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Small Scale Tuna Fishers Lay Foundations for Quota Justice at ICCAT.

In its 50th Anniversary year, it was highly appropriate that ICCAT’s annual meeting finished on November 21, World Fisheries Day (WFFD).

WFD, celebrated around the world since 1998, is dedicated to the men and women who depend on fisheries for their livelihoods. This year Vatican teamed up with the FAO to organize an event focussing on the violations of fishers’ human rights.

Human rights and tuna fisheries are intricately interconnected. Small-scale tuna fisheries, amongst the oldest fishing activities the world, have seen their fortunes fade, their rights eroded and the stocks of tuna and tuna like species decimated. Meanwhile the fortunes of industrial tuna fisheries have soared. The plight of workers in this sector, especially aboard vessels fishing illegally and on the high seas, is the subject of much international concern. The association of WFD and ICCAT’s annual meeting, even if unplanned, sends a strong message to deciders: **human rights of fishers and their fishing rights are inseparable.**

For Fernando Gutiérrez, a Member of LIFE and President of the Federation of Canary Island Cofradías, attending the ICAAT meeting had provided an important opportunity to meet the key deciders and to form alliances. “It has been a real honour to attend this meeting, and we must not allow another 50 years to pass before we attend again. We can’t let such an important opportunity to make our voices heard pass us by”, he said.

Gutiérrez highlighted **the injustices besetting the sector**, including the way that access had become concentrated in the very few hands “to the detriment of thousands of small scale fishers”. In this regards he criticised the national allocation system in Spain: “Everyone knows well that there is tremendous injustice in our country’s system, which affects small scale fishers across the whole of Spain, but up to now, no one has opened their mouths. This must change”.

Gutierrez was also **able to highlight the plight of European small scale fishers formally and informally**; in the corridors where important decisions are also taken, as well as formally to the Director General of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries of the European Union, Mr Aguiar Machado, who chaired a public meeting.

Bertrand Cazalet, representing the SPMLR – the Union of Professional Small Scale Fishers of Languedoc-Roussillon, also a Member of LIFE – highlighted how small scale fishers’ representatives had participated in the drafting sessions for resolutions and recommendations, both for Bluefin tuna and swordfish. In Cazalet’s view, it was important for small scale fishers to be present in ICCAT because **this raised their profile and made ICCAT aware of their problems**. However, he felt that there were important issues of justice to take up at national level as far as access rights were in concerned.

“In France, a relatively important share of the national tuna quota – 10% - is allocated to the small-scale fleet, but this goes to the vessel owners in the POs. These are in fact large scale operators who have invested in small scale vessels, so **it is important that the genuine small scale fishers establish their own PO and apply for quota**” he said.

Cazalet also felt that the establishment of a TAC by ICCAT for swordfish was an important step. However, ICCAT needed to establish how the TAC should be shared between its countries, and, particularly in the Mediterranean, **Italy and Spain needed to act to curb the excesses of their industrial fleets**. It is claimed by many that their catches exceed by far what they actually report.

For LIFE, the next concrete steps will include supporting its Members at national level in their struggles to obtain just allocation systems. At EU level **LIFE will continue to push for the proper implementation of Regulation (EU) 2016/1627 on a multiannual recovery plan for Bluefin tuna**, especially as regards promoting “coastal fishing activities and the use of selective fishing gear and techniques that have a reduced environmental impact”.

As Gutiérrez has highlighted, the opportunities that ICCAT offers in terms of meeting key deciders and forming alliances must not be missed. **LIFE will therefore apply for Observer status in ICCAT**, and will work with its members over the next 12 months to prepare the case for a separate small scale Bluefin tuna TAC. 2017 will be a watershed year for Bluefin tuna. Following a full assessment of the stock in 2017, **it is likely that the ICCAT recovery plan will give way to a management plan**. This will open up the opportunity to change the allocation system and include small scale fishers as key stakeholders.

Both Gutiérrez and Cazalet feel it is important for small scale fishers’ representatives to attend the ICCAT meeting – and to attend future meetings. However, justice will not be obtained tomorrow, or the day after; Rome was not built in a day, but at this 50th Anniversary meeting of ICCAT, some important foundations have been laid for the future.