



**SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE
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Safe handling and release guidelines for seabirds

WCPFC-SC15-2019/EB-WP-10

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Introduction

Bycatch in pelagic longline fisheries is one of the greatest threats to seabirds, particularly albatrosses and petrels. Species of particular conservation concern caught by WCPFC fisheries include the Antipodean wandering albatross (*Diomedea antipodensis antipodensis*), black petrel (*Procellaria parkinsoni*), flesh-footed shearwater (*Ardenna carneipes*) and Campbell Island mollymawk (*Thalassarche impavida*).

Some seabirds caught on longline hooks, or in fishing nets, are retrieved alive at the vessel on hauling. In some fishing operations a substantial proportion of birds may be alive. For example, in the New Zealand domestic pelagic longline fishery 36% of observed seabird captures during the 2016/17 fishing year were alive when hauled to the vessel (Abraham & Thompson 2015). Handling and releasing live-caught seabirds in a way that maximises their chances of long-term survival will, together with the implementation of effective seabird bycatch mitigation measures, help reduce the impact of pelagic longline fisheries bycatch on these vulnerable seabirds.

During discussions on safe release guidelines at SC14 (Agenda Item 6.2.3), and in relation to the Workshop on WCPFC Bycatch Mitigation Problem-Solving (reported to SC14 in SC14-EB-WP-12), it was noted that guidelines for release of live-caught seabirds would be helpful to reduce impact. This paper provides such guidelines.

Best practice, and existing advice

The Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels (ACAP <https://acap.aq/>) provides a range of advice, guidelines and resources aimed at furthering the conservation of albatrosses and petrels. This includes resources specifically targeted at fishers and fishery managers, developed with input from expert practitioners in both seabird biology and fisheries management. These resources include guidelines for hook removal from bycaught seabirds. ACAP is also currently developing a guide to removing entangled seabirds from nets, which will be relevant to purse seine fisheries.

The guidelines for hook removal from seabirds are available in two formats, a two page A4 format (<https://acap.aq/en/resources/acap-conservation-guidelines/2177-hook-removal-from-seabirds-guide-a4/file>) and a single page A3 format (<https://acap.aq/en/resources/acap-conservation-guidelines/2178-hook-removal-from-seabirds-guide-a3/file>). The A4 format is provided as Appendix 1. This advice includes practical advice on the following elements of safe handling and release of seabirds:

- The materials required for safe handling and release – a “release kit”
- Bringing the bird on board carefully to avoid any further damage/injury
- Safe restraint of the bird to avoid further damage/injury
- Methods to remove the hook, or reduce the amount of trailing line
- Care for exhausted and/or water logged birds
- Release of the bird to avoid any further damage/injury

A number of recommendations regarding the potential development of safe seabird handling guidelines were made by participants at the WCPFC Bycatch Mitigation Problem-Solving Workshop (reported to SC14 in SC14-EB-WP-12). The ACAP guidelines specifically address a number of these recommendations:

- Handling birds of different sizes: the ACAP guidelines highlight different techniques for large birds
- Illustrations: these have been refined to be realistic
- When to remove or leave hook: different scenarios are covered including both removal of hook, or cutting line when hook is fully swallowed
- How to handle birds: the correct ways to hold the bird are illustrated
- Listing required equipment: this is included as a “release kit”

The advice provided by ACAP represents best practice for the safe handling and release of live-caught seabirds in pelagic longline fisheries.

Recommendations

We recommend that SC15 consider the ACAP guidelines for the safe release of seabirds and recommend that the Commission:

- note that there is an opportunity to enhance survival of bycaught seabirds by implementing safe handling procedures.
- agree that the ACAP best practice on hook removal from seabirds be adopted as seabird safe handling guidelines across all WCPFC longline, and other hook fisheries.
- note that ACAP are developing guidance for safe handling and release of live birds from nets which should be reviewed by SC16 for possible adoption across purse-seine fisheries.

References

Abraham E. R., Thompson F. N. (2015). Captures of all birds in surface longline fisheries, in the New Zealand Exclusive Economic Zone, during the 2016–17 fishing year. Retrieved from <https://psc.dragonfly.co.nz/2018v1/released/birds/surface-longline/all-vessels/eez/2016-17/>, Jul 5, 2019.

Appendix 1. Hook release guidelines developed by the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels

HOOK REMOVAL FROM SEABIRDS

Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels

Release Kit



Towel /
Blanket



Pliers /
Bolt cutters



Net



Box / Bin

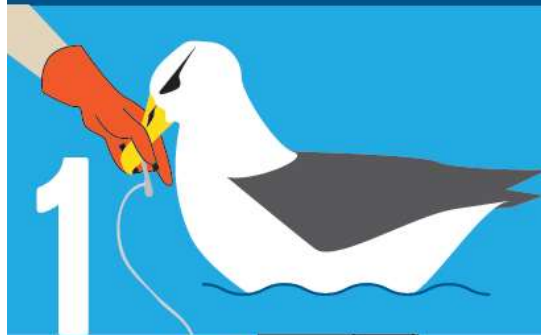


Gloves



A C A P

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Bring bird aboard

If possible, slow or stop hauling and slow or stop vessel to release line tension. If practical, use a landing net to lift small birds on board, otherwise retrieve the bird on the line as safely and quickly as possible. When within reach, grab it by the bill. **Never grab the wing.**



Restrain bird and hold securely

Carefully fold the wings into the bird's body. Wrap the bird in a towel/blanket (not too tightly) and cover the eyes if possible. Make sure the bird doesn't come into contact with oil on deck.

For large birds that you cannot manage under your arm, restrain the bird securely between your legs without squeezing. Hold the bill gently shut but **do not cover the nostrils.**



If the bird vomits, loosen hold on bill so the bird does not suffocate.

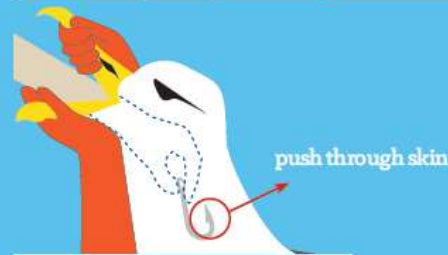


Remove the hook

If the hook is visible

Use pliers (or bolt cutters for large hooks) to cut through the hook shaft (or to flatten the barb). Pull the hook back out of the bird.

OR



If the hook is swallowed and removal is possible

A second person can find the hook position externally by feeling along the neck or internally by following the line to the hook. Gently force the tip of the hook so that it bulges under the skin of the bird (for **large birds**, this may be easier if you reach down the bird's throat and hold the hook). If you can get a good grip on the hook, push the tip of the hook through the skin and remove.

Never try to extract the hook backwards.



If hook removal is not possible

Either because removing the hook will cause further damage to the bird or the hook is too deeply ingested, cut the line as close to the hook as possible and leave the hook in the bird.



If the bird is exhausted or waterlogged

If possible, place in a **ventilated** box or bin in a quiet, dry, shaded place to recover for an hour or two. Otherwise, contain bird in a quiet dry area, **away from oil**. The bird is ready for release when the feathers are dry, bird is alert and able to stand.



Release the bird

If the bird is strong and mostly dry, release it onto the water (but clear of the vessel) immediately after hook removal. Having again first grabbed the bill, lift and slowly lower the bird onto the water letting go of the bill last.

Where birds cannot be lowered directly onto water, lift and release the bird from the side of the vessel into the wind letting go of the bill at the same time. The bird may remain on the water for some time after release.



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