

BS RAC response to the Commission consultation paper on an EU Action Plan for Reducing Incidental Catches of Seabirds in Fishing Gears

Introduction

The Baltic Sea Regional Advisory Council (BS RAC) is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on an EU Action Plan for Reducing Incidental Catches of Seabirds in Fishing Gears. We would also like to thank the Commission for granting the BS RAC an extension to the timeframe to produce a response.

The BS RAC supports the general concept of a plan that helps to meet international agreements, the requirements in EU directives and the CFP, but that does not confuse the situation for fishermen or increase detailed top-down regulations. The BS RAC is of the opinion that the Commission should try to include issues of bird bycatch in fisheries policies in general, as well as in long-term management plans where relevant. The local/regional perspective must be strong in any new legislation. Local adaptation must be allowed and stakeholder involvement should be open.

BS RAC comments in summary

1. Problems of bird bycatch are not evenly spread across the Baltic. Some areas have problems, while others have very small problems with bycatch of birds. This fact should be reflected in the Action Plan and it is an absolute must that any such plan allows for regional adaptation. We agree that more data and knowledge are very important in order to identify and illustrate where problems exist, and the fishermen and RACs should be a part of this work.
2. Although more data may be needed, there is still sufficient knowledge about problem areas where mitigation can and should start. Several options for mitigation efforts are already available and tried elsewhere.
3. We think that the data collection on bird bycatch should be included within the EU Data Collection Framework.
4. All efforts must be taken to ensure that recreational fishing is also included in assessments and naturally also targeted for actions.
5. It is important to keep focus on both gill nets and long lines as they both have proven problems with bycatch. However gear type should not be a limiting issue; the level of bycatch in a particular fishery is what should be the most important factor.
6. We support the idea of having EU overarching targets and reference points for bird populations in specified areas when actions must be taken to improve the situation in relation to the conservation status of the population. The more detailed efforts to meet these targets etc. should be handled at a local/regional level and for each fishery.

Specific comments to some of the proposed actions in the Consultation paper

Field of Action 1 – Assessing the interactions between seabirds and fishing gears in EU waters

Problems with bird bycatch are not evenly spread across the Baltic Sea. There are areas that may have problems, such as the Southern Baltic Sea¹, while others may have virtually no or few problems, and this should be taken into consideration in a plan to reduce bycatch. It is an absolute must to allow for regional adaptation in any such plan.

One key issue is to determine when bird bycatch is a problem and when it is not. Limits for acceptable levels of bycatch need to be defined, preferably on an area, species and fishery specific basis. To do this there must be improved knowledge and data. This means getting more information about the actual catches of birds by the fishery. For this reason we think that the data collection on bird bycatch should be included within the EU Data Collection framework.

In areas that do have problems, calculated to have bycatch of birds by the thousands, it is important to prioritise the species of birds that are most threatened and to make sure that efforts to reduce the problem target these species first. Moreover, any studies and improved knowledge needed should focus on these species first.

All efforts must be taken to ensure that recreational fishing is also included in assessments and naturally also targeted for actions. This is particularly important in the Baltic Sea since the recreational (simply defined as everything outside commercial, licensed fishing) fishing is widespread and occurs in shallow coastal areas, constituting important feeding grounds, and in areas with seasonal bird concentrations.

Field of Action 2 – Identification and implementation of mitigation measures in EU waters

Research has shown that certain types of birds have a greater risk of getting caught in fishing gear. Diving birds are about 10 times more likely to be caught in fishing nets than long-tailed ducks, according to a study from 2002.² Also the type of gear (mesh size, net colour) and at what depth the gear is placed have proven to be important. Larger mesh size and nets in shallow areas have a higher

¹ Zydellis; Bellebaum; Osterblom; Vetemaa; Schirmeister; Stipniece; Dagys; Eerden; Garthe (2009). Bycatch in gillnet fisheries – An overlooked threat to waterbird populations. *Biological Conservation* 142, 1269-1281

² Zydellis; Bellebaum; Osterblom; Vetemaa; Schirmeister; Stipniece; Dagys; Eerden; Garthe (2009). Bycatch in gillnet fisheries – An overlooked threat to waterbird populations. *Biological Conservation* 142, 1269-1281

bycatch rate, and mitigation must focus on finding ways to either change gear or move the fishing elsewhere.

Mitigation efforts to reduce bycatch must also focus on problems with long lines, as this gear type is known to sometimes cause a high level of bird bycatch. However, there are ways to reduce bycatch here as well. A study carried out in Estonia in 2009 shows that a change in gear from nets to long lines has not lead to reduced catches of fish, but has in fact increased the cod catch and at the same time significantly reduced bird bycatch. The same study also tested seal safe gear and herring traps with good results.³

We support the idea of having EU overarching targets and reference points for specified areas when actions must be taken to improve the situation. Moreover, the plan of action should list areas that are not considered as problem areas since bycatch is low or non-existent. More detailed efforts to meet these targets etc. should be handled at a local/regional level and for each fishery

Field of Action 4 – Mitigation Research

Further research in this area is certainly important. There is, however, somewhat more knowledge than the Commission consultation document implies. It is not really true that currently no best practice mitigation measures have been identified for gillnets. While there are indeed no formal guidelines, restrictions or certifications yet, there is definitely enough knowledge to define and enforce concrete mitigation measures in many sea areas, especially in the Baltic. There is no reason to wait for further research results before putting them in force in the known problem areas in the southern Baltic.

Field of Action 5 – Education, training and outreach

There is already a great deal of knowledge among the fishermen about where there are problems and how to avoid them. We believe education and training of fishermen are of prime importance, for example on how best to handle birds that are still alive. Pilot projects could help to identify suitable approaches for the future.

Secondary to the education and training of fishermen come information and education of the public with respect to the "better value" of sustainably caught fish. A greater understanding about how and where fish is caught is wanted, and consumers should have this information.

³ Markus Vetemaa and Linas Ložys, 2009 Estonian Marine Institute, University of Tartu LIFE Nature project "Marine Protected Areas in the Eastern Baltic Sea" Reference number: LIFE 05 NAT/LV/000100