



*These grey-headed albatrosses at South Georgia are one of the species that has benefited from actions taken by CCAMLR to protect Southern Ocean seabirds.*

GRAHAM ROBERTSON

## GOOD NEWS FOR SOUTHERN OCEAN SEABIRDS

Over the last 15 years large numbers of seabirds have been killed by longline and trawl fishing vessels operating throughout the southern hemisphere.

Some of the worst fatalities have occurred in longline fisheries for Patagonian toothfish which concentrates around many of the sub-Antarctic islands where seabirds assemble to breed. Some seabird populations have been ravaged, none more so than albatrosses at South Georgia which have decreased by 30% in the last 20 years. The impact is alarming – in 1997, shortly after the commencement of systematic data collection by the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), nearly 6000 seabirds were killed in the legal fishery at South Georgia alone. White-chinned petrels in the Indian Ocean sector have fared just as badly: since 2002 about 40 000 white-chins have been killed on longlines in the Kerguelen and Crozet toothfish fisheries.

In spite of these scenarios, not all news about the impact of fisheries on seabirds is bad and once in a while something really good happens. At its 2006 meeting, CCAMLR reported that only two

seabirds were killed by legal toothfish longliners in CCAMLR regulated waters. This estimate excludes the Kerguelen region where mortality, though reduced, remains high despite continuing efforts, but includes all other toothfish longlining in CCAMLR. The low number of fatalities is a remarkable achievement, especially in light of the fishing effort in 2006 when nearly 33 million hooks were set for toothfish.

Given the magnitude of the previous mortality, the size of the hooking effort and the difficulty in changing entrenched fishing practices, how has it been possible for CCAMLR to reduce seabird mortality to such a low level over such a vast area of the world's oceans? In its 25-year history CCAMLR has matured into the most effective regional fisheries management organisation in the world in the achievement of ecologically sustainable fishing practices. Key to CCAMLR's success is the numerous specialist working groups and the breadth of issues they cover, a plethora of conservation measures designed to protect all components of the marine environment, the presence of scientific observers on all longline vessels and, most critically, the development of the political willingness to enact seasonal fishery closures if deemed necessary for conservation. The strategic closure of the South Georgia fishery in summer (when seabirds are breeding) in the early 2000s, and gradual improvement in compliance with conservation measures by longline operators

in CCAMLR waters in general, were responsible for achieving the low seabird mortality in 2006.

The credit for this success is due to the 24 member states that constitute CCAMLR, especially people in the Incidental Mortality Associated with Fishing and the Fish Stock Assessment working groups. These working groups are responsible for the initiatives that ultimately shape seabird conservation outcomes, and include people responsible for carrying proposals forward to the Scientific Committee, and then to the Commission which is the decision-making forum of CCAMLR. Many working group members have attended the month-long CCAMLR meeting (held annually in Hobart) for years, working tirelessly through the negotiations that are commonplace in the multi-national approach to fisheries management, to achieve fisheries with a low impact on seabirds and other aspects of the marine environment.

While there is much work to be done to improve the situation in the Kerguelen fishery and to conserve South Georgia albatrosses, which continue to decrease due to mortality in fisheries to the north of the CCAMLR region, the 2006 statistics for CCAMLR waters provide optimism that further efforts will ensure improved conservation of these iconic sea birds.

Graham Robertson,  
*Southern Ocean Ecosystems programme*