

Ascension Island

Ascension Island (7°56'S, 14°22'W) is an isolated volcanic island in the equatorial waters of the South Atlantic Ocean, around 1,600 kilometres (1,000 mi) from the coast of Africa and 2,250 kilometres (1,400 mi) from the coast of Brazil. The island is small (88 km²) in area and geologically young, having emerged around 1.5 million years ago. Ascension is part of the UKOT of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha, with the Governor, who is based on St Helena, represented on the island by an Administrator. The island has a population of around 880 with an elected advisory council.

The Ascension Exclusive Fishing Zone (EFZ) was declared in 1978 and includes the surrounding seas to the 200 nm mile limits, which is an area of 445,390 km². Although not part of a seamount chain, three seamounts, the Harris Stewart Seamount, the Grattan Seamount and an unnamed seamount, fall within the fishing zone. Ascension Island has a very narrow shelf (0-200 m), which occupies just over 100 km² and depths reach over 1,000 m less than 5 miles from the island.

Ascension lies within the northern branch of the South Atlantic Equatorial Current (SAEC), with sea surface temperatures ranging from 24 to 29°C. The northern-most branch of the SAEC forms the northerly portion of the South Atlantic Ocean gyre, and is a broad, westerly-flowing movement of water which channels a productive belt of water from the Congolese coast out into the equatorial Atlantic.

The island is an important breeding site for the endangered green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), with Ascension Island hosting the largest number of breeding turtles (approximately 25,000 nests annually) in the South Atlantic. Ascension Island is also home to almost half a million breeding pairs of eleven different species of seabirds, including noddies, boobies, terns and the endemic Ascension frigate bird (*Fregata aquila*).

In January 2016 the UK Government announced that, as part of the commitment for Blue Belt's around the Overseas Territories, just over 50% of the Ascension EFZ was to become a marine reserve (no fishing). As an interim measures AIG has closed the area within 50 miles of the island and the half of the EFZ south of 8°S (see Figure A-1) to commercial fishing (but not to inshore sports fishing undertaken for commercial gain).

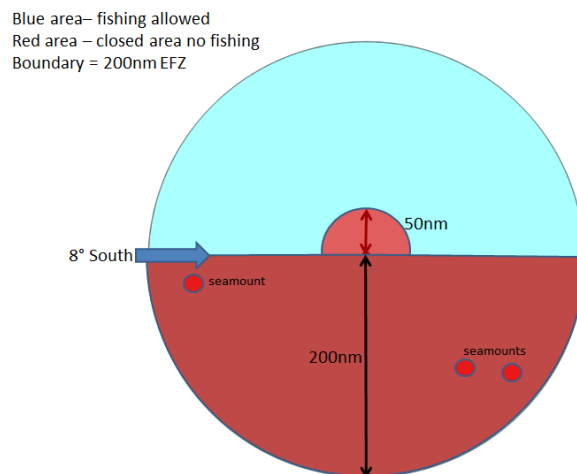


Figure A-1. The Ascension Island EFZ showing the closed area to the south (red) and the open area to the north.

1. Ascension fisheries

The main commercial fishery on Ascension is a longline fishery that targets big-eye tuna, but also catches a small amount of yellowfin tuna. There are also recreational and sports fisheries for tuna, billfish and groundfish that operate close to the island.

1.1 Brief history of fisheries

The Atlantic longline fishery for tuna was initiated by the Japanese fleet in the 1950s with Korean and Taiwanese vessels joining later. The target was initially yellowfin tuna, but in the 1980s effort switched to adult bigeye tuna, with longlines set deeper.

Prior to the declaration of the EFZ in 1978, there was likely to have been significant fishing effort in the region. Although the EFZ was declared in 1978, there was no regulation of fishing until 1988 when a licensing system was established and, according to Scullion (1990), unlicensed¹ fishing probably occurred in the zone from 1981 to 1986. Scullion (1990) also reported that there had been some relatively unsuccessful attempts at purse seine fishing in the north of the EFZ between 1979 and 1986 by Spanish and Venezuelan flagged vessels targeting skipjack and small yellowfin tuna.

Between 1988 and 2004 foreign vessels were licensed to fish in the EFZs of both Ascension and St Helena. The licensing was subject to access agreements with the relevant ICCAT member states and initially access was only agreed for Japanese vessels. Access agreements were subsequently reached with other ICCAT member states. Although the agreements gave access to both the St Helena and Ascension EFZs, in practice, almost all the fishing was undertaken in the Ascension EFZ. At that time the licensing system was operated from St Helena, with the revenue going to St Helena Government. The vast majority of the licensed vessels were longliners, but some purse seiners were also licensed. The fishery peaked in the mid 1990s when over 80 vessels licensed to fish in 1993 and 1996. On average each vessel spent 35 days in the zone and the maximum number of days fished peak in 1996 with over 2500 fishing days (Figure A-2).

