

High-seas heroes saving albatrosses from extinction: A decade of success

On World Oceans Day, an international team of experts that works to prevent seabirds getting killed incidentally in fishing lines is celebrating ten years of conservation success.

Albatrosses are one of the most threatened groups of birds in the world. Every year, an estimated 100,000 albatrosses are incidentally killed on longline fishing hooks and trawl cables. In the past, up to 30,000 per year were killed in Namibia alone. Fishery mortality is the main driver of albatross population declines, and 15 of the 22 species of albatross are threatened with extinction.

In Namibia, the nutrient-rich waters of the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem run from south to north along the entire coastline and reach the surface through permanent upwellings at intervals along the coast. These waters are the bedrock for one of the world's most productive capture fisheries, with annual marine landings valued at an estimated N\$7 billion. Accordingly, fisheries play a major role in the Namibian economy, contributing around 4.5% to GDP (Namibian Fisheries Policy draft 2015).

The fishing industry is based in the main port of Walvis Bay on the central coast, with some vessels also at Lüderitz in the south. There are about 20 different commercial fish species consisting primarily of small pelagic species (pilchard, anchovy and horse mackerel) and lobster along the shallower inshore waters on the continental shelf, as well as large pelagic species (adult mackerel and demersal hake) and other deep-sea species (monkfish, sole and crab) in the waters further offshore. Other commercial marine species include

John Dory, angelfish, shark, swordfish, kob, barbel, squid, cardinal fish, Cape gurnard, grenadier, Jacopever, chub mackerel, octopus and mullet.

The problematic link between fisheries and seabird mortality is that the seabirds have learnt that they can catch a quick meal from the baited hooks when they are deployed during setting operations on longline vessels, but often become hooked themselves and drown. Discharge from vessels after processing their catch also attracts seabirds and can lead to entanglement in cables and drowning.

Fishery mortality has driven a steep reduction in albatross populations, but this has been exacerbated by the bird's late maturity and monogamism. These very special birds can live up to 60 years, mate for life and start reproducing at the relatively late age of 5-10 years. An albatross couple produce only one egg, which is incubated for up to three months, one of the longest incubation periods of any bird. It can take some time for the chick to fledge, so a year may pass by between laying the egg and the chick leaving the nest. Killing one bird also means that the partner will stop nursing the chick, resulting in the death of the chick. The partner may take years to find another mate.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and BirdLife International launched the Albatross Task Force (ATF) in 2006 to reduce the

number of albatross and petrel deaths from fishing and, ultimately, to improve the conservation status of threatened seabirds. ATF staff members have spent over 5,000 days at sea to demonstrate how to keep seabirds off the hook. ATF recommendations are based on rigorous scientific testing, working side by side with the fishing industry.

The ATF was established in Namibia eight years ago, supported by the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF), and has achieved success in raising awareness of the issue and introducing mitigation measures. The ATF initially monitored the fishing fleet to collect data and highlight the significant bycatch of seabirds. The findings were then presented to government organisations and the fishing industry and the ATF made suggestions for mitigation measures, which are now being implemented.

Measures include the use of bird-scaring lines, setting baited hooks under the cover of darkness and weighting hook lines to help them sink rapidly, out of reach of foraging birds. A bird-scaring line is a simple plastic rope with streamers fixed to it, which is attached to a buoy and dragged behind the vessels. The streamers flap in the wind, irritating the birds and scaring them away from the longlines and hooks.

A new report shows that since its launch in 2006, the Albatross Task Force has been extremely successful. Albatross bycatch has been reduced by 99% in

the South African hake trawl fishery and experimental trials demonstrate that it would be possible to reduce bycatch by more than 85% in six other fisheries where regulations that require the use of bird-safe methods are now in place. In Namibia, the experimental use of bird-scaring lines resulted in even higher success rates. ATF records show that, if installed properly, zero seabird deaths and very low interaction rates with trawl cables are possible.

Initially, many decision-makers in the fishing industry were reluctant to install the bird-scaring lines, since it was presumed that this would reduce the efficiency of the operations. To say the least, the opposite is the case: every

baited hook that does not catch a bird is available to catch a fish, increasing income. Furthermore, the bird-scaring lines require very little investment (as little as N\$ 2000 per vessel) and last about 6 months.

