Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) meeting: some progress, but sustainability remains a concern

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The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) held its 21st Annual Meeting in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from 22 to 26 May 2017. The meeting addressed important challenges facing the conservation and sustainable management of stocks covered by the organisation’s mandate.

The EU welcomes certain steps taken towards better protection of sharks, marine mammals and turtles, but regrets the failure to reach agreement on conservation measures for billfish and neritic tuna. The latter despite clear scientific evidence of the need to take concerted action.

A positive outcome of the meeting is that the IOTC endorsed a proposal, tabled by the EU and co-sponsored by France on behalf of its overseas territories, to ban the use of large scale driftnets in the Indian Ocean. This ban would be applicable not only on high seas (as agreed in 2012), but also in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of the contracting parties. The new measure will take effect from 2022 and should have a major impact on reducing incidental mortality of protected species, including manta rays, cetaceans, sea turtles and sharks.

The IOTC also endorsed a proposal tabled by the EU on shark finning. The IOTC Scientific Committee has repeatedly recommended that ‘all sharks must be landed with their fins attached to their respective carcass.’ For the first time, a measure on the full protection of shark finning has been adopted in a Regional fisheries management organisation (RFMO) managing tuna, even though only for sharks landed fresh (sharks landed frozen remain subject to the precedent light protection measures). Nevertheless, it is a very welcomed step forward.

However, the European Commission regrets that the existing Resolution on Rebuilding the Indian Ocean yellowfin tuna was reopened and amended before the end of its first year of implementation. The new provisions do not appear to be driven by a conservation objective and will likely reduce the impact of the rebuilding plan, rather than strengthen its implementation. The provisions are not based on the Scientific Committee's recommendations and are arbitrarily targeting the EU purse seine fleet in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, the European Commission regrets that the IOTC was unable to adopt the management measures proposed by the EU for specific stocks such as neritic tunas and billfish, despite scientific evidence and the Scientific Committee's own recommendations that urgent action is needed. IOTC was also not able to agree on measures for the conservation of mobulas and manta rays.
Finally, implementation and enforcement remain major issues in the Indian Ocean. There is a need for more vigorous action as lack of compliance puts at risk the overall sustainability of the Indian Ocean, including tuna stocks.

**Background:**

The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) is an intergovernmental organisation mandated to manage tuna and tuna-like species in the Indian Ocean and adjacent seas. The objective of the Commission is to promote cooperation among its members with a view to ensuring, through appropriate management, the conservation and the optimisation of the utilisation of stocks in the area and encouraging sustainable development of fisheries based on such stocks.

The members of IOTC are Australia, Maldives, Mauritius, China, Mozambique, Comoros, Oman, Eritrea, Pakistan, European Union, Philippines, France, Seychelles, Guinea, Sierra Leone, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Sudan, Iran, Tanzania, Japan, Thailand, Kenya, United Kingdom, South Korea, Madagascar, Yemen and Malaysia.

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