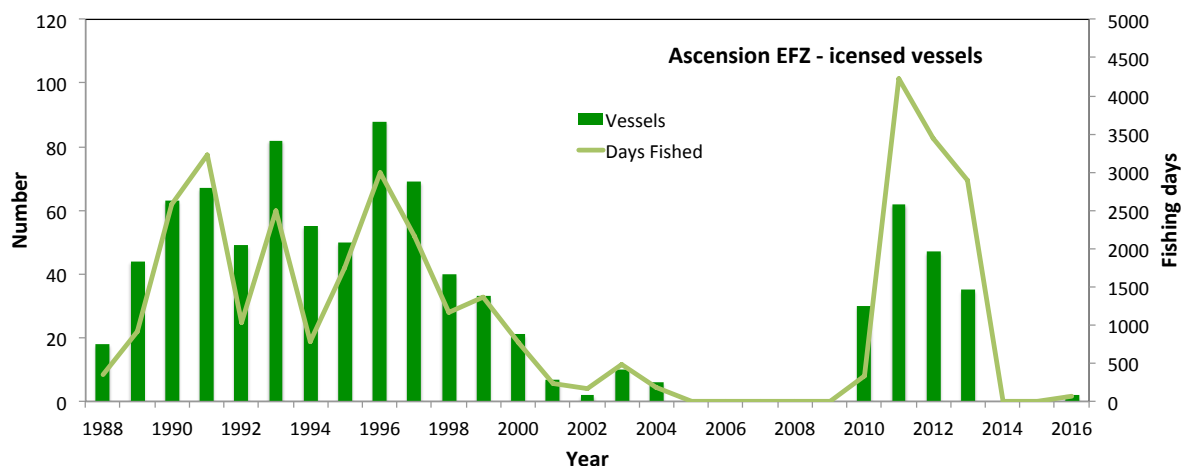


Figure A-2. Number of licences and fishing days in the Ascension fishery since 1988 (fishing days only)

¹ ICCAT data shows that fishing occurred in the area around the Ascension EFZ, but it is not certain that fishing occurred inside.

available until 2004).

The fishery is highly seasonal, with most fishing between December and April as the longline fleet follows the migrating bigeye tuna (Figure A-3), which generally pass to the north of Ascension. Over the period 1988 to 2004 there were a reported 22,682 fishing days in the Ascension EFZ with a catch of 24,086 tonnes of bigeye (1.05 tonnes per day; Table A-1).

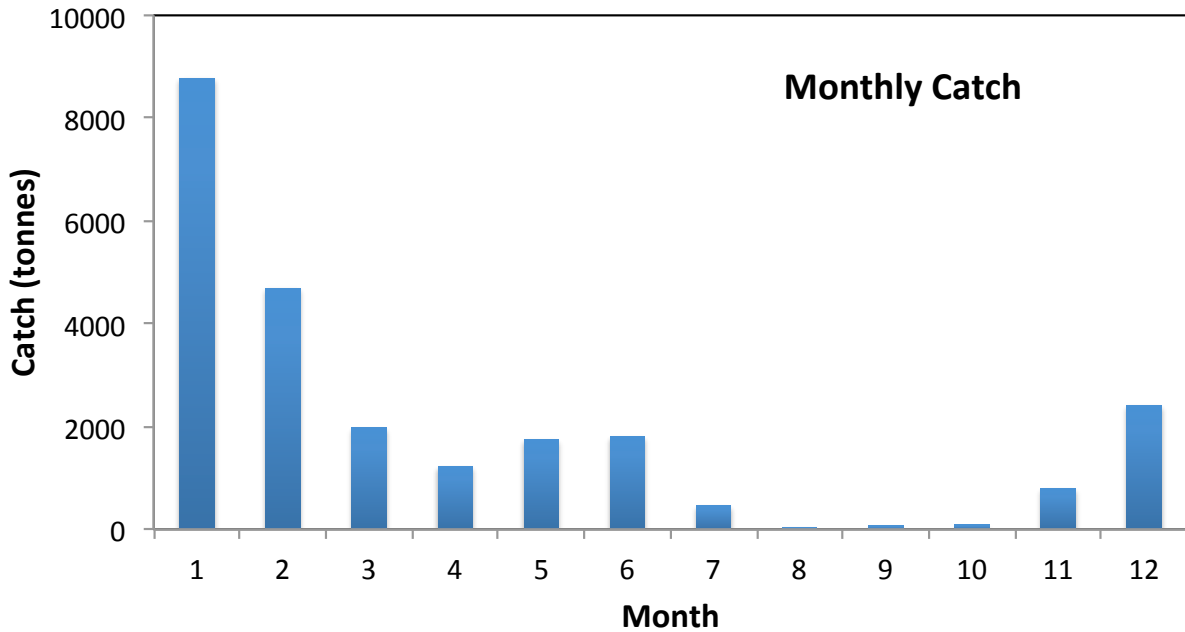


Figure A-3. Monthly catches of bigeye tuna caught in the Ascension fishery between 1988 and 2004. The month is assigned on the basis of the date of entry of the vessel into the EFZ. Data from SHG Senior Fishery Officer.

