

INTER-AMERICAN TROPICAL TUNA COMMISSION

MINUTES OF THE 59TH MEETING

La Jolla, California, USA

October 28-31, 1997

The 59th meeting of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) was held in La Jolla, California, USA, on October 28-31, 1997.

1. Opening of the meeting

The meeting was called to order by Dr. James Joseph, Director of the IATTC, on October 28 at 10:25 a.m. He called for nominations for Chairman. A motion was made and seconded that a representative of the United States serve as Chairman. This motion was approved, and Mr. Brian J. Hallman was appointed to serve in this capacity.

Mr. Hallman said that the purpose of the meeting was to negotiate a legally-binding agreement which would conform with the Declaration of Panama, made at the 30th intergovernmental meeting, held in Panama, Republic of Panama, in October 1995. He pointed out that a considerable amount of work had been done in preparation for the present meeting.

He announced that he was pleased to report that El Salvador had deposited its instrument of adherence to the IATTC on October 28, 1997. He then called for introductions. The heads of the delegations of Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, France, Japan, Panama, the United States, Vanuatu, and Venezuela introduced themselves and their delegations. This was followed by introductions of the delegations of Belize, Colombia, Mexico, the Netherlands Antilles, the Republic of China, Spain, the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT), the European Union (EU), the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the International Whaling Commission (IWC), the Organización Latinoamericana de Desarrollo Pesquero (OLDEPESCA), the American Cetacean Society, the Asociación Empresarial Pesquera de América Latina (ALEP), the Center for Marine Conservation, the Defenders of Wildlife, the Earth Island Institute, the Fishermen's Coalition, the Fundación para la Defensa de la Naturaleza (FUDENA), Greenpeace International, the Humane Society International, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, and World Wildlife Fund. The attendees are listed in Appendix 1.

2. Adoption of the agenda

The Chairman asked if there were any comments on the provisional agenda. There were none, so it was considered to be approved. The agenda is attached as Appendix 2.

3. Review of the 1997 fishing year to date

The Chairman said that Agenda Items 3 and 4 were both to be presented by Dr. Joseph, and suggested that they be covered consecutively, followed by a period for questions. No one objected, so this procedure was adopted.

Dr. Joseph said that a strong El Niño event was occurring, so he would talk about that first. Weakening of the southeasterly trade winds in the eastern Pacific region has decreased the upwelling and the westward flow of water there, resulting in greater-than-normal sea-surface temperatures in equatorial waters from the coast of South America to about 170°W. In addition, the sea levels are above normal and the depth of the thermocline is greater than normal in much of the affected area of the eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO). The large area of warm water is associated with changes in the circulation patterns of the air in much of the world, and this should cause heavier-

than-normal rainfall in normally-dry areas of Ecuador and Peru. Some climatologists have predicted abnormal weather patterns in the United States during late 1997 and early 1998, but others believe that there is not enough information available to make such predictions. Also, there is disagreement as to the duration of the present El Niño; some climatologists think that it will reach its maximum during 1997, whereas others think that it will not do so until 1998. Reduced catches of tunas in the EPO coincided with the El Niño episode of 1982-1983. These reduced catches were most likely the result the increased depth of the upper mixed layer, making it more difficult to find and catch the fish. At that time most of the larger vessels of the U.S. purse-seine fleet transferred their operations to the western Pacific Ocean, and most of those boats remained there after the El Niño had dissipated. So far the effects if the present El Niño on fishing have been minor, and much less than those of the 1982-1983 El Niño.

