

Stop seabird bycatch in EU fisheries

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With the introduction of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management in the 2002 CFP reform, the EU committed to conduct its fisheries in a way that minimises damage to the marine environment. However, in key areas, nothing has changed for the better in the last ten years. Taking seabirds as one of the most visible and best studied group of species, it is clear that an ecosystem-based approach is still far from reality.

It is estimated that every year at least 200,000 seabirds die as bycatch in the gears – mainly longlines and gill-nets but to a lesser extent also trawls and purse seines – of EU fishing vessels, with the Baltic and eastern North Sea probably accounting for at least half of this toll. All of the victims are protected under EU Birds Directive and for some, such as the endemic Balearic shearwater, this impact risks dire consequences, threatening the species with extinction in the next 40 years. Further from home, in the Southern Ocean, 17 out of 22 albatross species are endangered, largely due to incidental catch in the longlines and trawls of fleets which include EU-flagged vessels.

The tragedy is that this is a needless waste of marine life. For most of these bycatch problems, proven technical solutions exist which are not expensive, and such 'mitigation measures' are already in routine use by other fishing nations such as South Africa and Brazil, dramatically reducing seabird deaths. In longline fisheries, techniques to reduce bait-snatching by seabirds can even increase fish catch.

It is high time for the EU to get serious about its principles and commitments, to catch up with the developing world, and eliminate the seabird bycatch in its own fisheries. The EU must adopt without further delay its long overdue EU Seabird Plan of Action, prescribing ambitious and robust measures for tackling this problem at national, EU and wider international level. In parallel the new CFP and secondary legislation need to provide an effective framework for regulation and incentives.



BirdLife believes that EU policies to address bycatch need to be guided by the following principles:

1. Aim for zero bycatch

The CFP should aspire to reduce seabird bycatch to zero. The practical solutions need to be fishery-specific and it might take time to get there, but the policy needs to send a clear signal to the industry that, in ecosystem-based fisheries, killing of birds which are protected by the EU's environmental legislation is not acceptable.

2. Make seabird-friendly gear a condition for access to fisheries and protected areas

It is beyond doubt that the EU needs to significantly reduce its fleet to match fish resources. The cuts should fall heaviest on those fisheries which cause the greatest overfishing and inflict the most environmental damage.

Preferential access to fishing opportunities and resources should be given to those operators who implement adequate seabird bycatch mitigation measures. Demonstrable use of seabird-friendly gear should be a pre-condition for fishing in Natura 2000 sites and other MPAs where seabirds are a qualifying feature and where bycatch threatens their favourable conservation status.

3. Step up collection of data on seabird bycatch

Knowledge about the status of our ecosystems and impacts on them is a vital precondition for ecosystem-based management of fisheries. Sadly, the collection of data on environmental impacts of EU fisheries, including information on bycatch rates, is totally inadequate and under-resourced. Nevertheless, the existing data clearly indicates the gravity of the problem, even though it is certainly just the 'tip of the iceberg'. An obligation must be put on Member States to systematically collect and report data on seabird bycatch, including through the use of independent observers, using agreed protocols which follow the FAO's best practice guidelines on reducing bycatch in fisheries.

4. Ensure the same high EU standards wherever our vessels are fishing

The CFP should ensure that the same best practice applies both inside and outside EU waters, wherever EU-flagged vessels operate with gear that kills and injures seabirds. EU vessels are contributing to the chronic decline of albatrosses – the single most threatened group of birds globally – in the southern Oceans. The EU should require these distant water fleets to perform to environmental standards as high as those imposed in EU waters.

5. Empower fishermen to develop and apply bycatch solutions.

Fishers should be at heart of developing bycatch solutions and they need to be supported to do this. The CFP and its funding instrument should create incentives for fishers to engage in results-based solutions for innovation and adaptation of measures to reduce seabird bycatch. To this end, EU fisheries funding should explicitly support education, training and outreach to the fishing sector, and the implementation of pilots and trials. Such funding should also clearly target support for R&D, implementation of mitigation measures to minimise seabird bycatch, and – in some cases – to allow cessation of fishing activity.



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