

Albatross Task Force

Team Highlights

April 2021 – March 2022



Partnership for
nature and people

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE

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Introduction

As we embark upon the United Nations Decade for Ocean Science, the Albatross Task Force (ATF) has a critical role to play to drive evidence-based solutions that improve the sustainability of fisheries in areas of high biodiversity. Hard-won successes over the previous decade have led to fleet-wide changes in fishing practices, and our efforts have transitioned to strengthening compliance with highly effective mitigation measures. To do so, this year the ATF has taken a deep dive into the world of electronic monitoring.

This is most notable in the work of the Argentina team. The hoki trawl fleet is responsible for the accidental deaths of approximately one thousand albatrosses and petrels annually, through collisions with cables that pull and monitor the nets. We secured agreement for the vessels in the fleet to carry cameras to monitor use of bird-scaring lines – resulting in vast improvements in compliance with regulations to implement this measure. Read on to find out the scale of improvements! The full potential of electronic monitoring is considerable – and the ATF is at the forefront of efforts to ensure it supports better albatross conservation.

Of course, many of the solutions to seabird bycatch remain firmly analogue, and we continue to advocate for adoption of the practical solutions to the extinction crisis facing our albatrosses. From the simplicity of bird-scaring lines to the innovative Hookpod, we have great confidence in the efficacy of measures available to fleets to halt the bycatch of seabirds.

The challenge is no-longer to need to develop these measures, but rather to ensure industry implement them correctly. As adoption of measures spreads, we have worked with national fleets to develop small improvements that increase effectiveness. We have found that ‘extension arms’ – simple attachment points for the bird-scaring lines welded to the sides of the vessel improve deployment and reduce the risk of entanglement. In Namibia, almost half the hake trawl fleet have adopted this. Practical steps like this facilitate compliance and become the nuts-and-bolts of normal day-to-day operations for the fishing industry.

In 2021 we initiated the transfer of ATF technical experience to our work with the High Seas fleets – former ATF Brazil instructor Dimas Gianuca was our very first High Seas Bycatch Specialist. His years of experience at-sea are now supporting mitigation trials on Asian distant water tuna vessels.

As ever, none of this would be possible without the support of government agencies in-country and contributions from the RSPB membership, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Fondation Segré, the Sloane Robinson Foundation, the Chabot Family Foundation, and many private donors. Thank you!

ARGENTINA

Aves Argentinas

Leo Tamini, Nahuel Chavez, Rubén 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 demersal and mid-water trawl fleet is made up of four vessels in the austral port of Ushuaia.

Team progress

Austral trawl

This year has seen remarkable progress in the austral hoki trawl fleet, in part thanks to ‘conditions of certification’ placed on vessels as part of their Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) sustainable seafood certification. All four of these huge trawlers are now carrying cameras to monitor compliance with the use of bird-scaring lines; ATF review of this camera data shows a compliance rate of 94% across the past year – a remarkable turnaround from a compliance rate of around 30% in 2019.

Industrial trawl

Progress has, unfortunately, not been as strong in the industrial hake fleet. Compliance with bird-scaring line use has not risen after it crashed during the pandemic. Two actions are proceeding to tackle this issue – firstly, the team are focussing strongly on inspector training to improve implementation of the regulations. In recent months the national inspector agency has substantially increased the number of at-sea inspector deployments, so our hope is that this will result in more robust enforcement of bird-scaring line regulations. Secondly, we are exploring the potential of driving improvements through some of the major international fishing companies that own hake vessels. We are at the very early stages of this style of engagement but hope to be able to report progress in the next year.

Educational outreach

The team led their first classes at the National Fisheries School in Mar del Plata, training 38 future captains in seabird bycatch mitigation, and 17 fisheries observers were trained, meaning that 70% of active observers have now received seabird bycatch prevention training from the ATF. After a long pandemic-induced hiatus, our seabird education programme has bounced back better than ever. The team conducted 124 sessions in Mar del Plata schools, reaching 2,134 children.

Next steps

Commencing a programme of training for fisheries inspectors is a major objective to support better compliance in the industrial hake fleet, and we aim to train 75% of the current inspectors by the end of the year. In the hoki fleet, our outstanding challenge is to identify effective ways of mitigating bird bycatch on the notorious ‘third wire’ on these vessels.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: ARGENTINA

94% compliance with the use of bird-scaring lines in the hoki fleet thanks to cameras

70% of active fisheries observers have now been trained by the ATF

2,134 Mar del Plata children educated in seabird conservation



Image: Instructor Rubén Dellacasa safely releasing a black-browed albatross after it landed on deck a little bewildered during his almost two-month trip on a hoki vessel

