Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels

Eighth Meeting of the Parties

Dunedin, New Zealand, 19 - 23 May 2025

Observer Report

BirdLife International

SUMMARY

BirdLife International established the Marine Programme two decades ago in response to population declines in ACAP listed species, mainly because of mortality in fisheries operations. BirdLife's contribution to the implementation of solutions to this pervasive issue has been four-fold:

i. strengthening the evidence of the overlap between fishery operations and the distribution of vulnerable seabirds to inform decision makers.

ii. backing a team of grass-roots practitioners to demonstrate the efficacy of bycatch solutions in priority fleets.

iii. promoting the adoption of effective seabird conservation measures in fleets that operate in areas beyond national jurisdiction through engagement at the tuna Regional Fishery Management Organisations.

iv. leveraging the inclusion of standards within the seafood supply chain that require fisheries to demonstrate what actions they are taking to reduce their impact on Endangered, Threatened and Protected species.

All these efforts have been conducted in collaboration with ACAP Parties to strengthen the enabling factors that drive reductions in seabird bycatch. However, many barriers to the consistent adoption of bycatch mitigation measures remain, particularly the monitoring and reporting of mitigation use in pelagic longline fleets that operate in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The leadership of ACAP Parties to set an example in the tuna RFMOs is a critical step to breaking this barrier.

This document provides a summary of BirdLife initiatives that are intended to support the objectives of the Agreement, inform Parties of our work and promote further collaboration.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019 the ACAP Advisory Committee declared a conservation crisis is faced by listed species, due to the mortality of thousands of albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters as a result of fisheries operations.

Two decades ago, BirdLife International established the Marine Programme in response to these population declines in recognition that simple solutions were available that, if implemented effectively, could rapidly reduce the impact of fisheries without negatively affecting target catch.

Demonstrable progress has been made thanks to dedicated efforts by ACAP Parties, Observers to the Agreement and collaborating organisations across multiple regions, but despite these advances, mortality from fishery interactions continues to represent the highest impact at-sea threat to ACAP species.

This information paper is provided to the eighth Meeting of Parties to share a brief overview of BirdLife International's recent initiatives in support of discussions between the ACAP Secretariat, Parties to the Agreement and Observers.

1.1. BirdLife's Marine Programme

BirdLife International's Marine Programme coordinates initiatives through a network of Partners and collaborating Non-Governmental Organisations to improve the conservation status of seabirds.

Over the past 20 years the initiatives conducted under the BirdLife Marine Programme have contributed to positive advances in global seabird conservation efforts. These include:

- Collaborative global assessments on the impacts of multiple cumulative threats to seabirds.
- The development and maintenance of the Seabird Tracking Database www.seabirdtracking.org which currently holds over 55,000 tracks across 168 species from 450 colonies thanks to submission of information from over 250 researchers.
- Provision of spatial analyses that support the design and designation of marine Important Bird Areas, Marine Protected Areas, and other marine spatial planning initiatives relevant to ACAP species.
- Ongoing support for a network of international practitioners that develop, demonstrate and promote Best Practice bycatch mitigation measures at the vessel level and at the national and regional policy level.
- Provision of technical support for fishery observers to facilitate the effective monitoring and reporting of the fisheries operating in areas that overlap with vulnerable seabirds.
- Contributions to experimental bycatch mitigation research that has shaped ACAP's Best Practice scientific advice.
- Regional advocacy that has supported the adoption of seabird conservation measures in all five tuna Regional Fishery Management Organisations (RFMOs).

- Seabird conservation conditions secured in fisheries undergoing certification through the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).
- Long-term engagement to strengthen both the policy adopted and implementation of the Convention on Migratory Species regarding avian policy matters.

This work has led to documented seabird bycatch reductions in multiple fleets, notably in fisheries that employ demersal trawl and longline gears. Ultimately the success or failure of these efforts must be measured by the recovery of seabird populations.

Current available evidence from long-term population studies indicates these efforts have been insufficient to halt population declines. In the following sections we reflect on the initiatives BirdLife is conducting in continued response to the conservation crisis of ACAP listed species.

2. CURRENT INITIATIVES

2.1. IUCN Red List

The BirdLife Red List team will commence work to update the global assessments for the world's seabirds between 2025 and 2029. The assessments will aim to collate new data on the population sizes and trends of the world's seabirds and will be reliant on new data being made available.

The updates to the ACAP species assessments will form an indispensable source for reassessing the high priority species listed under ACAP. While it is preferable that information is already analysed and published by relevant experts, BirdLife welcomes additional input from researchers to inform these assessments.

2.2. Regional scientific assessments

2.2.1 Fishery bycatch risk assessments

Through a collaboration with Global Fishing Watch, BirdLife is conducting an analysis to identify fleets that pose the greatest potential impact on seabirds within the Humboldt Current and adjacent High Seas. This analysis also aims to pinpoint key areas where seabirds and fishing activity overlap, using the latest available seabird tracking data and vessel activity data at fine temporal and spatial resolutions.

Since the project commenced in May 2024, key data gaps have been addressed in the Seabird Tracking Database thanks to collaborating researchers across the region (and beyond) resulting in the addition of over 87 new datasets.

