



MEDIA RELEASE

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The Republic of Korea moves to protect albatrosses

Cape Town, 2 July 2013 – Albatrosses are the most highly threatened group of birds on earth. Longline fishing plays a large role in that situation. BirdLife International, through the Global Seabird Programme and supported by the UK BirdLife partner, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, recently signed an agreement with the Korean government and Sajo Industries, a major Korean tuna fishing company. The agreement paves the way for an Albatross Task Force Instructor to join a Korean scientific observer, and conduct the first ever experimental research on a Korean Bluefin tuna longliner, into how to mitigate seabird bycatch more effectively.

BirdLife International established the Global Seabird Programme in 1997, in response to the crisis of longline fishing impacts on albatross populations. Longlining for tuna involves setting up to 3000 hooks a day, each on a long branchline and attached to a mainline >100 km long. Albatrosses and petrels in particular are attracted to fishing vessels, and become accidentally hooked and drown when they take the bait.

In 2004 BirdLife began its work with international tuna commissions, which govern the exploitation of tunas across ocean basins. In 2012, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) passed a resolution that dramatically strengthened requirements for tuna longliners operating in areas south of 25°S, where high densities of albatrosses and other threatened seabirds occur. The new measure specified just three options for longliners to use, all with scientifically proven benefits to reducing incidental seabird deaths; those measures are (1) setting lines at night, when albatrosses cannot easily see the baited hooks, (2) using a bird-scaring device known as a tori line, and (3) adding weights close to the hook to ensure that branchlines sink quickly.

At the time of the historic IOTC agreement, the Republic of Korea expressed its concerns about the practicality of implementing some of the measures. BirdLife South Africa's Dr Ross Wanless was present, and discussed how BirdLife's Albatross Task Force had successfully trialled new, safe measures for adding weights. "Our research, done during production fishing for tuna, showed that the Safe Lead did what it was

supposed to, namely drop the hooks out of the reach of seabirds very quickly and not cause safety or entanglement issues. Our research also showed that there was no impact whatsoever of adding weights to branchlines – fishermen caught as many target fish with our gear as without it.” said Dr Wanless.

In compliance with the IOTC resolution 12-06 on reducing the incidental bycatch of seabirds in longline fisheries, the Korean authority has just started sea trials, in collaboration with Birdlife International, to ensure the safety and practicality of these measures with a view of resolving their concerns and assuring the orderly implementation, including training for and adaptation to these measures. This represents an enormous breakthrough for all parties, as no environmental organisation has ever been invited onto an Asian tuna longliner before. After more than one year of planning and consultations, Sajo Industries, one of Korea’s leading tuna longline industries, volunteered to participate in the research trials. “The industry was concerned about the impacts of changing their fishing gear, but also recognised the need to be in compliance with the IOTC regulations. For this reason they agreed to support the collaborative research” explained the Korean authority. In early July a member of BirdLife’s Albatross Task Force, Leandro Tamini, will board the Sajo Industry tuna longliner in the southern Indian Ocean and commence trials. The results of the trials will be presented to scientists at the next Scientific Committee meeting of the IOTC to be held in the Republic of Korea later this year.

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Notes for the editor:

1. The mission of BirdLife South Africa is to promote the enjoyment, conservation, study and understanding of wild birds and their habitats.
2. BirdLife South Africa contact details: Lewis House, 239 Barkston Drive, Blairgowrie, P.O. Box 515, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, Tel. +27-11-7891122, Fax. +27-11-7895188, e-mail address: info@birdlife.org.za, website: www.birdlife.org.za
3. Details of the IOTC are available from <http://www.iotc.org/en/>
4. The Amsterdam Albatross *Diomedea amsterdamensis* is one of three albatross species listed as “Critically Endangered”. It is the most highly threatened seabird species on earth, with a total breeding population of just 25 pairs. It breeds exclusively on Amsterdam Island in the South Indian Ocean. The more than 75% of its time at sea is spent in IOTC areas with high longline fishing effort.
5. Southern Bluefin tuna is one of the most highly valued fish species in the world, with this year’s ceremonial new year auction in Tokyo setting a new record price for a single fish – \$1.8 million. Prices for individual fish on regular auctions will often exceed \$10 000 per fish. Catches of this species fall under the Commission for the Conservation of Bluefin Tuna. However, this commission does not have conservation measures, and requires that when fishing for Bluefin tuna, vessels must comply with the conservation measures of the relevant ocean basin, in the case of the Indian Ocean, the IOTC regulations apply.
6. Longline vessels targeting tunas set extremely long lines with thousands of branched lines with hook attached. Seabirds, especially albatrosses and petrels, are attracted to the baited hooks. If they get hooked while scavenging baits, they get pulled under as the longline sinks to the fishing depth, and drown. Although scientists and conservationists

have been aware of the problem for 20 years, RFMOs have only in the last few years begun to implement measures to address the incidental mortality.

7. The most widely used technique to avoid seabird bycatch is the tori or bird-scaring line, invented by a Japanese longline fishing skipper. Research from South Africa, amongst other areas, shows that two or three measures in combination, including tori lines, weighting lines so the bait sinks out of reach of seabirds quickly, and setting at night when most seabirds don't forage, is the most effective at reducing seabird bycatch.