Table A-1. Catches and catch rates by foreign licensed longliners in the Ascension EFZ from 1998 to 2004 (data from SHG Senior Fishery Officer).

| Species | Catch (tonnes) | Catch rate (kg / day) |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| Bigeye | 24,086 | 1,050 |
| Yellowfin | 2,580 | 113 |
| Albacore | 560 | 24 |
| Swordfish | 2,624 | 115 |
| Striped marlin | 171 | 7 |
| Black marlin | 958 | 42 |

Catches were dominated by bigeye tuna, but yellowfin and albacore tuna, swordfish and marlin were also reported caught (Table A-1; Figure A-4).

In 2005 responsibility for the regulation of fishing in the Ascension Island EFZ switched from St Helena Government to AIG and between 2005 and 2009 there was no licensed fishery in the Ascension EFZ. The licensed fishery re-opened in 2010, administered by SHG under contract to AIG. The fishery was closed in early 2014, whilst the future options for the fishery were reviewed. Cefas were contracted to review management options for the fishery (Reeves & Laptikovskiy, 2014).

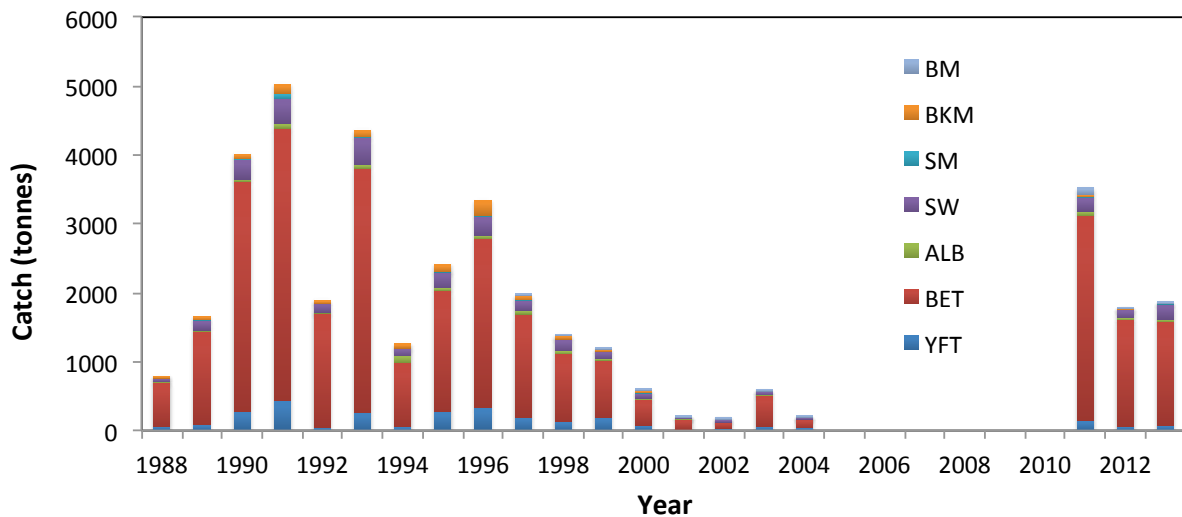


Figure A-4. Annual catches of the main species caught in the Ascension fishery between 1988 and 2013 (2010 data missing). (BET = bigeye; YFT = yellowfin; ALB = albacore; SW = swordfish; SM = striped marlin; BKM = black marlin; BM = blue marlin). Data from SHG Senior Fishery Officer.

1.2 The current fishery

The fishery is a pelagic (drifting) longline fishery, which targets free-swimming bigeye and yellowfin tuna. The vessels typically deploy 3,000 hooks per set (Huang, 2013). The main line (monofilament nylon) is 90 to 150 km long. Secondary branch lines, which are attached to the main line, are about 40-50 m in length and have light-sticks connected to baited J or circle hooks. Squid, mackerel, and milkfish are used as bait. The vessels usually spend six to nine hours setting lines and around twelve to nineteen hours hauling lines (Huang, 2013). Hooks are set just below the thermocline to target bigeye tuna or above the thermocline for yellowfin. The vessels involved are typically 400-800 GRT and over 20 m in length.

The fishery re-opened for the 2015/16 season, with more than half the EFZ closed to fishing (Figure A-1). During the 2015/16 season, two Taiwanese vessels were licensed.