A regional workshop was held in Lima to facilitate cross-country collaboration, identified gaps in fisheries and seabird data, and explore innovative methods such as integrating AIS and VMS with satellite imagery to address data gaps from artisanal fleets. Support from the ACAP Secretariat, Chile, Peru and Ecuador has been fundamental in the delivery of this work.

The Humboldt Current analysis will continue throughout 2025 and BirdLife hope to replicate this work across other regions and the high seas, subject to securing funding. The intention of this work is ultimately to inform our grass roots projects, regional advocacy, and supply chain engagement with a much clearer and finer scale understanding of the highest risk fishery operations and the companies associated with the vessels in those fleets. We believe these efforts will help direct the tools and resources developed by ACAP Working Groups and collaborators contributing to the objectives of the Agreement.

2.2.2 Sensitivity mapping

The Marine Science team at BirdLife is working with national Partners to develop offshore sensitivity maps to inform the strategic spatial planning of wind energy development in across multiple countries. Sensitivity maps can allow decision-makers to identify risks and suitable areas more efficiently, help to speed up existing planning processes, inform and corroborate environmental impact assessments once locations are selected for development, and avoid conflicts between stakeholders.

2.2.3 Regional bycatch assessments

BirdLife has also contributed to the recent publication[1] of a regional seabird bycatch evaluation in European fisheries and a global assessment of seabird bycatch in trawl fisheries. These publications help raise the profile of the cumulative impact of fisheries on seabird populations whose foraging distributions bring them into contact with multiple fisheries and are important to highlight the scale of the issue, and the connectivity of the human activities that impact these birds. Consultation with national experts significantly improved the necessary assumptions inherent in deriving the estimates.

In the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), BirdLife has been working with CCSBT Members and Secretariat to produce a Southern Hemisphere seabird bycatch risk assessment. This work will continue through 2025.

2.3. Grass roots conservation projects

Based on the work of the Albatross Task Force, BirdLife has supported the expansion of grass roots conservation projects in Europe, West Africa and the Pacific through a combination of initiatives that continue to strengthen data collection onboard vessels, demonstrate the efficacy of seabird bycatch mitigation measures and promote available Best Practice solutions through in-port outreach.

This approach has supported the adoption of seabird conservation measures within the framework of domestic legislation in multiple countries. Coordination of these efforts has helped share knowledge, strengthen local capacity and capability and promote collaborations across global oceans where seabirds exhibit an overlap with high-risk fisheries.

In recent years, these teams have worked with local stakeholders, companies and governments to conceptualise and develop technological solutions to improve the at-sea

[1] Ramírez, I., Mitchell, D., Vulcano, A., Rouxel, Y., Marchowski, D., Almeida, A., Arcos, J.M., Cortes, V., Lange, G., Morkūnas, J. and Oliveira, N., 2024. Seabird bycatch in European waters. *Animal Conservation*, 27(6), pp.737-752.

monitoring of seabird bycatch events and utilisation of mitigation measures as well as use of Artificial Intelligence to streamline data interpretation.

The continued collaboration with government agencies and institutions has been invaluable to the delivery of these initiatives. BirdLife notes the important progress in the collective capacity and capability that contributes to the objectives of the Agreement, thanks to the collaboration amongst Parties and Observers and welcomes the efforts made in this regard.

Given the improvements in data collection by fishery observers and electronic monitoring options, BirdLife seeks opportunities to help strengthen the effective reporting of information that will lead to collective evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures and inform improvements in our understanding of mitigation options.

2.4. Global and regional Advocacy

2.4.1. Regional Fishery Management Organisations

Based on the experience from the grass roots projects, the Marine Programme has continued to engage with tuna RFMOs to promote measures to support seabird bycatch reductions in fleets fishing for tuna and tuna-like resources, including improved collection and reporting of data on seabird bycatch and compliance with conservation measures.

Where reporting exists, BirdLife notes stark contradictions between what is reported and the reality that our grass roots teams observe at a vessel level, or from analytical approaches using remote sensing[2]. There are fundamental elements within the data collection, reporting and compliance processes of RFMOs that inhibit the effective management of pelagic longline fleets. Twenty years on from the first seabird bycatch mitigation regulations being adopted by tuna RFMOs, the continued failure to make progress in seabird bycatch reduction is of most serious concern.

The improvements that have been achieved were through a coordinated approach by ACAP Parties and Observers at RFMOs to lead intersessional processes and champion improvements to existing seabird conservation measures and more transparent reporting of compliance with current mitigation options. The most recent efforts in this regard in the Western Central Pacific Fishery Commission (WCPFC) and the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) led by New Zealand and the United Kingdom, respectively are commendable.

How ACAP Parties and Observers collaborate to replicate the good progress made in some national fleets into those fisheries that operate on the High Seas is the greatest challenge faced by the Agreement. Such collaboration must be scaled-up to strengthen the support in RFMOs to drive meaningful change. For our part in the process, BirdLife will review our objectives and plans for further engagement in the RFMOs during 2025 and look forward to working with the ACAP Parties and Working Groups to determine where our support is best placed to contribute to ACAP's RFMO strategy.