Dr. Joseph then reviewed the surface fishery for tunas in the EPO to date. The capacity of vessels at sea during 1997 has been greater than during 1995 or 1996, but less than during 1982, the first year of the last strong El Niño event. The Mexican fleet is the largest, followed by those Ecuador, Venezuela, Vanuatu, and the United States. The catches of yellowfin and skipjack tuna during 1997 are ahead of those of 1995 and 1996, while those of bigeye during 1997 are ahead of those of 1995, but nearly the same as those of 1996. Exceptionally large catches of skipjack were made during the fourth quarter of 1995, so it is likely that by the end of the 1997 the skipjack catch will be less than that of 1995. During 1995 and 1996 the greatest catches of yellowfin were made by vessels of Mexico, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Vanuatu, those of skipjack were made by those of Ecuador, Mexico, the United States, Colombia, and Vanuatu, and those of bigeye were made by those of Ecuador, Vanuatu, Colombia, and the United States. Preliminary data indicate that the distributions of the catches among countries for 1997 will be about the same as those for 1995 and 1996. The geographical distributions of the catches of yellowfin and skipjack during 1997 are, so far, similar to those of 1981-1996. The distribution of the catches of bigeye during 1997 is similar to those of 1995 and 1996, but different from those of earlier years when the catches of bigeye were much less. In closing, Dr. Joseph emphasized that the 1997 data were preliminary, and that when the final results are available some of what he had just said might be invalidated.

4. Review of the International Dolphin Conservation Program (IDCP) to date

Dr. Joseph briefly reviewed the history of the tuna-dolphin problem in the eastern Pacific Ocean. It began during the late 1950s and early 1960s when most of the larger baitboats were converted to purse seiners. During the 1970s the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service began to assess the effect of the fishery on the dolphins and to seek ways to reduce the mortality of dolphins due to the fishery, as most of the vessels which fished for tunas in association with dolphins at that time were registered in the United States. The most important feature of this program was the placement of observers on tuna vessels to collect data on the mortality and relative abundance of dolphins. As more vessels of nations other than the United States entered the fishery, it became obvious that the United States could not solve the problem alone. In 1976 it was agreed that the IATTC should have its own program, which would involve vessels of all nations which participate in the surface fishery for tunas in the EPO. Due to lack of funds, however, the IATTC program did not become fully operational until 1986. The mortalities of dolphins due to fishing amounted to about 133 thousand animals during 1986, but rapidly decreased to about 53 thousand in 1990, 27 thousand in 1991, and 16 thousand in 1992. In 1992, at the 24th intergovernmental meeting, held in conjunction with the 50th meeting of the IATTC, the Agreement for the Conservation of Dolphins, establishing the International Dolphin Conservation Program (IDCP), was passed. It established the following overall dolphin mortality limits (DMLs) for the next seven years: 1993, 19,500; 1994, 15,500; 1995, 12,000; 1996, 9,000; 1997, 7,500; 1998, 6,500; 1999, <5,000. Vessels which have notified their governments that they intend to fish for dolphin-associated tunas are awarded individual-vessel DMLs, which are calculated by dividing the overall DML by the number of such vessels. If a vessel reaches its DML it must cease fishing for dolphin-associated tunas until the following year. If it exceeds its DML, its DML for the following year is decreased by the amount that that vessel had exceeded its DML during the year in question. During each year of the 1993-1996 period the mortalities have been less than the corresponding overall DMLs, and only a few vessels have reached or exceeded their DMLs. It appears that the same will be the case for 1997. The spectacular decreases in dolphin mortalities during the 1986-1996 period are due almost entirely to reduction in the mortalities per set, rather than to reduction in the numbers of sets on dolphin-associated fish.

The Agreement for the Conservation of Dolphins also created the International Review Panel (IRP) and the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB). Representatives of governments, the fishing industry, and environmental groups are members of the IRP. At the IRP meetings, which occur three times each year, data on violations of regulations for the protection of dolphins are reviewed, and the information is sent to the governments of the respective nations for appropriate action. The actions taken are reviewed at subsequent meetings of the IRP. The SAB was established to review schemes for gear modification to reduce the mortalities of dolphins; due to lack of funds, however, it has met only once.

Mexico has its own tuna-dolphin program, the Programa Nacional para el Aprovechamiento del Atún y Protección de los Delfines (PNAAPD). Some of the trips of Mexican vessels are accompanied by IATTC observers and some by PNAAPD observers.