2. Target species

2.1 Bigeye tuna

Bigeye is the main target species in the Ascension fishery and is one of the largest tuna species, reaching 250 cm fork length (FL; 210 kgs) and are distributed from 60°N to 50°S in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Typically fish remain in the surface layers (circa 50 m) at night, but regularly dive to 300-500 m during the day. Bigeye is listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN.

Atlantic catches of bigeye, which are taken by longline, purse seine and pole & line vessels, peaked at 133,000 tonnes in 1994, but have since declined to less than 70,000 tonne. The highest catches are in tropical waters, often just to the north of the Ascension EFZ.

2.2 Yellowfin tuna

The yellowfin tuna, which represents about 10% of the catches, is one of the larger tuna species, reaching weights of over 180 kg and are distributed in the tropical and sub-tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans. Yellowfin tuna are generally found in the surface (upper 100 m) waters and are principally caught off the west African coast and in a band across the tropical Atlantic.

Atlantic yellowfin catches, which are taken by a mixture of purse seine, longline and pole & line boats peaked at 193,000 tonnes in 1990 and have dropped to around 100,000 tonnes in recent years. The highest catches are taken in the Gulf of Guinea area and off the tropical west African coast.

3. Sustainability of target species

Stock assessments are undertaken by ICCAT to determine the status of the stocks of the target species. Ascension does not undertake any assessment of sustainability at the local level.

3.1 Stock

The Atlantic population of bigeye tuna is managed by ICCAT as a single mixed stock. Although Atlantic yellowfin tuna are known to spawn in both the Gulf of Guinea (West Africa) and the Gulf of Mexico, ICCAT consider the stock to be a single mixed one. However, recent work in the Pacific has demonstrated the presence of genetically distinct populations in different parts of the Pacific (Green et al., 2015) and similar heterogeneity is possible in the Atlantic. Tagging work around both Ascension and St Helena indicates extended residence time of tuna around the island.

3.2 Harvest Control Rules

ICCAT's objective is that the stock biomass (B) is greater than the biomass that would support the maximum sustainable yield (B_{MSY}) and that fishing mortality (F) is less than F_{MSY} .

3.3 Stock Assessment Methods

ICCAT stock assessments use a range of methods to determine the status of the stock in relation to the virgin biomass (B_0) and in relation to the biomass that provides the maximum sustainable yield (B_{MSY}). Stock assessments also consider the level of fishing mortality (F) in relation to the level that would maintain the stock above B_{MSY} (i.e $F < F_{MSY}$). If B is greater than B_{MSY} and F is less than F_{MSY} the stock is considered healthy and in the "green quadrant" of the Kobe plots. If either $B < B_{MSY}$ **or** $F > F_{MSY}$ the stock is considered in the amber zone. If $B < B_{MSY}$ **and** $F > F_{MSY}$ the stock is in the red zone. The Convention objective is to have stocks in the green zone ($B > B_{MSY}$ and $F < F_{MSY}$).

Full details of the ICCAT stock assessments can be downloaded from the ICCAT website.

3.4 Stock Status

The most recent ICCAT big-eye stock assessment was undertaken in 2015 (ICCAT, 2015) and indicated that the stock was overfished ($B/B_{MSY} = 0.67$) and, despite catches being below the catch limit, continued to be overfished ($F/F_{MSY} = 1.28$). The status had changed since the last assessment (2010) due to changes in selectivity, with a greater proportion of small fish being caught, particularly in purse seine fisheries. As a result, the SRC recommended to the Commission that the catch limit be reduced. ICCAT Commission reduced the overall catch limit from 85,000 to 65,000 tonnes.

The recent ICCAT yellowfin assessment (ICCAT, 2016a) suggests that the stock remains overfished (95% of B_{MSY}), but the stock status has improved since the previous (2011) assessment, when it was 85% B_{MSY} . Fishing mortality remains less than F_{MSY} ($F/ F_{MSY} = 0.77$) and, with the catch limit of 110,000 tonnes, the stock should recover to be above B_{MSY} by 2020 (68% probability), with a 97% likelihood of recovery by 2024.

Table A-2. ICCAT stock status of the tuna species caught in Ascension waters.

| | Biomass | Fishing Mortality | Recovery under current catch limit by | Last Assessed |
|-----------|---------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------|
| Bigeye | $B < B_{MSY}$ | $F > F_{MSY}$ | 2028 | 2015 |
| Yellowfin | $B < B_{MSY}$ | $F < F_{MSY}$ | 2020 | 2016 |

4. By-catch and non-target impacts

4.1 Fish by-catch

The longline fishery catches a range of by-catch species, some of which are retained and some are discarded. The data available on shark catch from the fishery is very limited, as vessels only report on the retained catch (which may, in the past, have included shark fins).