In the meantime, BirdLife is providing technical support as a non-implementing partner to the FAO Seabird Project which is led by the Commission on the Conservation of Southern Bluefin

[2] Kroodsma, D., Turner, J., Luck, C., Hochberg, T., Miller, N., Augustyn, P. and Prince, S., 2023. Global prevalence of setting longlines at dawn highlights bycatch risk for threatened albatross. *Biological Conservation*, *283*, p.110026.

Tuna (CCSBT). The progress made by CCSBT has been positive, and BirdLife congratulates the collaborations that are supporting a successful conclusion of the project and we encourage participation in the fourth element of the project on a global seabird bycatch risk assessment. Furthermore, we are supporting the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) on their Seabird Action Plan.

Finally, BirdLife continues to contribute to the collective messaging of the Tuna NGO Forum, raising the profile of seabirds within the wider advocacy efforts of the group. Streamlining and updating seabird conservation measures and achieving greater observer coverage (or electronic monitoring) to improve the transparency of fishing operations have been priority asks listed by the Forum over the past two years.

2.4.2. Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction

As a member of the High Seas Alliance, BirdLife has provided capacity through regional representatives to advocate for the rapid ratification of the United Nations Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Treaty.

Furthermore, BirdLife is contributing to the provision of scientific evidence to facilitate the identification of high priority sites for consideration as high seas marine protected areas under the Treaty once ratified. The delineation of the North Atlantic Current and Evlanov Sea basin marine protected area (NACES MPA), which has been designated by OSPAR Convention has provided an important experience in this regard. BirdLife have led work on the management framework for the site, and a management plan is now in the process of consultation.

2.4.3. Convention on Migratory Species

BirdLife engages in many different policy streams under CMS and its family of agreements. Since COP14 the Flyways Working Group is developing a draft Resolution and decision to expand the flyways approach to the oceans. The six flyways identified by BirdLife[3] provide a framework for tackling many of the global seabird threats in synergy while potentially strengthening conservation work across ocean basins. In the draft Resolution linkages to BBNJ are being encouraged, specifically regarding potential sites for MPAs in the High Seas. A policy gap analysis is currently under preparation by BirdLife, which will inform targeted activities in the draft Resolution and *inter alia* highlight where there are gaps in CMS accessions and relevant instruments that are pertinent to seabird conservation. BirdLife currently supports work led by New Zealand at the CMS Scientific Council on the draft proposal for addition of multiple gadfly petrel species (and some shearwaters) to the Appendices of the Convention, for consideration at COP16 in Brazil in 2026.

2.5. Seafood supply chain engagement

Through collaboration with Sustainable Fisheries Partnerships, BirdLife has contributed to the delivery of retail audits for supermarkets in the United Kingdom and United States, highlighting fisheries in the supply chain that represent a high-risk to seabird populations. This has led to commitments by several of the major retailers to require increased observer coverage of fisheries in their supply chain and improved transparency and reporting on the adoption of mitigation measures.

[3] https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/geb.70004

We have also conducted an in-depth evaluation of the version 3.0 of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification standard, and promoted stronger scoring criteria for Endangered, Threatened and Protected species under element II of the standard as well as minimum requirements in observer coverage of 30% in tuna fleets undergoing assessment. While imperfect, and with a lengthy implementation timeframe for tuna fisheries operating on the High Seas, the certification process continues to offer opportunities to improve data collection, make reporting more transparent and create an incentive for the adoption of seabird bycatch mitigation measures.

Our team has continued to provide support to the collective companies represented under the Seafood Business for Ocean Sustainability (SeaBOS), contributing to their Endangered, Threatened and Protected species strategy. However, transparency on how SeaBOS companies are meeting their commitments under the strategy has been underwhelming.

Finally, we recognise the tools and resources under development by Southern Seabird Solutions Trust and New Zealand's Department of Conservation represent an important contribution to inform engagement with the seafood supply chain, and BirdLife applauds the efforts to date and will promote the materials when they become available.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conservation crisis affecting the ACAP listed species is deepening, with persistent and steep declines in many populations. In the context of the timeframe of the Agreement, it is clear that good progress has been made by ACAP Parties in the experimental research to identify Best Practice bycatch mitigation measures, the introduction of regulations that require vessels to deploy these solutions and improvements in data collection.

However, the consistent practical adoption of Best Practice measures in many fisheries requires urgent attention, especially in pelagic longline fleets that operate in areas beyond national jurisdiction. The failure of Contracting Parties in tuna RFMOs to effectively monitor and transparently report on the bycatch of seabirds by their fleets, and on the efficacy of the mitigation measures that are in use confounds the issue.

The adoption of new regulations in New Zealand that represent ACAP Best Practice is extremely encouraging, but other nations must urgently follow this example or provide compelling evidence to demonstrate what alternative combination of measures can be used that will lead to the recovery of albatross, petrel and shearwater populations.

BirdLife remains committed to supporting efforts across the initiatives outlined in this observer report and welcomes the constructive input from the ACAP Secretariat, all ACAP Parties and Observers that continues to guide, inform and improve our work.

4. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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