Rubén Dellacasa, ATF Argentina

CHILE

CODEFF

Cristián Suazo & Patricio Ortiz



Target Fisheries

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

Team progress

Purse-seine

The major focus of our work to reduce bycatch in Chilean purse seine fisheries – particularly of the threatened pink-footed shearwater – is now on capacity building. This is performed through a series of training programmes: data collection on bycatch and the practical use of mitigation measures for observers; effective deployment of modified nets to mitigate bycatch for fishing crews; production of seabird-friendly purse seine nets for netmakers. The team have done a truly remarkable job: 259 people from industry were trained – a mix of at-sea and on-shore personnel, the latter to support capacity building on bycatch mitigation in fishing companies. Similarly, over 200 inspectors and inspector trainers attended seabird bycatch workshops run by ATF Chile. All of this is targeted at embedding seabird-safe fishing practices into purse seine fisheries management for the long-term.

South-central demersal trawl

With recently enacted legislation requiring all trawl vessels in Chile to use bird-scaring lines, the team delivered training at the request of the government, with a mix of 89 Ministry of Environment and Fisheries subsecretariat staff trained in monitoring and mitigation seabird bycatch in demersal trawl fisheries, along with 17 captains and crew.

The team have also enjoyed stepping back out to do some hands-on work, distributing 'reference' bird-scaring line among the different fleet sectors as a guide for self-production. In addition, the team worked specifically with the small-scale crustacean trawlers to develop a novel 'extension arm' to ensure that bird-scaring lines could be deployed effectively and safely in this unique fleet.

The roll out of electronic monitoring is well underway in Chilean fisheries, and the ATF-Chile team have been providing advice and training to fishery managers and enforcement agencies in how to utilise this to examine compliance with the use of bird-scaring lines in trawl fisheries and considering how to use this to look at seabird bycatch levels.

Next steps

After all the pandemic-induced delays, the major priority for the team this year is to complete final at-sea trials to confirm adjustments to the modified purse seine, write-up and publish the data on this package mitigation measures to support wider adoption globally and to finalise a database tracking the uptake of modified nets across the small-scale fleet in Chile.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: CHILE

Over 500 crew, inspectors and observers trained in seabird bycatch mitigation and monitoring
Design and deployment of specially designed extension arms and bird-scaring lines on small-scale trawlers



Image: The crew on a Chilean crustacean trawler with an ATF-designed bird-scaring extension arm rising above them

Cristián Suazo, ATF Chile

NAMIBIA

Namibian Nature Foundation

Titus Shaanika, Ndamononghenda Mateus & Samantha Matjila



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 40 vessels respectively, based in the ports of Walvis Bay and Lüderitz.

Team progress

Demersal longline

It is extremely encouraging to report that bycatch remains at a low reported level in this fleet since our much-publicised 98% reduction – an estimated 0.01 birds/1000 hooks is the most recent indicative bycatch rate. The focus for the team now is ensuring there is no slippage on this progress – there have been some indications that bird-scaring lines are not always being used correctly. Our ongoing emphasis is therefore on outreach and education with industry, observers and inspectors.

Demersal trawl

An iterative improvement in the practical use of bird-scaring lines throughout trawling operations has been necessary to reduce entanglements between the lines and trawl warp cables. The solution was the addition of simple ‘extension arms’ designed to position bird-scaring lines marginally further from trawl warps. These have now been attached to 16 out of the 40 vessels in the fleet, the majority of which have been examined in-port by the ATF team. At-sea trips are underway to check the performance of these extension arms during fishing operations – initial trips indicate that the design is effective.

Outreach activities

As noted above, with regulations in place and seabird bycatch significantly reduced in Namibia, an increasing amount of the team’s focus is on training fishing crew, observers and inspectors to ensure that bycatch mitigation is properly used, that data are collected and rules enforced. In addition to the many informal in-port engagements, the team’s workshops were attended by 19 fishers, 24 observers and 40 inspectors (among others). The ‘train the trainers’ capacity-building events were attended by a further 27 participants across these fisheries stakeholder groups.

Next steps

Namibia is a beacon of global hope in tackling seabird bycatch – the key now is to ensure that the measures that have delivered this success are fully embedded across the key elements of the fisheries management system. This year, the team will be focussing on training, strengthening the bycatch regulations, ensuring bycatch data collection and analysis is working well and exploring bycatch in the monkfish and midwater trawl fleets.

