

Addressing fisheries-related mortality of albatrosses and petrels – mainly the incidental capture of birds on hooks set by longline fishing vessels – is a priority of the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP). The Australian Government meets its obligations to achieve this through the *Threat Abatement Plan for the incidental catch (or by-catch) of seabirds during oceanic longline fishing operations*, under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act).

# Planning to protect albatrosses and petrels

The Threat Abatement Plan was prepared in response to the listing of longline fishing as a Key Threatening Process under the EPBC Act. The plan aims to significantly reduce the bycatch of seabirds during oceanic longline operations in the Australian Fishing Zone at current fishing levels.

In practical terms this means:

- supporting research and development of new mitigation measures;
- ensuring (through legislation and education) that effective mitigation measures are used;
- collecting and analysing data to assess the effectiveness of existing measures and improve the knowledge of seabird–longline interactions; and
- educating the community, stakeholder groups, longline operators and international forums.

The Threat Abatement Plan targets areas where current research shows interactions between longline fishing

operations and seabirds is most likely. It applies to all such fishing operations in the Australian Fishing Zone (see map), with mitigation measures mandatory in areas south of 30°. Until recently it was believed that at-risk bird species seldom ventured north of this range. However, the limit has now been extended in response to a number of seabird captures during longlining operations north of 30°, and satellite tracking research that shows some seabird species have larger foraging ranges than previously thought. Mitigation measures will soon be applied by all longline vessels operating south of 25°.

Key mitigation measures proposed under the Threat Abatement Plan aim to minimise the interaction between baited hooks and foraging seabirds by making the baits unavailable or unattractive. They include:

- **Night setting and area/seasonal closures**

Setting of longlines is restricted to the hours between dusk and dawn, when many seabirds do

not forage. In appropriate circumstances, fishing areas are closed during times or at locations where seabird–foraging activity is high.

- **Weighting of main lines and/or branch lines**

Weight is added to fishing lines to ensure that baited hooks sink rapidly out of the reach of seabirds.

- **Single or twin bird-scaring lines**

Bird-scaring or ‘tori’ lines suspended over the area in which baits are set and hauled, can substantially reduce interactions with some bird species.

- **Offal management strategies**

Strategies to reduce the bird-attracting practice of discarding offal and fish scraps include discharging offal at times other than line setting and hauling, and discharging offal from a point that minimises its availability to birds.

Other mitigation measures include puncturing the swim bladders of bait and thawing bait to speed sinking, using

Black-browed albatross, *Thalassarche melanophrys*



The Threat Abatement Plan applies to all longline fisheries in the Australian Fishing Zone, with mitigation measures expected to be mandatory south of 25° soon. The fisheries indicated on the map are areas where seabirds are most threatened.





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A range of conservation measures and changes to longline fishing practices are helping to protect petrels and albatrosses, such as these black-browed albatrosses (*Thalassarche melanophrys*), from threatening processes.

underwater bait-setting devices, and using devices such as streamers to protect the catch from birds as it is being hauled aboard.

As our understanding and ability to mitigate fisheries-seabirds interaction grows, we will be able to move towards the goal of achieving zero bycatch of seabirds. By developing and refining bycatch mitigation methods, Australia can contribute to the implementation of the ACAP by providing other 'range' states (states through which albatrosses and petrels range) with examples of good practice, and encouraging the uptake and implementation of these measures across the entire area of the birds' distribution.

The current seabird bycatch Threat Abatement Plan, introduced in 1998, is under review. A key aim for 'version two' is to ensure there is flexibility to adequately respond to changing circumstances – for example, if seabird mortality in a particular area of the Australian Fishing Zone temporarily exceeds levels prescribed under the Threat Abatement Plan.

All of the ACAP-listed species that breed in Australia or forage within the Australian Fishing Zone are targeted by a recovery plan, which was introduced in 2001. The plan sets out a number of actions required to achieve its objectives. These include addressing seabird bycatch through the Threat Abatement Plan and other priority actions identified under the ACAP – in particular ensuring the protection of albatross and petrel breeding sites. Published Threat Abatement Plan and Recovery Plan documents are available through the Department of Environment and Heritage website.

*Threat abatement plan:*

<<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/tap/longline/legislative.html>>

*Recovery plan:*

<<http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/recovery/albatross/>>

—CATHY BRUCE

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# Antarctic tourists support seabird conservation

The International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) is a 69-member organisation dedicated to sustainable private-sector tourism in Antarctica and the subantarctic. Each year more than 20 000 tourists visit Antarctica with IAATO, with most people travelling by cruise ship. As part of their onboard entertainment, passengers are given a series of lectures by ship staff on subjects ranging from Antarctic clothing to international law and the Antarctic Treaty. In 2002 the AAD provided IAATO with a lecture titled 'seabird conservation in fisheries'. The lecture informs passengers about seabird mortality occurring in longline and trawl fisheries operating in the southern hemisphere, and raises money for conservation efforts. Donations are sent to Birds Australia, the Melbourne-based partner to Birdlife International. The lecture and the fund raising drive fall within the gambit of Birdlife's Save-the-Albatross campaign, a global initiative to reduce the number of albatrosses and petrels that die from interactions with fishing gear.

Each year the availability of funds raised during the previous summer's cruise season is advertised on the internet and Birdlife's web site. Applicants are invited to submit proposals addressing three themes: actions to reduce seabird mortality in fisheries, ecological research on fisheries-vulnerable seabird populations and political actions that underpin conservation efforts. Proposals are assessed by a 10-person advisory group consisting of specialists from Argentina, Chile, Falkland Islands, UK, Spain, USA, New Zealand and Australia. The winning applicants are notified of their award in August each year and funds are distributed via Birds Australia in September. This coincides with the commencement of the breeding season for southern hemisphere seabirds, when many sea-based and land-based conservation projects are likely to commence.

In 2002, the first year of the lecture, passengers donated US\$5000 to the campaign. This grew to US\$20 000 in 2003 and US\$54 000 in 2004. The advisory group has used these funds to support seabird conservation projects in South Africa, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay, the Falkland Islands and New Zealand. Projects include: the development and testing of longlines that sink quickly and minimise the incidence of seabird capture; development of devices to prevent fatal collision by seabirds with trawler net cables; and assessment of seabird mortality levels in critical southern hemisphere fisheries.

Projects such as these directly and indirectly help reduce the number of seabirds that die needlessly each year in the world's oceans. Passengers onboard IAATO vessels have contributed substantially to efforts to make fisheries more seabird-safe and are to be commended for their continued generosity and support for this worthwhile initiative.

More information is available on the Birds Australia website: <<http://www.birdsaustralia.com.au/albatross/intro.html>>

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Biologists Jeffrey Mangel and Joanna Shigueto were recipients of IAATO-derived funds in 2003 and 2004. Jeffrey and Joanna work for the Asociación Pro Delphinus (APD), a non-profit group headquartered in Lima, Peru. APD's charter is to implement an integrated approach to marine fauna conservation in Peru, a country where few marine conservation programs have so far been initiated. Jeffrey and Joanna have used their IAATO awards to determine the level of seabird bycatch in artisanal longline fisheries in Peru and to educate fishermen on the use of seabird-friendly fishing practices.

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