The mortalities of dolphins of the various stocks due to the fishery during 1994-1996 ranged from zero to 0.13 percent of the population—far less than the estimated natural renewal rate of 2 to 6 percent. Estimates of the relative abundance of the various stocks show that the declines in abundance have ceased, but in most cases statistically-significant increases have not occurred. This is not surprising, in view of the long live spans of the dolphins. Significant increases are expected within the next 5 to 10 years.

The Chairman asked if there were any questions on Dr. Joseph's presentations on the tuna fishery or the Tuna-Dolphin Program's activities. The representative of Mexico asked about the size composition of the tunas caught by the surface fishery during 1997. Dr. Joseph replied that the sizes of the yellowfin caught vary from year to year, and that the average size caught during 1997 is somewhat less than the average sizes encountered during the previous few years. He pointed out that the yellowfin caught in association with dolphins are larger, on average, than those caught in free-swimming schools, and that those caught in free-swimming schools are larger, on average, than those caught in log-associated schools. The average size of skipjack caught during 1997 is within the range of sizes caught during previous years. The average size of bigeye has declined precipitously during the last few years, due to the fact that greater and greater portions of the catch are taken in association with floating objects, which attract small fish. The representative of the United States asked about the effects of El Niño on the distribution of dolphins and the analyses carried out by the staff of the IATTC. Dr. Joseph said that there is evidence that the distribution of dolphins varies from year to year and that the IATTC staff is taking this into account. He then called upon Dr. Martín A. Hall to elaborate on the IATTC's studies of the effect of El Niño on the IATTC's estimates of the relative abundance of dolphins. Dr. Hall replied that the present El Niño was the first large one since the IATTC's Tuna-Dolphin Program had become fully operational in 1986. He pointed out that the 1982-1983 El Niño had severely affected the fishery for dolphin-associated yellowfin during that period, but that the effect of the present El Niño has so far been far less detrimental to that fishery. The representative from Japan asked about the effect of El Niño on recruitment of tunas. Dr. Joseph said that there is some indication that El Niño events are followed by increased recruitment of yellowfin. There is no information on the effects of El Niño on recruitment of skipjack or bigeye.

The Chairman said that consideration of a legally-binding instrument for the International Dolphin Conservation Program was the next order of business. The representative of the United States suggested that the IATTC meeting be adjourned and that an intergovernmental meeting be convened to consider this topic. All were in agreement, so the IATTC meeting was temporarily adjourned at 12:15 p.m.

5. Consideration of a legally binding instrument for the IDCP

The meeting was reconvened on October 31, 1997, at 4:50 p.m.

The Chairman stated that the meeting was preparing to consider Agenda Item 5 at the time of recess, and that during the recess this matter had been considered at the intergovernmental meeting (IGM). He invited the Chairman of that meeting, Dr. Tillman of the United States, to summarize the work that had been done.

Dr. Tillman stated that a draft text and annexes had been read fully once and that the main articles had been read twice. He said that considerable work was still needed before a draft of the agreement would be ready for consideration. It was noted that informal consultations would take place among delegations (including one to be held that evening) prior to the next IGM, which would be held at a time and place to be determined.

The representatives of the EU and Spain asked that there be a clear statement about their reservations to the entire text that was discussed at the IGM.

6. Other business

The Chairman stated that the next regular meeting of the IATTC would be held on June 9-11, 1998, in La Jolla.

The representative of the EU said that that organization was considering favorably the possibility of joining the IATTC, and asked that the parties be prepared to modify the Convention to permit the entry of the EU if this is necessary. The Chairman said that modifications would be required before EU would be able to join, and several Commissioners noted that their governments would have to study the question before they could reply. The Chairman said that a formal written expression of interest from the EU should be provided before the task of amending the Convention was begun.

7. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 5:10 p.m.