Huang (2009b) reviewed data on the by-catch of the Taiwanese distant water longline fleet and reported that in the tropical Atlantic blue shark made up 18.1% of the catch, with other sharks comprising 3.8%. Combined the sharks made up around 50% of the bigeye catch (bigeye was 40% of the total). Blue sharks have commercial value and may be retained, but the fate of any discarded/released sharks is not known. Around Ascension the bigeye is a higher proportion of the catch (74 %) and the shark catch lower (Judith Brown, pers. comm.).

According to AIG licence conditions vessels are not allowed to retain on board any bigeye thresher, hammerhead, shortfin mako or oceanic whitetip sharks (caught either within or outside of the EFZ) and all attempts should be made to return them to the sea alive. Vessels are required to carry de-hookers and dip-nets on board to support the live release of any incidentally caught shark, seabirds or turtles.

4.2 Seabird, turtle and marine mammal interactions

Turtle by-catch can be a significant problem in tropical tuna longline fisheries (Gilman & Lundin, 2008) and Huang (2013) reviewed the by-catch of turtles in the Taiwanese longline fleet fishing in the Atlantic Ocean.

Huang reported that 626 turtles were caught in the Atlantic longline fishery from a total of 103 observed trips (13096 sets and 40.75 million hooks) during 2004-2011. Catch rates were highest in tropical waters from April to June (0.0311 per 1000 hooks). The main species caught were leatherback and Olive Ridley turtles. Around 40% of the turtles caught were released alive. Specific data for historic turtle by-catch within the Ascension EFZ are not available.

ICCAT Recommendation 10-09 requires that contracting parties with vessels operating in the area:

- (i) report details of turtle by-catch;
- (ii) carry on board safe-handling, disentanglement and release equipment capable of releasing

sea turtles in a manner that maximizes the probability of their survival;

AIG licence conditions mean it is illegal to retain on board any species of sea turtle in Ascension waters, and all attempts should be made to return them to the sea alive.

Seabird by-catch is a problem in longline fisheries further south in the Atlantic, but is less of an issue in the tropics (Gilman & Lundin, 2008; Huang et al., 2009a).

Huang et al. (2009b) note that observers (4774 observed days) reported the capture of 27 cetaceans by the Atlantic Taiwanese longline fleet² between 2002 and 2006. The species composition and fate of the catch is not reported, but they were mostly caught in the tropical region.

4.3 Benthic interactions

Within the Ascension EFZ the only permitted commercial fishing method is pelagic longline, so there is no direct impact on the benthic system.

4.4 Ecosystem effects

The trophic ecology of the tuna species is poorly known, but the diet of yellowfin tuna is being investigated as part of a current Darwin Project. Tuna play an important role in herding prey to the surface, which facilitates seabird foraging and many of the seabirds (e.g. terns and black noddies) are known to associate with schools of tuna (particularly skipjack and albacore).

4.5 Bait species

The bait used in the fishery is a mix of squid, mackerel (*Scomber spp.*) and milkfish (*Chanos chanos*) (Huang, 2009). There is no information on the source or sustainability of the bait.

5. General Fisheries Management

For the migratory tuna and billfish the management of Ascension's fisheries involves both the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and local management. Local management incorporates the mandatory requirements (regulations and recommendations) of ICCAT and ICCAT species catch limits must be adhered to.

5.1 ICCAT Management of migratory species

Tuna stocks are managed on a pan-Atlantic basis by ICCAT. The principal decision making body of ICCAT is the Commission, which meets annually in November. The Commission is supported by the Standing Committee on Administration and Finance and by the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS). Four panels have responsibility for different species groups. The panel of particular relevance to Ascension is:

Panel 1: Tropical tunas (yellowfin, bigeye and skipjack)

The panels are responsible for reviewing the species, group of species, or geographic area under its purview, and for collecting scientific and other information relating to them. Contracting Parties are

² This refers to the entire Atlantic tuna fishery.

required to pay for panel membership. Fees for panel membership are within the region of £16,000. Based on advice from the SCRS, the Panels advise the Commission on recommendations.

On the basis of scientific advice from the SCRS and the Panels, the Commission annually decides on conservation and management measures aimed at maintaining target stocks at or above levels that permit the maximum sustainable yield. ICCAT sets catch limits for the principal target species (Table A-3) and, in most cases, those catch limits are split between the member states.

Table A-3. ICCAT catch limits for the tuna species caught in the Ascension EFZ.

| Common name | Scientific name | ICCAT Catch Limit (tonnes) |
|----------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Yellowfin tuna | <i>Thunnus albacares</i> | 110,000 |
| Bigeye tuna | <i>Thunnus obesus</i> | 65,000 |
| Albacore tuna | <i>Thunnus alalunga</i> | 24,000 ³ |

5.2 Legislation

The Fisheries Limits Ordinance (FLO, 1978) established the Exclusive Fishing Zone from the territorial baseline to 200 nautical miles. The FLO was repealed in 2016 and replaced with the Fisheries (Conservation & Management) Ordinance (FCMO), which modernised the fisheries legislation.

