

Albatross Task Force

Team Highlights

April 2019 – March 2020



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Introduction

The Albatross Task Force was jointly launched by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and BirdLife International 15 years ago. Since then, our dedicated team of seabird bycatch experts have achieved amazing results. Nonetheless, 15 of 22 albatross species are today threatened with extinction and the incidental capture of seabirds in fisheries, known as bycatch, continues to drive population declines all around the world.

This past year has seen important crucial steps in the right direction for the protection of these magnificent birds. In August 2019, the government of Chile announced the introduction of regulations requiring all national trawl fleets to use a variety of mitigation measures to protect seabirds during their operations, including the mandatory use of bird-scaring lines (BSLs), management of discards which attract birds to fishing vessels and the elimination of net monitoring cables which pose a high collision risk to foraging seabirds.

The introduction of these measures means that all the original ATF target fleets now have seabird bycatch mitigation regulations in place – this is the cornerstone of creating sustainable reductions. However, much work remains to be done to secure fleet-wide bycatch reductions across our target fisheries and ensure that national governments have the requisite capacity needed to monitor and sustain bycatch reductions long into the future.

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.*

Although an incredible amount of work has been delivered by our dedicated ATF teams, there has been some impact from COVID-19 at the tail end of this reporting year (March 2020). The activities most affected by the pandemic include at-sea work onboard vessels, routine port visits and face-to-face training events with industry representatives, fisheries observers and inspectors. It currently remains unclear when outreach of this sort will become possible once again – and will of course vary from country to country. In the meantime, our teams have been adjusting to remote meetings where possible and continued to work from home to prepare for project activities that will be delivered once the lockdown is lifted in their respective countries and it is deemed safe for them to return to work.

In the past year, our ATF teams have trained over 130 fisheries observers and inspectors on issues relating to seabird bycatch mitigation, spent nearly 400 days at sea monitoring seabird bycatch and taught around 1,400 students about seabird conservation. These activities, aimed at increasing awareness of the threats these birds face and the simple solutions which can be implemented to protect them, are only possible due to 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, Planeterra International Foundation, Fondation Segré, the Sloane Robinson Foundation, Steppes Fund for Change, Under the Skin and many private donors. Thank you for all your support!

ARGENTINA

Aves Argentinas

Leo Tamini, Nahuel Chavez & 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

Our team continues to support this fleet with the uptake of bird-scaring lines (BSL), which became mandatory in May 2018. In addition to spending 31 days at-sea, providing fishers with technical support and advice, our team has been working with government observers and compliance officers to monitor BSL use across the fleet. Compliance levels continue to be variable, so we have a strong focus on improving this. To that end, we provided over 80% of the fleet with Tamini Tablas (which help to reduce entanglements of BSLs, a major driver of non-compliance) and vessel-specific bycatch mitigation plans with tailored recommendations are being developed for crew members.

Mid-water trawl

This fleet continues to report high bycatch rates, due to its use of a 'third wire' to monitor the position of the net in the water. During this reporting period, our instructors spent a total of 35 days monitoring this fleet at-sea and recorded an average bycatch rate of 0.039 birds/ hour. The team have continued to press for the uptake of BSLs on the third wire and are currently exploring the possibility of using cameras to monitor the use of bycatch mitigation measures on these vessels.

Educational outreach

We delivered seabird ID and bycatch mitigation training to 55 students at the National Fisheries School in Mar del Plata. Furthermore, over 1000 children participated in our educational outreach activities in public and private schools. 20% of these reported having relatives in the fishing industry. An additional 137 children took part in the 2019 World Ocean Day Art Competition organised by our team, which focused on the relationship between seabirds and fisheries in Argentina.

Next steps

The ATF team will continue to work towards increasing BSL use on trawl vessels, by providing crew members with practical advice, technical support and publicly celebrating vessels making the biggest strides for seabirds. The Argentina and Chile teams will be collaborating closely to tackle the shared issue of seabirds being killed on the third wire of trawlers. Moreover, we will continue to deliver capacity building activities to relevant stakeholders and government agencies and aim to intensify our educational outreach work.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: ARGENTINA

>80% of trawl fleet equipped with Tamini Tablas

1,046 school children taught about albatross conservation

Seabird bycatch mitigation incorporated into National Fisheries School syllabus



Image: ATF Instructor Nahuel Chavez holding a Tamini Tabla onboard an industrial trawl vessel

Leo Tamini, Aves Argentinas

BRAZIL

Projeto Albatroz & SAVE Brasil

Dimas Gianuca, Augusto Silva-Costa & Gabriel Canani Sampaio



Target fishery

Historically the ATF team in Brazil has focussed 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 (9 vessels operating out of Rio Grande and Itajaí and ca. 55 vessels in Cabo Frio).