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: NAMIBIA

Bycatch rates remain low in the hake longline fishery - 0.01 birds per 1000 hooks

16 trawl vessels have extension arms installed to support better bird-scaring line deployment

Over 100 crew, observers, inspectors and government officials trained



Image: An extension arm attached to a Namibian trawl vessel to improve bird-scaring line performance

Titus Shaanika, ATF Namibia

SOUTH AFRICA

BirdLife South Africa

Andrea Angel & Reason Nyengera



Target Fisheries

In South Africa, the ATF team has been working with 16 domestic and 1 joint-venture pelagic longline vessels targeting tuna and swordfish, as well as 70 demersal trawl and 35 demersal longline vessels targeting Cape hakes *M. paradoxus* and *M. capensis*.

Team progress

With bycatch mitigation requirements in place in our four target fisheries, much of the South African team's focus is on ensuring that fisheries monitoring and compliance systems are up to the task of sustaining minimal seabird bycatch.

Seabird bycatch data

Fisheries data are not collected by a government agency in South Africa, but by private companies. Access to this information is therefore not always straightforward. In order to permit better oversight of the bycatch situation in each fishery, the team have secured access to bycatch data from all of our target fisheries. We now intend to update South Africa's National Plan of Action on Seabird Bycatch and advocate for adoption of changes to better coordinate all this data and keep seabirds safe.

Electronic Monitoring

A future with more extensive fisheries monitoring depends on electronic systems – using cameras and other technologies to collect data and ensure vessels are following the rules. The South African team have driven this agenda forward by testing remote sensors and cameras to monitor compliance with mitigation measures in the longline and trawl fleets respectively. In addition to this practical work, the team are collaborating with Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment to run a workshop bringing these experiences together and promote wider adoption.

Training observers

Human observers will always be an important part of fisheries management, and as such the team have created a series of training videos to support the roll out of seabird bycatch training to South Africa's observer agencies. These will form the basis of 'train the trainers', to embed seabird bycatch mitigation into the standard training of sea-going observers.

Next steps

As well as running the first train the trainers workshops and pressing for the publication of a new National Plan of Action, the team are commencing Hookpod trials in South Africa's burgeoning domestic pelagic longline fishery, developing vessel-specific mitigation plans for the demersal longline fleet and ensuring bycatch remains low in the offshore trawl and joint-venture pelagic longline fishery. A busy year awaits!

ALBATROSS TASK FORCE: SOUTH AFRICA

Over 500 hours of footage obtained so far in inshore trawl fleet camera trial

1400 Hookpods purchased for domestic pelagic longline trials



Image: ATF team Andrea Angel and Reason Nyengera with camera technician Dave Estment after installing cameras and extension arms on an Inshore trawl vessel.

ATF South Africa

CONCLUSIONS

Life in our oceans is under serious pressure, with fisheries recognised as a major driver of the parlous state of many species, especially albatrosses and petrels. The choices we make on what we put on our dinner plates are linked to impacts in the most remote island seabird colonies. Over the past year fisheries sustainability has been the topic of a public debate about whether sustainable seafood actually exists. Results from our Albatross Task Force teams demonstrate that sustainable seafood can and does exist, but not without directed and expert effort and effective advocacy at scale.

The BirdLife Marine Programme, which is hosted by the RSPB and manages the Albatross Task Force, is approaching our 25-year anniversary. Our grassroots work through the ATF is the practical support that underpins our international policy advocacy with fisheries managers. Increasingly, we are utilising a third approach as supermarkets, seafood companies and other elements of the supply chain begin to accept the need for change.

Initially, this has meant leveraging sustainable fishery certifications like that run by the Marine Stewardship Council to ensure adoption of bycatch mitigation measures is a condition of certification– this has been important in Argentina, Namibia and South Africa. Increasingly, we are able to work directly with retailers and companies to encourage commitments to ensure seabird safe supply chains that go above and beyond certification standards – particularly with regard fisheries surveillance, including electronic monitoring. We want to help drive transformation in ocean governance.

Our vision is to combine our practical know-how, policy expertise, and supply chain pressure with advanced monitoring technology through a partnership with Global Fishing Watch, the organisation making fisheries data more transparent. We will engage with governments and industry in a new way and bring about the fundamental improvements necessary to resign seabirds of their regretful badge of ‘the most threatened group of birds’.

For the ATF this will require doubling down at what we do best – providing practical knowledge, capacity building and research to keep seabirds off hooks, away from cables and out of nets. We will need to extend our work to new fisheries in the coming years and fully consolidate our successes to date. This is no mean feat, but new technology and an increasingly engaged supply chain are our allies.

We’ve demonstrated that seabird bycatch is a solvable problem. We want to thank you for believing in that from the beginning and continuing to support the ATF while we endeavour to make eliminating seabird deaths in fisheries an everyday part of the fishing business.

For updates and more info:

Visit www.rspb.org.uk and search for Albatross Task Force

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Back cover: Alastair Wilson