The FCMO deals with the regulation of fishing in the Ascension EFZ including:

- (i) The appointment and powers of a Director of Fisheries and Fisheries Protection Officers;
- (ii) Licensing of fishing;
- (iii) Reporting requirements, including transit through the zone;
- (iv) IUU related offences;
- (v) Fish aggregating devices;
- (vi) Transshipment and harbour access;
- (vii) Offences and penalties.

The Fishery Limits (Licensing of Fishing) (Offshore Zone) Order, 2015 prohibits fishing in the EFZ, beyond the territorial sea, unless it is carried out in accordance with a licence issued under section 5 of the FCMO. The schedule to the order indicates that the fee for such a licence will be £20,000. Similar legislation is planned for the Territorial Sea (within 12 nm of the island).

Under the Wildlife Protection Ordinance (2013) the Governor may, by Order published in the Gazette, declare any area with the Fishery Limits to be a prohibited area (analogous to a Marine Protected Area) for the taking of any or all species. Similarly any period can be declared a close season.

5.3 Licensing system

Only vessels licensed to ICCAT member states are eligible to fish in the Ascension EFZ. Any such licensing must be subject to an access agreement in accordance with ICCAT Recommendation 14-07. The only method of fishing that is permitted is pelagic longlining and the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs) is prohibited.

³ Southern albacore stock catch limit

Licenses are offered on an annual basis for the period from 1st August until 31st July, but in practice vessels mostly fish during the period from December to April. The current fee for a licence is £20,000.

The licence conditions are very detailed and include, *inter alia*, the following mandatory requirements:

- (i) The vessel must have a valid safety certificate from the Flag State and a valid Ship's Sanitation Certificate;
- (ii) The vessel must have sufficient life jackets and sufficient life raft places for all on board
- (iii) The vessel must have VMS and Class A or B AIS operating at all times in the EFZ;
- (iv) The vessel must have a fire plan for the vessel and a contingency plan in case of emergency;
- (v) Hooks must not be discarded and any lost gear must be reported;

Various by-catch and other environmental restrictions apply (see above).

6. Fisheries Science

The Darwin Plus funded project (DPLUS021) called *Ascension Island Marine Sustainability* ran from 2014 to 2016 and established a fisheries science unit and sampling programme on Ascension. The sampling programme has principally focused on the inshore sports and recreational fishery, but has also sampled the offshore fishery during the limited opportunity in 2015. The project officially ended in 2016, but the sampling programme has been maintained with funds from the UK Government and the Moore Foundation. A new Darwin Plus project called *The Ascension Island Ocean Sanctuary (ASIOS): planning for the Atlantic's largest marine reserve* commences in April 2017. An EU Best funded project commenced in January 2017 to study the seamounts within the Ascension EFZ.

7. Surveillance and Monitoring

7.1 Data and position reporting

The flag-state has responsibility to report Task 1 and task 2 data to ICCAT. AIG licence conditions require that vessels report set by set catch data on AIG Catch Report Forms and that such forms are submitted on a weekly basis.

The FCMO requires that any fishing vessel passing through the EFZ, even if exercising the right of free passage, must report to the Marine Officer and must transmit its position by AIS or VMS to Ascension Island Government whilst in transit through the zone. Thus any vessel that is in the zone without first informing AIG is liable to prosecution, but bringing a prosecution against such a vessel may prove challenging.

7.2 Monitoring

All licensed vessels must be prepared to carry an observer whilst fishing in the Ascension EFZ, but the degree of observer coverage will depend on the number of licensed vessels. All licensed vessels must have an operational Class A or B AIS system and a Vessel Monitoring Systems (VMS) as specified in the licence conditions (AIG, 2016). The Taiwanese also operate their own observer programme on the longline vessels (Huang et al., 2009b).

7.3 Surveillance

There is considerable fishing effort in the waters outside the Ascension EFZ (Figure A-5) and there is therefore a risk of illegal fishing in the EFZ, particularly on the edge of the zone. Vessels are only likely to risk entering the zone if the catch rates are expected to be greater inside the zone than outside. It is likely that such circumstances are seasonal and vary between years. The highest risk time is likely to be between December and April, when previous data suggests that catches are the best.

There is no full-time patrol vessel for Ascension waters, but a St Helena fishing vessel has been contracted to operate as a patrol vessel for a short-term period during the main fishing season (Dec-April). The costs of operating a full time patrol are high, but the occasional presence of a patrol vessel may be sufficient to deter illegal fishing. Satellite surveillance, such as combining AIS with Synthetic Aperture Radar should be able to identify if there is a problem and show which areas and times of year represent the highest risk.