Team progress

Industrial pelagic longline

Data collected by our team and Projeto Albatroz staff since 2000 suggest this fishery may be killing up to 4,600 seabirds/ year. Given the challenges in ensuring mitigation compliance in Brazil (see below), we have been conducting at-sea trials with 20-metre opening Hookpods – a device that physically protects the barb of the hook until it has sunk beyond the reach of foraging seabirds. Not a single bird was caught on the 45,289 hooks monitored by our team as part of these trials, suggesting that the 20-metre Hookpod is effective at reducing seabird bycatch in this fishery. Importantly, our results also show that using Hookpods has no adverse effect on the number of fish caught when compared to the standard fishing gear.

Demersal longline

Despite not being able to get onboard any vessels in this fleet, our team has gathered a large amount of information about this fishery from logbook entries and interviews with skippers. By doing so, we have learned that endangered albatrosses are regularly caught in this gear type off the coast of southern Brazil. The high bycatch rates reported by skippers in this fishery are likely driven by the fleet's operational preferences to set during the day and the use of inadequate and non-standardised line weighting regimes in the form of granite blocks (ranging from 2 – 10 kg) spaced at varying intervals.

Mitigation compliance

Data from the ATF and Projeto Albatroz – and from skippers themselves – shows that compliance with the use of mitigation measures remains low in the pelagic longline fishery in southern Brazil. To remedy this, we have been training port inspectors on the legal requirements for seabird bycatch mitigation to ensure that vessels' mitigation measures are checked during inspections. In the past year, 11 port inspectors have been trained by our team, and this has been a key factor in driving high compliance with line weighting requirements.

Next steps

We plan to conduct experimental trials to determine the sink rates of the line weighting regimes used in the demersal longline fleet to assess the threat these pose to seabirds and to identify best practice options for fishers. Since there is currently no at-sea bycatch data collection programme in Brazil, we will continue to train enforcement officers on the legal requirements for seabird bycatch mitigation to support and incentivise port inspections.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: BRAZIL

11 port inspectors trained

0 seabirds caught in Hookpod gear

Up to 4,600 birds killed/year in the pelagic longline fleet



Image: Fisher hauling line on a pelagic longline vessel in southern Brazil

Gabriel Canani Sampaio, Projeto Albatroz

CHILE

CODEFF

Cristián Suazo & Patricio Ortiz



Target Fisheries

In Chile our team works with the industrial demersal trawl fleets targeting South Pacific hake *Merluccius gayi gayi* and hoki *M. magellanicus* in south-central Chile, as well as the purse-seine fishery. Most of our purse-seine work has thus far been with the large small-scale portion of the fleet, targeting sardine *Strangomera bentincki* and anchovy *Engraulis ringens*, but the team recently also started to monitor seabird bycatch on larger industrial purse-seine vessels targeting Chilean jack mackerel *Trachurus murphyi*.

Team progress

South-central demersal trawl

A key milestone this year was the introduction of regulations requiring the use of mitigation measures on all trawl vessels in Chile - with local ATF experiences forming a core part of the technical recommendations for the use of bird-scaring lines - and the signing of a cooperation agreement between BirdLife and the Association of Industrial Fisheries of Chile (ASIPES) aimed at the adoption of seabird bycatch mitigation measures onboard vessels in south-central Chile. This agreement has enabled our team to conduct 44 trips onboard demersal trawl vessels to monitor seabird bycatch, demonstrate the use of bird-scaring lines and confirm the importance and feasibility of the installation of snatch-blocks (aimed at reducing the risk of collision with the net monitoring cable which is used by some vessels).

Purse-seine

ATF-Chile has continued to advocate for the wider adoption of modified purse-seine nets, which have been shown to substantially reduce seabird bycatch in this fishery. In the past year, four artisanal purse-seine vessels have been fitted with modified purse-seine nets and funding has been obtained to modify another five. The team also identified a novel source of seabird bycatch in a sub-section of this fleet and are in the process of developing additional net modifications to resolve this. Moreover, an additional 18 fisheries observers have been trained by the ATF in the past year, leading to further improvements in seabird bycatch monitoring in purse-seine fisheries across Chile. A comprehensive programme of training is being established across all the key industry and management institutions, so that seabird bycatch is monitored and reduced in a sustained way in this important fishery.

