

ICCAT: the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas or the International Commission for the Capture of Atlantic Turtles?

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The accidental capture and mortality of sea turtles in fisheries, known as bycatch, needs to be systematically addressed around the world to arrest major sea turtle declines. Bycatch of loggerheads (*Caretta caretta*) and leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is particularly acute in the world's expanding pelagic longline fleets which fish for tuna, swordfish and sharks. Regional fishery management organizations (RFMOs) are an excellent vehicle for promoting sea turtle bycatch reduction on a large scale, especially those RFMOs which have acknowledged the need for a more precautionary approach to the conservation of target and non-target species. Since September 2006, three RFMOs have adopted resolutions to begin to address the bycatch of sea turtles and promote the adoption of FAO's "Guidelines to Reduce Sea Turtle Mortality in Fishing Operations." Sea turtle scientists and advocates can play a valuable role in this initiative by working to ensure these resolutions are implemented and efforts to reduce bycatch continue.

In the Atlantic Ocean, estimates of longline interactions with sea turtles are on the order of 150,000-200,000 loggerheads and 30,000 to 60,000 leatherbacks each year. Significantly smaller numbers of other sea turtle species also are captured in these fisheries. Longline fisheries have been identified as a major culprit in the alarming and ongoing decline of nesting populations of American loggerheads in the Western Atlantic which, until recently, were flourishing in response to decades of conservation. Fishing regulated by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) has the greatest impact on sea turtles of all the RFMOs managing high seas fisheries in the Atlantic and thus should be a focus of efforts by the sea turtle conservation community to reduce bycatch. ICCAT currently has 43 members, including the European Community, United States, China, Japan, Korea, and Russia. Many ICCAT members participate in multiple RFMO agreements which ultimately may help to facilitate adoption of measures to reduce sea turtle bycatch within the relevant RFMOs.

A new initiative by the five global tuna commissions to address management measures and promote a more precautionary approach to target and non-target species has promise if the Commission Secretariats and members can be convinced to act. FAO participation in reducing sea turtle bycatch is highly desirable, but as a result of constraints with financing and staff, FAO's project to develop a Code of Conduct to reduce sea turtle bycatch has stalled. Recommendations on ways the sea turtle community can help to address these issues will be discussed.