In the absence of a patrol vessel AIG should seek HMG support to utilize passing Royal Navy and British Antarctic Survey vessels, as happened occasionally in the past, to undertake short patrols and make sure they are routed through high-risk parts of the EFZ. The RMS St Helena (whilst still in operation) could also be routed through high-risk areas to the south to detect and deter illegal fishing⁴. (note the RMS does currently report any fishing vessels it sees whilst in transit to Ascension Island Government).

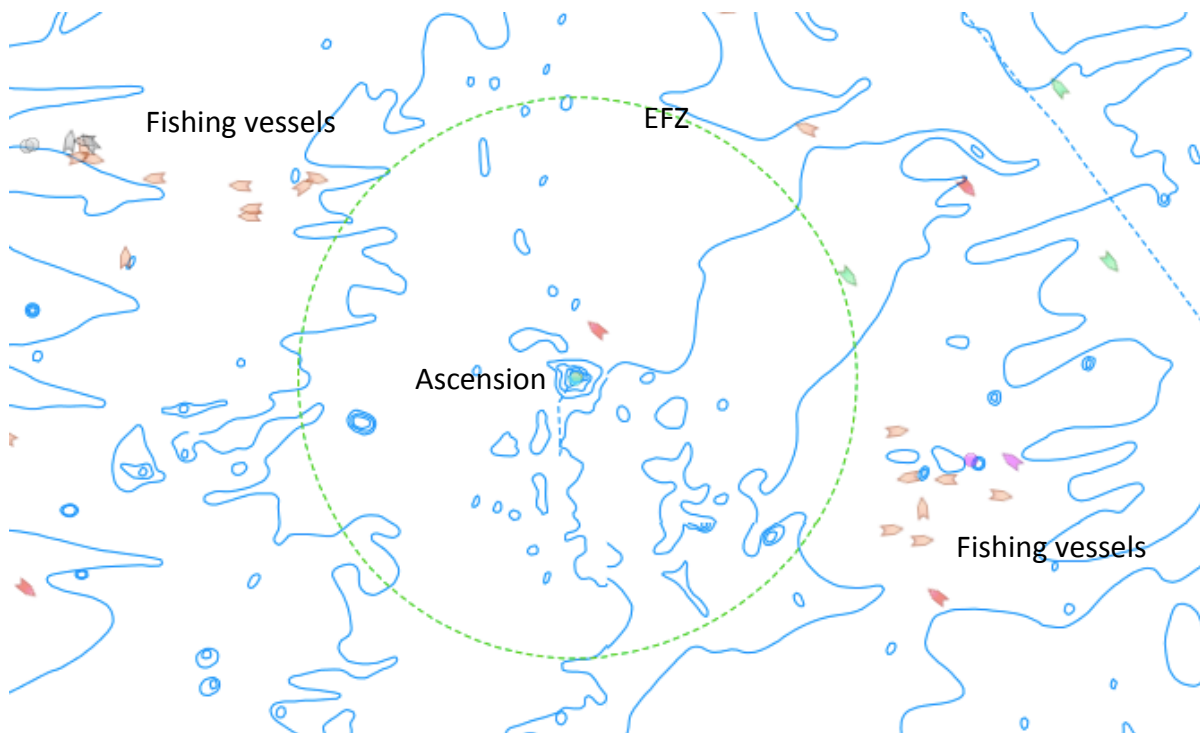


Figure A-6. The Ascension EFZ showing fishing vessels outside the zone to the NW and SE (from Marine Traffic Jan 2nd 2017).

⁴ The RMS does report fishing vessels, but does not cover high risk areas.

It has been estimated that the cost of surveillance and patrolling would be around £400,000 per year (RSPB, 2014), but that would be dependent on the type of patrol vessel used and for what periods it is used.

The costs of surveillance need to be balanced against the scale of any illegal fishing and the consequences of that fishing. In terms of the tuna stocks, the fish caught (assuming by an ICCAT member) will still count against the ICCAT quota, so the impact will be negligible. There may, however, be a risk to the reputation of AIG and the UK if illegal fishing is tolerated in the EFZ.

8. Fishing vessel safety

The licence conditions require that vessel have flag-state safety certificates and also that vessels have sufficient life-jackets and life raft spaces for all on board (including an observer). In the long-term AIG should set a timetable for improving standards on board vessels, with an ultimate goal of achieving the “Torremolinos” protocol standards.

9. Consultations, transparency and RFMOs

Atlantic tuna stocks are managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT), of which the UKOTs, as a group, are a member. The UKOTs receive ICCAT quotas, but Ascension does not utilize any of the quota as the quota is linked to the flag-state of the catching vessel, rather than the capture location. ICCAT recommendations must be implemented when the fishery operates in the Ascension EFZ, but again this is principally the responsibility of the flag-state of the vessel.