Training material

We have also worked with the Fisheries Development Institute in Chile (IFOP) to produce seabird bycatch identification guides for ~200 national fisheries observers.

Next steps

A big push for the coming year will be to support industry with the fleet-wide uptake of best practice mitigation measures on trawl vessels in south-central Chile, in line with the requirements in the newly introduced regulations. Our purse-seine work will move into a capacity-building phase, with the delivery of training to observers, inspectors, crews and netmakers, ensuring a strong legacy from our efforts to reduce seabird bycatch in this fleet.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: CHILE

Seabird bycatch mitigation regulations introduced for trawl fleet

200 fisheries observers provided with seabird identification guides

109 days at sea across target purse-seine and trawl fleets



Image: Pair of grey-headed albatrosses nesting on the Diego Ramírez islands, Chile

Cristián Suazo, ATF Chile

NAMIBIA

Namibian Nature Foundation

Samantha Matjila & Titus Shaanika



Target Fisheries

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

Team progress

Demersal longline

The team spent 55 days at-sea and monitored a total of 425 590 hooks for seabird bycatch in this fleet. Eight birds were recorded killed during this period, corresponding to a bycatch rate of 0.02 birds/1000 hooks. This bycatch rate matches that reported independently by national fisheries observers and indicates a bycatch reduction of over 95% compared to rates recorded before regulations requiring the use of BSLs were introduced in November 2015. This bycatch reduction has primarily been driven by the fleet-wide uptake of BSLs.

Demersal trawl

A total of 74 days were spent at-sea monitoring seabird bycatch and mitigation compliance onboard demersal trawl vessels. We recorded an average rate of 0.24 interactions/hour and observed interactions involved shy albatross, black-browed albatross and Atlantic Yellow-nosed albatross amongst others. None of the observed interactions resulted in birds sustaining any visible injuries. Two sooty shearwaters were however observed caught in the net during this reporting period, representing the first record of seabird mortality due to net entanglement in this fleet.

Outreach activities

In June 2019, the ATF co-hosted the World Oceans Day celebration in Walvis Bay. The event was attended by over 200 people, included a mass beach clean-up and provided an excellent opportunity to highlight the issue of seabird bycatch in Namibia. In November 2019 our team also hosted a workshop with stakeholders from the Namibian fishing industry and relevant government agencies to discuss issues around compliance with seabird bycatch regulations in the demersal trawl fleet, where the late deployment of BSLs has been recorded on several vessels. In addition to this, the team trained 37 government observers and inspectors in bycatch mitigation and distributed seabird ID guides to all government observers and active hake vessels in Namibia.

Next steps

In the coming year the team will be working with the National Hake Association to resolve underlying causes of non-compliance on demersal trawl vessels, including the installation of “extension arms” to avoid entanglement with BSLs and trialling ‘batching’ discards so that these are not discharged during setting operations. In addition to this, the team will continue to deliver seabird bycatch training to staff from relevant government agencies, to ensure that Namibian authorities have the knowledge and skills required to take over responsibility of monitoring seabird bycatch independently of the ATF team.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: NAMIBIA

129 days at-sea

0.02 birds killed/1000 hooks in the demersal longline fleet

100% of government observers equipped with seabird identification guides



Image: Black-browed albatross foraging off the coast of Namibia

John Paterson, ATF Namibia

SOUTH AFRICA

BirdLife South Africa

Andrea Angel & Reason Nyengera



Target Fisheries

In South Africa, the ATF team has been working with 26 domestic and 3 joint-venture pelagic longline vessels targeting tuna and swordfish, as well as 67 demersal trawl and 25 demersal longline vessels targeting Cape hakes *M. paradoxus* and *M. capensis*.

Team progress

Joint-venture pelagic longline

Pre-departure briefings on seabird bycatch mitigation were delivered to all vessel skippers and fishing masters. This fleet maintains 100% observer coverage and the ATF continues to provide training to observer agencies to ensure accurate reporting on seabird bycatch, which has been low for successive years since regulations were brought into force.

