

Echebaster: Trends in the Catch of Indian Ocean Skipjack

The postponement of the IOTC Commission meeting until November 2020 (subject to confirmation) means there will be a delay in the formal consideration of the advice on the management of Indian Ocean skipjack included in Report of the 22nd Session of the IOTC Scientific Committee ^{1 2}

However, based on the most recently available data on stock status, the latest ISSF report³ on the status of tuna stocks around the world concluded that the IOTC skipjack stock was at the MSY level.⁴

A harvest control rule for skipjack was defined in 2016.⁵ This led to an annual catch quota of 470,029 Mt. for the period 2018–2020. A full assessment of Indian Ocean skipjack is currently underway. This will confirm stock status and the need to adjust the quota.

The 607,000 mt total catch of skipjack in 2018 was substantially above the quota. The specific reason for the high level of catch are not understood. Contributing factors could be higher biological availability of skipjack due to favorable ecosystem conditions, an unintentional consequence of a shift from FSC fishing to FAD fishing in response to the yellowfin quota and the total skipjack quota not being allocated between fleet segments.

According to the figures⁶ we have available, the total catch of **skipjack** by four defined operators of the purse seine fleet⁷ in 2018 was 401,515 mt. This represented about two-thirds of the total recorded catch. In contrast, at 354,725 mt the estimated 2019 catch of those four segments was 12.7% lower than the previous year. There was though a marked difference in the outcome for each of the segments.

If the same pattern was repeated in all fleet segments, the potential total catch of skipjack in 2019 could be 535,000 or 14 % higher than the maximum permitted under the HCR.

In comparison, between 2017 and 2018, Echebaster saw an increase in its FAD catch of 4,290 mt to 32,642 mt, followed in 2019 by a reduction to 24,704 mt. This was 20.2 % lower than the previous year and was despite an additional vessel in our fleet for part of the year.

If this proportional reduction had been achieved by all fleet segments, the total 2019 catch could have been as low as 484,000 mt, or 3 % above the quota.

We achieved the 2019 outcome by sticking rigidly to the quotas for yellowfin permitted by the Seychelles and Spanish regulations. As such, yellowfin was a choke species on the catch of skipjack. Just 3 of our 6 vessels fished in November 2019 and only 2 in December 2019. This led to a reduction in the number of sets by month. In 2019 our vessels completed 84 and 62 FAD sets in the final 2 months respectively compared to 200 in September and 226 in October.

Skipjack represented about 60 % of our total tuna catch in 2019 (2018 = 65%), while bigeye had a 10 % (9.2%) share and yellowfin 29 % (21 %). We do not know the data for other purse seine companies.

The catch of skipjack in relation to the HCR annual quota continues to be an issue, especially due to the lack of formal IOTC meetings.

While there is a limit to what a single company may achieve, we are working closely with our colleagues in SIOTI to implement the Spanish regulation on allowable catches for yellowfin in 2020. In effect, this limits the catch of skipjack and bigeye to 70 % of the total tuna catch by vessel. At the same time, we are actively cooperating with SIOTI and other fleet operators to promote the application of same regulations by other flag states. In the longer term we will work with SIOTI to establish a robust harvest strategy and related HCR.

We will continue to inform stakeholders of progress and in September we will review our catch data for the first 6 months of 2020.

¹ <https://iotc.org/documents/SC/22/RE>

² "Based on the results of the stock assessment of skipjack tuna in 2017, the Commission, following Resolution 16/02, adopted an annual catch limit of 470,029 tonnes for the years 2018 to 2020. Total catches in 2018 (607,701 t) were 29% larger than the catch limit generated by the Harvest Control Rule (470,029 t) which applies to the years 2018–2020, and there has been an increasing trend in catches over the past 3 years. The Commission needs to ensure that future catches of skipjack do not exceed the agreed limit for the 2018–2020 period".

³ ISSF 2020-09: An Evaluation of the Sustainability of Global Tuna Stocks Relative to Marine Stewardship Council Criteria

⁴ The new stock assessment in 2017 suggested that the stock is now at the MSY level. Given the current status of the fishery, the scientific committee indicates that the stock should fluctuate around the MSY level if the HCR is implemented (Resolution 16/02). The stock status was officially determined as not overfished and not subject to overfishing. Therefore, SG80 is met. However, there is not a "high degree of certainty" that the stock has been above the MSY reference points in recent years. The new stock assessment estimates mark a significant change from the previous assessment, and it may take a few years further research to establish a more robust assessment which is widely accepted. A number of alternative models indicated lower stock status. Furthermore, total catches in 2018 (607,701 t) were 29% larger than the catch limit generated by the Harvest Control Rule (470,029 t) which applies to the years 2018–2020, and there has been an increasing trend in catches over the past 3 years. So, although on balance the stock was determined to be at the MSY level, this conclusion is not highly certain, so SG100 is not met.

⁵ <https://iotc.org/cmm/resolution-1602-harvest-control-rules-skipjack-tuna-iotc-area-competence>

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Flag	2019	2018	19/18	
France	72,825	84,747	85.9%	
Italy	4,275	7,250	59.0%	
Spain	176,860	202,734	87.2%	
Seychelles	100,765	106,784	94.4%	(Spanish Owners only)
Total	354,725	401,515	88.3%	
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FAD	24,704	32,642	75.7%	
FSC	1,445	128	1128.9%	
TOTAL	26,149	32,770	79.8%	

⁷ Purse seiners flagged in France, Spain, Italy , and Seychelles flagged vessels owned by Spanish interests.