

Freezer tuna vessels improve purse seine fishing selectivity

The Spanish freezer tuna sector promotes the implementation of new practices improving the selectivity of tuna purse seine fishing in order to minimize the impact on the marine ecosystem and to manage fisheries in a sustainable manner.

Represented by the National Association of Freezer Tuna Shipbuilders (ANABAC-OPTUC) and the Organization of Associated Producers of Large Freezer Tuna Freezers (OPAGAC-AGAC), with the collaboration of AZTI, the tuna sector has revised the code of good practices, which aims to improve the maneuvers made in purse-seine tuna fishing that is carried out in all the oceans of the world.

The Code, signed in 2012 and revised in 2015, is updated with the new developments achieved and suggested by the Review Committee and supervised by AZTI's scientific advisors to improve the objectives of responsible management of the Spanish tuna sector.

With respect to FADs, efforts have been made to identify and agree on an alternative design of these devices to minimize the impact on sensitive associated species, such as sharks and turtles. The progressive replacement of the FADs used by the fleet of OPAGAC-AGAC and ANABAC-OPTUC by new models of non-trapping FAD had as deadline the end of 2015 so that at present only the use of non-trapping FAD is allowed, through the use of FAD with certain agreed minimum characteristics and without harming each company that can develop and implement designs and materials that further minimize the impact on non-target species and impact on the marine environment.

Some of the highlighted good practices include the development and implementation of lower risk releasing techniques that optimize the survival of associated species, including the obligation to have material and specific equipment on board to facilitate release maneuvers.

In the case of sharks, the impact of their bycatch can be reduced by appropriate management and release protocols. With respect to sea turtles, following the recommendations of the four regional tuna fisheries organizations (RFOs) on this group of marine animals, the crews should by all means endeavor to release each and every turtle that may be entangled in objects or in the nets when closing the seine. With the approved practices, the sea turtle mortality in the purse-seine fleet of the two Spanish associations is practically nil.

Although the incidence of stingrays and manta rays in sets with objects is very low, a very simple and safe protocol is set for their release in case they appear. This procedure is based on trying to take the animals out of the seine, using the brailer with which the catch is approached, even if a certain amount of fishing is lost or, if this is not possible, with some other type of device or specific type of equipment that minimizes any possible harm.

As for whale sharks, most tuna ORPs have implemented measures that prohibit intentional fishing practices. However, these animals may be unintentionally surrounded by the net, since they often swim away from the surface, making it difficult to detect them before the set.

Despite the difficulty of the whale shark release maneuver, the crew will take all possible measures to avoid the damage to these animals and will carry out their release following the protocol developed by scientists and agreed in the program.

The results analyzed so far show that 100 per cent of whale sharks incidentally seined are released and survive without any problem after the release maneuver.

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