

Victor Ngongo, Imvelo Blue Environment

CONCLUSIONS

Our last annual report covered the period from April 2019 – March 2020 – a period only just starting to sense the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and full of uncertainty about how long it would last and how it would impact our lives. At that point, we could not have anticipated the scale of challenges presented to us, or indeed how we might rise to meet those challenges.

Of course, this is still very much being played out. We're fortunate that the Albatross Task Force is built on a solid foundation of brilliant people who – thanks to thousands of days amassed at sea – are well acquainted with the concept of sudden change, challenge and the need to adapt. In a year like no other, I hope you'll agree on reading this report that the teams have found ways to achieve great things.

From a fisheries management perspective, one of the most notable impacts of the pandemic has been the challenge of maintaining sufficient monitoring of fisheries when observer deployments were cut back and normal flows of information were stemmed or stopped completely. It has become clearer than ever that the future – certainly among industrial fisheries in the near-term – is electronic. Our teams in Argentina, Chile and South Africa are all involved in projects that are exploring the potential of cameras or other remote-sensing tools in either recording bycatch itself or whether mitigation measures are being used. Some of the projects are collaborations direct with industry (as in Argentina and South Africa), and in the case of Chile, we're working with government and industry to ensure the rapidly expanding electronic monitoring programme is properly taking account of seabird bycatch issues. These advances will inform potential alternative solutions for fleets with no observer programmes, like Brazil.

Of course, collecting data is one thing, but acting on it is another. As we build up capacity through training in government institutes, we need to be confident that seabird bycatch runs through all elements of the fisheries management system. So not only do we have observers collecting data, but compliance officers acting when rules are breached, analysts trying to understand and flag any concerning patterns or upticks in bycatch, and open fora where this information is shared with stakeholders by managers and acted upon appropriately.

Even in our most advanced fisheries, we're not all the way there yet – but many of these key building blocks are in place. We need to use the next few years to cement the knowledge, structures and systems to make sure that when we step away completely, we can do so in confidence. Running workshops, writing training manuals, helping to design data collection forms and constructing databases probably seem a far cry from the swashbuckling, sea-faring origins of the Albatross Task Force. But without these nerdy details taken care of, we'd likely be back to square one within a decade.

With that, we'd like to thank you as ever for your continued support in making the work of the Albatross Task Force possible.



For updates and more info:

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Front cover: Dimas Gianuca, ATF

Back cover: Brydon Thomason