Demersal trawl

We are confident that compliance with the use of mitigation measures remains high in this fishery. Our team nonetheless maintains a watching brief on this fleet, which has demonstrated bycatch reductions of over 95%. There is limited information from the inshore portion of the fleet - an issue we are working to resolve through a funded project in 2020/21.

Domestic pelagic and demersal longline

The team has developed a new BSL design, adapted for use on small longline vessels, to increase uptake of mitigation measures in both these fleets. The new design, which received positive feedback from industry during development, was incorporated into the 2020/21 permit conditions for these fisheries and now form part of South African legislation.

Although many interactions with seabirds were recorded across the 23 demersal longline sets monitored this year, 100% of the observed sets occurred at night and no birds were caught. However, our time-depth recorder data shows that there are notable differences in the sink rates of hooks depending on their position on the line, with hooks close to weights being the only ones to attain 10m depths within the area that is protected by BSLs behind the vessel. This fishery is targeting sustainable seafood certification, and through the process, we are planning to resolve the bycatch risk that the present gear configuration continues to pose.

Capacity building

Our team delivered training on seabird identification, bycatch mitigation and associated data collection protocols to 14 fisheries observers working on trawl and longline vessels.

Next steps

We will continue to monitor seabird bycatch rates, train observers and compliance officers in critical aspects of bycatch mitigation reporting, with a focus on building these issues into the standard operations of all the relevant agencies. Our efforts in 2020/21 will also include technical support to industry to improve mitigation uptake where needed, particularly in the inshore trawl and demersal longline fleets.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: SOUTH AFRICA

312,470 hooks monitored in the demersal longline fleet

100% compliance with night setting on observed longline sets

New bird-scaring line design incorporated into South African legislation



Image: Crew on demersal longline vessel setting baited lines under the cover of darkness

Reason Nyengera, BirdLife South Africa

CONCLUSIONS

While the world grapples with the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that the achievements of the Albatross Task Force in the past year provide some uplifting news – and demonstrate that by working together, we can and *are* making a real difference for seabirds around the world.

One of the most important achievements of the past year has of course been the introduction of regulations on the use of seabird bycatch mitigation measures in industrial trawl fleets in Chile. This is the last of our original ten target ATF fisheries to put seabird-saving laws in place (with the exception of the small-scale artisanal longline fleet in Ecuador, where regulation would be challenging to implement), and represents a real landmark in how far this work has come – from just trying to get on board vessels in the early days, to entire fleets now legally needing to use mitigation measures! For our ATF team the introduction of these regulations is the culmination of over a decade of collaboration with fishers, researchers and relevant government agencies to draw attention to the issue of seabird bycatch and the role of Chile as a key conservation hotspot for albatrosses.

As we ponder the incredible amount of work that has gone into securing seabird bycatch regulations in all our original ATF target fleets, it seems apt to also reflect on how joined up the solutions we are implementing need to be in order to have the desired effect. It is, for instance, of limited use to have albatrosses protected in Argentinian waters, only to be caught by a fishing vessel as soon as they round Cape Horn into Chile. On the other hand, introducing seabird bycatch mitigation measures in fleets in Chilean waters means that globally threatened albatrosses from as far away as New Zealand and the island of South Georgia in the South Atlantic are kept safe during their foraging trips.

But there is still much to be done. Data collected by our team in Brazil shows that the pelagic longline fleet is killing up to 4,600 seabirds/year, including several endangered albatross and petrel species. In addition to having regulations on paper, it is clear that increased compliance with the use of mitigation measures is needed to drive further bycatch reductions in several of our target fleets. This means significant investment in training and equipping government observer and inspector programmes with the ability to monitor and enforce regulations to make sure they are more than words on a page. Moreover, further research is needed to determine the risk posed to seabirds by fisheries we have only recently started to engage with and to develop effective mitigation measures accordingly.

By continuing to work collaboratively with stakeholders from industry and government, we remain confident the ATF teams will be able to help deliver further bycatch reductions in some of the world's deadliest fisheries for seabirds and leave a legacy for albatrosses and petrels for generations to come. Our aim is that in the next two years we will be able to demonstrate an 80% bycatch reduction in all the ATF fleets – we've already done this in Namibia and South Africa and South America is next. That makes 2020-21 a critical year, and while the ongoing coronavirus pandemic will clearly bring challenges, rest assured that the ATF is finding ways to make sure our impact is as strong as ever. Once again, we would like to thank you for your continued support in making this possible!



For updates and more info:

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