Through presentations to government and industry, the ATF and the NNF helped update the Namibian National Plan of Action – Seabirds (NPOA-S) and the Namibian Fisheries policy. Consequently, new regulations were introduced to the Fisheries Act and gazetted in November 2015, making the use of seabird-scaring lines mandatory. The ATF has driven the adoption of mitigation measures in Namibia's fishing fleet. Currently, 74% of demersal trawlers have bird-scaring lines

installed and 79% of demersal longline vessels have bird-scaring lines, with at least 50% of their longline weights meeting requirements. The challenge now is to ensure widespread compliance and demonstrate significant reductions in bycatch across the fleet.

Oliver Yates, ATF Programme Manager, said:

"Albatrosses are magnificent seabirds and it's a truly breath-taking experience to see them at sea. They are among the largest flying birds and have the largest wingspans of any bird in the world, reaching up to an incredible 3.5m. Albatrosses spend most of their lives at sea and only come onto land to breed. As a



third of albatrosses breed in UK Overseas Territories, it is our duty to protect these threatened birds and encourage other governments to do the same whilst in their waters. “The ATF have made some great achievements over the last ten years but we still need to ensure all vessels in all fleets are effectively implementing the mitigation measures recommended for the fishery, and that this becomes sustainable in the long-term.”

Patricia Zurita, CEO at Birdlife International, said:

“By saving albatrosses from accidental death behind fishing boats, we are saving one of the most threatened groups of birds from extinction. BirdLife has proven this works with a decade of research, refining solutions and working with fishermen. Now it is time to expand this model worldwide so we can ensure no bird is needlessly caught by fisheries ever again in the future.” Large reductions in seabird bycatch have been achieved where governments have supported the adoption of regulations and the ATF has demonstrated that similar reductions of albatross deaths are possible in other target fisheries if these mitigation methods are put into practice. This requires improving levels of compliance through national fishery monitoring initiatives.

Clemens Naomab, ATF Instructor in Namibia, said:

“When you find out you are saving 30,000 birds a year, it’s a wonderful experience. It’s worth all the days of seasickness! “Fishermen don’t want to catch seabirds, it is accidental. The simple changes we introduce on boats and in policy not only eliminate this bycatch, but are good for fishermen too. I don’t see another way that would work better than what we are doing now.”

- The Albatross Task Force (ATF), a global team of experts led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and BirdLife International, was launched ten years ago to reduce the number of albatrosses and petrels accidentally killed by fisheries in the Southern Ocean. The Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF) has been the local Namibian partner to RSPB since 2008 and provides experts for the international ATF team in order to implement this project for seabird conservation. Mitigation measures have been tried and tested to reduce the number of incidents caused by vessels during fishing activities.
- The ATF in Namibia has been highly successful, driving the adoption of mitigation measures in the fleet. ATF has shown that when fishing vessels have implemented mitigation measures, through the introduction of bird-scaring lines, there has been zero seabird bycatch.
- NNF and the ATF project team helped implement the Namibian National Plan of Action – Seabirds (NPOA-S). Based on a revised Namibian fishery policy, new regulations were introduced to the Fisheries Act and gazetted in November 2015, making the use of seabird-scaring lines mandatory for the fishing industry.
- The ATF and NNF are continuing to work with the Government of Namibia (Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources) and the fishing industry to ensure that all target fleets are complying with the recommended mitigation methods and regulations now in place.



Founded in 1987, the Namibia Nature Foundation (NNF) is one of the largest non-governmental organisations (NGO) targeting conservation and sustainable development in Namibia. The primary aims of the NNF are to promote sustainable development, the conservation of biological diversity and natural ecosystems, and the wise and ethical use of natural resources for the benefit of all Namibians, both present and future. www.nnf.org.na

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) is the UK’s largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home. Together with its partners, the RSPB protects threatened birds and wildlife, so our towns, coast and countryside will teem with life once again. The RSPB plays a leading role in BirdLife International, a worldwide partnership of nature conservation organisations. www.rspb.org.uk / www.birdlife.org

In 2006, the RSPB and Birdlife International launched the Albatross Task Force (ATF), the world’s first international team of bycatch mitigation instructors. The ATF is a BirdLife International project funded by the RSPB and supported through a network of collaborating non-governmental organisations.