ICCAT reports and stock assessments are available on the ICCAT website (www.iccat.int). ICCAT have, in the past, been criticized for their management of tuna stocks, but have introduced measures and quotas that should improve the status of the target stocks. The UK sends representatives to ICCAT including occasional UKOT representatives, but Ascension has not sent representatives. It is important that Ascension is properly represented at ICCAT at a science and policy level to ensure stocks are properly managed and to protect Ascension’s resources.

Ascension Island does not have a permanent resident population, but the elected Island Council represent the views of the temporary residents and are involved in the decision making process.

The laws of Ascension are available on line (<http://www.ascension-island.gov.ac/government/legal-and-judicial-services/ascension-laws/>), but it would be helpful to develop and publish a strategy for the fishery.

10. Summary

The Ascension Island fishery is a small part of the pan-Atlantic tuna fishery that is managed by ICCAT. Catches in the EFZ are variable and depend of the migration pattern of the tuna and access arrangements for the Ascension EFZ. In previous years the catches in the zone have reached up to 5% of the ICCAT catch limit for bigeye tuna. The fishing is with pelagic longline and there are significant concerns about the by-catch of non-target species, particularly shark and turtles in longline tuna fisheries in tropical waters. As part of the licensing system AIG has introduced strict controls on the by-catch of shark and turtles.

There has never been a clear strategy or management plan for the fishery, which has not been helped by recent uncertainty over the size and location of the marine reserve.

The fishery recently re-opened, with the southern half of the EFZ closed and with new licence conditions. The take-up of fishing licenses has been low, which means the revenue from the fishery has been very small. This may be due to the level of the fees, which need to reflect the differential catch rates inside and outside the EFZ, or the more stringent licence conditions. Alternative licence fee structures should be considered. For instance vessels could be asked to pay a small application fee (e.g. £2,000) payable at the start of the year and then a monthly access fee if they decide to enter the EFZ (though noting that the average historical fishing days was only 35). This may attract more initial applicants, who wish to hedge their bets.

The closing of the south of the zone will limit the flexibility of the fishery, which will generally follow the migratory bigeye tuna, and may put off vessel operators from applying.

Given that the tuna are pelagic and highly mobile, the tangible conservation benefits of closing half or all the EFZ are not obvious. Closing the area will simply displace fishing outside the zone, as the ICCAT catch limits will not change.

Whilst a commitment has been made to a 50% marine reserve, it is important that Ascension Island and UK Governments consider the bigger picture and develop a strategy that has clear conservation benefits for this part of the Atlantic. An important aspect of this is to consider the impacts of displacing effort and the potential benefits of engaging with licensed fishing boats to raise standards of conservation and safety.

It is important that Ascension (through the UKOT delegation) work closely with ICCAT to ensure long-term sustainability of the stocks and to influence how the fish are caught. Ascension should work closely with St Helena and Tristan da Cunha to ensure their interests are properly represented, particularly as together they constitute one UKOT.

There is clearly a risk of illegal fishing in the Ascension EFZ, particularly in the December to April period when the migrating bigeye are abundant in the area. Ascension should work with other territories, as part of the Blue-Belt initiative to increase satellite surveillance and, if possible, increase patrolling. In the absence of a patrol vessel AIG should seek HMG support to use Royal Navy and British Antarctic Survey vessels to undertake short patrols. The RMS St Helena (whilst still in operation) could also be routed through high risk areas to the south to detect and deter illegal fishing.

There is the opportunity for greater cross-territory collaboration in a number of areas. A report in 2010 (MRAG, 2010) considered the fisheries in St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha and identified a number of areas where greater co-operation between the islands would be beneficial to all.

| Strengths | Weaknesses |
|---|---|
| The fishery is underpinned by modern legislation. | The main target species, bigeye tuna, is considered overfished and still subject to overfishing by ICCAT. The recent reduction in the Atlantic quota should address this. |
| The Ascension fishery raises environmental and safety standards in the participating vessels. | The fishing method, pelagic longlining, can result in catches of threatened non-target species such as turtles and sharks. |
| Licence conditions require that shark and turtle by-catch is not retained and, where possible, released alive. | There is no strategy or management plan for the fishery. |
| Ascension Island Government has run a fishery patrol and satellite surveillance projects during the peak in the last two fishing seasons. | There is a significant risk of illegal fishing in the EFZ and limited capability to patrol the zone. |

11. Recommendations

1. The future operation of the fishery should be considered in the context of the tangible conservation benefits to the tropical Atlantic region and associated fisheries;
2. The structure of the licensing should be reviewed and alternate options considered, including the use of an application fee and access fee;
3. AIG should establish a long-term strategy to gradually raise safety standards and crew conditions on the longline fleet;
4. A satellite based surveillance programme should be continued and options considered to enhance the current patrol arrangements.
5. Ascension, with assistance from the UK Government, needs to engage fully with ICCAT at both science and policy level to ensure their interests are represented and protected.

12. References

- AIG, 2016. Ascension Island 2016: Information for Applicants
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