



## Opinion: A look at last year's 'hits and misses' in tuna management

Closing management gaps and curtailing political deadlock for sustainable tuna fisheries: the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation VP of Policy looks back at 2017.

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The beginning of the year is a good a time to “take stock” of the themes, trends and the hits and misses when it comes to tuna conservation and management. 2017 was a year of triumphant ups and disappointing downs that will shape the landscape for years to come. As we at ISSF [International Seafood Sustainability Foundation] prepare our advocacy priorities for 2018, it’s important to reflect back at last year for guidance and inspiration.

### The Good

#### Addressing management gaps: non-entangling FADs

Starting with the good news is always easier, and 2017 had no shortage of wins for the long-term sustainability of tuna stocks and the marine ecosystem. It was a year that marked the closing of some significant management gaps on the part of [Regional Fisheries Management Organizations \(RFMOs\)](#).

The win we’re celebrating the most in this gap-closing category impacts the world’s biggest tuna fishery—the Western and Central Pacific Ocean. That region’s management body, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), [adopted provisions for the use of non-entangling FAD designs](#).



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In previous years, all other major tuna RFMOs had adopted provisions for the use of non-entangling FADs, which use special designs to help prevent the entanglement of sharks and other marine life. And the WCPFC finally joined its peers. While the measures are non-binding, they mark a significant step forward in the protection of marine ecosystems in the Pacific and pave the way for stronger measures to come.

### Adoption of harvest control rules scores a hit against politics as usual

In 2017, RFMOs made progress in improving their ability to make quick decisions to protect and manage a specific tuna stock's long-term sustainability. Good progress on harvest control rules, particularly, paves the way for politics-free decisions when it comes to tuna conservation.

Harvest control rules set a limit reference point, which is a threshold of stock health for when a certain management action needs to be taken to protect a tuna stock. Those protective actions are predetermined, so there is no opportunity for politicking before the management body can take action to prevent overfishing of that given stock.

While the development of harvest strategies, which include harvest control rules, saw progress in several RFMOs this year -- for example the WCPFC adopted an interim harvest strategy for North Pacific albacore and a harvest strategy for Pacific bluefin tuna.

However, ICCAT was especially impressive in its adoption of a harvest control rule for the North Atlantic Albacore stock. This has been a long-standing and key advocacy ask for ISSF and other stakeholders.

### Tunatech emerges

2017 was also the year of "tunatech." Electronic monitoring and reporting systems use modern technology to improve monitoring of fishing operations and facilitate rapid data submission—fundamental elements of science-based fisheries management.

Accelerating the use of modern technologies to better monitor fishing activities at sea and to strengthen data collection from fleets has been a longstanding ISSF goal, and it is gaining acceptance across the industry. Without good data and reporting, RFMOs are making decisions with insufficient or inaccurate information.

But that situation will improve with the adoption of e-reporting standards for observers, as occurred at the WCPFC meeting in 2017. Atlantic and Indian Ocean tuna fisheries also saw progress in advancing the use of electronic monitoring and reporting this year.

### Promoting food security, improving shark and ray management

ISSF has been advocating for RFMO measures that improve food security for coastal communities and that strengthen shark and ray conservation. And such appeals were successful in many cases.

In the Atlantic Ocean region, for example, there is now a binding measure to require full tuna retention, which will contribute to food security in developing coastal communities. The full retention of tunas and subsequent use of non-target fish in coastal community marketplaces can greatly reduce the waste associated with fish being discarded at sea. Now, all of the four tropical tuna RFMOs have such a measure -- something we have been advocating for over many years.

Science-based management of shark species, both as its own fishery and as bycatch in tuna fisheries, consistently make ISSF's list of RFMOs asks. In 2017, ICCAT adopted measures to protect northern Shortfin Mako sharks, following the 2017 assessment that showed the stock being overfished.

In the Indian Ocean, the IOTC adopted the first measure to require sharks be landed with their fins naturally attached. Because such measures enhance enforcement of the existing finning ban and strengthen fisheries data collection, we have joined other NGOs in advocating for fins-attached measures for years.

And it is a big win because similar measures in other oceans were unsuccessful in 2017. And, the WCPFC adopted Best Handling Practices for the Safe Release of manta and mobulid rays -- another advocacy priority for ISSF and our partners.

## **The Bad**

Since 2017's misses will form into some of this year's highest priorities, why not save them for the end so they will be top of mind in the new year?


### **Transparency loses in the Pacific**

Transparency in fisheries should be the norm. And in most tuna RFMOs, it is. It is a principle that has an impact on the fight against illegal fishing and has made headlines when it comes to seafood company compliance with sustainability best practices. RFMOs must engage all stakeholders both for the sake of fairness and as a checks-and-balances system that ensures the best policies are developed and implemented.

While nearly all RFMOs have procedures that provide for the participation of observer organizations, the WCPFC continues to lag far behind its counterparts. That's because the commission prevents accredited observers the ability to be present at meetings on member compliance with conservation measures. At the end of last year, the WCPFC stumbled further when it began to shut accredited observers out of the working groups that negotiated measures on tuna conservation.



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The commission also stalled discussion of developing a formal mechanism for inviting new fishing nations to join the Commission.

Such an approach makes WCPFC the only RFMO that is essentially closed -- which is out of line with international norms and prevents nations with a real interest in the fishery from being legally bound to measures for the conservation and management of the resource.


This year needs to be a very different story in this regard, and we hope that our allies and partners will join us in continuing to demand greater transparency and inclusiveness in the WCPFC.

### **We need more for sharks and rays**

Though strides were made to protect sharks and rays as mentioned above, more steps should have been taken to protect these animals, which are the target of certain fishing operations as well as unintended bycatch.



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We need better data, better protective regulations and more robust stock assessments for sharks and rays in every single ocean region. The stakes are high: Some shark populations are threatened, and even the limited data we have shows that the situation for certain shark populations is bad and may be worsening.

Yet fins-attached measures were once again shot down in IATTC, ICCAT and WCPFC. Shark and sea turtle mitigation measures and/or handling and safe release guidelines were deferred in IATTC. And prompt release and a prohibition on retention of manta rays measure in IOTC was rejected.

Unfortunately, RFMOs demonstrated a lack of seriousness when it comes to protecting these important species on several fronts.

### **Failures in observer coverage**

Observer coverage is critical for data collection, reporting and monitoring. As noted, measures for electronic monitoring and reporting systems gained momentum in 2017, and that is something to celebrate. But there were still letdowns regarding both purse seine and longline observer coverage.

The IOTC and ICCAT, for example, made little to no progress towards the goal of 100 percent observer coverage for large-scale purse seine fisheries this year. Given that such coverage is already required in the IATTC and WCPFC, we know that 100 percent is not an unrealistic goal. There was also no progress in all ocean regions toward the goal of increasing observer coverage on longline vessels to a minimum of 20 percent.

## Looking ahead

There was progress made and certainly a reason to toast to 2017 at the New Year. But we have to remain focused on taking steps forward, not backward when it comes to fisheries management, especially on issues of transparency, harvest strategies, making increased observer coverage the norm across all RFMOs, and ensuring the protection of sharks and rays.

We are proud of what was accomplished last year, and we will continue to serve as a global bridge among all stakeholders in the year to come. There is much work to be done in 2018 to ensure that we can celebrate again a year from now.

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