A look back at important scientific findings and management measures in 2019.

Managing Atlantic tunas, sharks, swordfish, and billfish presents unique challenges. These species can travel vast distances across state and international borders to find food or reproduce. Highly migratory species (HMS) are also some of the most economically important fish in the Atlantic. Managing them sustainably requires collaboration and the best available science.

We took important steps in 2019 to prevent overfishing of HMS while providing commercial and recreational fishing opportunities. Read more about some of these successes below.

**Historic Agreement Brings Sharks Under Stronger International Management**

In November, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) took the first steps toward establishing international management of open-ocean and highly migratory sharks and rays. The commission adopted amendments to its 50-year-old agreement that clarifies its authority to manage these species. The decision, endorsed by 53 countries, concludes a 10-year negotiation led by the United States. The amendments establish a strong foundation for precautionary and ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries management. Once implemented, they are expected to ensure that all countries with shark fisheries will be required to meet ICCAT conservation measures—just as countries have to do with other ICCAT-managed fisheries like Atlantic bluefin tuna and white marlin.

ICCAT also adopted new limits on the number of North Atlantic blue sharks that major fishing nations can catch each year. The decision won’t affect American fishermen since the United States has already set similar limits. This new measure will help hold other ICCAT members accountable to agreed limits and support long-term sustainability.

**Catch Share Program Successfully Reduced Bluefin Bycatch**

We conducted a formal review this year of our Individual Bluefin Quota Program. Launched in 2015, the program gives fishermen using pelagic longline gear an economic incentive to avoid interactions with bluefin tuna. That allows us to reduce the number of bluefin caught unintentionally while keeping longline fishermen on the water.

And it worked. The program reduced the average annual bluefin bycatch by 65 percent compared to the three years before it began. That’s about 330,000 pounds—or around four fully loaded semitrucks—less bycatch each year.

**New Management Measures Mitigate Shortfin Mako Overfishing**

In March, we implemented new measures that prevent commercial fishermen from keeping Atlantic shortfin mako sharks that are still alive when pulled to the boat. The rule also set new minimum size requirements in the recreational fishery. These measures allow more shortfin mako to reach maturity before they’re harvested. Additionally, recreational shark fishermen are now required to use circle hooks in all federal waters of the Atlantic. Circle hooks have been shown to reduce the chance that a shark dies after being released.

These measures together are helping to end overfishing of Atlantic shortfin mako sharks while providing responsible fishing opportunities. They are also part of an ongoing international effort through ICCAT to rebuild shortfin mako populations across the Atlantic. The commission is slated to hold a special meeting in July 2020 to consider additional conservation actions.

**Circle Hook Requirements Will Help Sharks Live After Being Released**

An interstate commission voted in 2019 to require recreational fishermen to use circle hooks when fishing for sharks in state waters. The measure, passed by the ASMFC in October, is expected to save thousands of sharks after being caught and released.

Unlike the traditional j-hook, circle hooks grab the corner of a shark’s mouth, reducing injury to their stomach and other organs. It’s also easier for fishermen to release a shark caught with a circle hook. Together, these traits increase the chance that a prohibited shark—or one too small to be kept—will survive after being released.

The commission’s decision comes after years of collaboration with NOAA Fisheries to create consistent conservation measures in state and federal waters.