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The Pew Charitable Trusts' Statement to the ICCAT Plenary October 2020

The Pew Charitable Trusts welcomes the opportunity to participate in this year's remote correspondence on the business of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). We appreciate the work of the Secretariat, Chair, and members to convene several virtual intersessional meetings throughout 2020 due to the extraordinary situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we understand the need to work by correspondence.

The global health crisis has highlighted the importance of having healthy and resilient fisheries that are well equipped to handle extraordinary circumstances. As the effects of the pandemic are likely to persist during 2021 and possibly beyond, RFMOs should be shifting from enacting reactive management measures to developing procedures and standards – like harvest strategies and electronic monitoring programs – that will help them legally and sustainably manage fish stocks even during difficult times.

Additionally, while there will always be a place for in-person meetings, a shift to virtual gatherings should be seen by RFMOs as an opportunity to increase participation in decision-making and improve transparency, rather than restricting it. This year and moving forward, it is imperative that ICCAT maintain its commitment to transparent discussions, including by ensuring observer organizations and other stakeholders are included in the process at least at the same level as afforded during in person meetings.

While the agenda before the Commission this year is necessarily limited, there remains opportunity for progress on several important items. Pew, therefore, urges members to hasten the introduction of new approaches that provide greater resilience and stability to the region's fisheries, including to:

Follow the scientific advice to conserve vulnerable species

Discussion on most ICCAT business has been delayed to 2021, intersessionally or at the Annual Meeting, but some issues of stock management and conservation still require urgent action this year. Now that email correspondence is underway, ICCAT should:

- Follow the SCRS advice on north Atlantic shortfin mako sharks and adopt a no-retention policy with no exceptions. As laid out in a joint NGO statement submitted to the Plenary by Shark Trust (PLE_112), the situation with this population is dire – it will continue to decline for the next 15 years, even if ICCAT fisheries do not hook a single individual. ICCAT also must act quickly to manage the south Atlantic stock for the first time, since scientists have concluded that the trend for that population is likely to mirror the northern stock if managers do not take action. Canada has proposed management for both stocks that is aligned with the scientific advice in PA4_806, and their proposal should be supported and adopted by all CPCs.
- Adopt a new total allowable catch (TAC) for western Atlantic bluefin tuna that ends overfishing in 2021. The results of the stock assessment for western bluefin concluded that the stock will experience overfishing with an unacceptably high 94% likelihood if ICCAT does not take urgent action this year. The Chair of Panel 2 has proposed a clear pathway forward in PA2_608, and

while even this proposal is not precautionary enough, it should be supported and adopted by all ICCAT CPCs.

- Maintain the already adopted bigeye tuna conservation measures for 2021. The Atlantic bigeye tuna population is in a very concerning state, a result of insufficient management by ICCAT for the last decade and increased reliance on FADs by Atlantic purse seine fleets. In 2019, ICCAT finally took some measures to try to control bigeye catch – though loopholes remain. Recommendation 19-02 requires a decrease in total catch between 2020 and 2021. ICCAT should maintain this measure and attempts to repeal this requirement should not be accepted.

Advance the development of management procedures to achieve sustainable and productive fisheries

With significant correspondence planned for Panels 1, 2, and 4, there will be many opportunities for CPCs to continue the recent momentum toward management procedures (harvest strategies) for ICCAT fisheries this year. SCRS scientists have made substantial progress developing management strategy evaluation (MSE) for several high priority stocks. During email correspondence this year, ICCAT should:

- Implement the northern albacore harvest control rule and raise the quota for that stock, in accordance with the SCRS advice and the results of the 2020 stock assessment.
- Schedule a series of intersessional Panel meetings in 2021 where managers and scientists can engage in constructive dialogue on relevant matters, including management objectives, reference points, candidate management procedures, and MSE development.
- Support the SCRS in continuing their regular meetings (virtually or in-person) on bluefin tuna and north Atlantic swordfish MSE development with the aim to adopt full harvest strategies for these stocks in 2022 and to explore new models and identification of exceptional circumstances for northern albacore, as necessary for adoption of a fully specified management procedure in 2021.
- Avoid scheduling unnecessary stock assessments in 2021 that put substantial pressure on SCRS and Secretariat scientists, likely slowing or halting their progress on harvest strategies.
- Commit to moving forward with harvest strategy development for the tropical tunas, in order to break the ongoing deadlock on management of these valuable and wide-ranging stocks. In particular, support efforts by CPCs who are aiming to adopt a management procedure, developed using MSE, for the western Atlantic skipjack stock, noting that this stock is not part of the multi-species purse seine fishery in the Atlantic.

Looking towards 2021, additional issues that should be a high priority for future work include: improvement of reporting and monitoring of transshipments; reducing impacts of tuna fishing on bycatch; development of an electronic monitoring program to complement human observer coverage; expansion of the use of IMO numbers to uniquely identify ICCAT fishing vessels; compliance with port State measures and related information exchange; and prevention of nationals (physical and legal persons) from engaging in IUU fishing. A successful intersessional meeting of the Integrated Monitoring Measures Working Group will be vital to all of these issues requiring attention in 2021. As such, ICCAT should commit to scheduling that meeting as soon as is feasible, preferably in person, but we understand a virtual approach may still be the only safe option next year.