

August 2024

To the Government of the Maldives,

The Maldives is world renowned as a leader in sustainable fishing practices. Its one-by-one tuna fisheries are beneficial both to Maldivian fishers and the marine ecosystem. For this reason, we would like to express our concern regarding recent discussions about potentially granting licenses for longline fishing in the Maldives and ask the Government to clarify its position regarding restarting the longline fishery. As a consortium of scientists and conservation experts, we would like to highlight the threats and urge you to consider such a decision's serious ecological, economic and reputational impacts:

1. The Maldives Tuna Fishery Management Plan recognises one-by-one fishing as a traditional Maldivian method, practiced for centuries and an exemplary fishery with minimal environmental and ecological impacts. The pole-and-line fishery, which predominantly catches skipjack tuna, spans several centuries, while the handline fishery which targets large yellowfin tuna for export, commenced in the late 1990s. In contrast, the same document states that longline is not a traditional gear in the Maldives. The longline fishery started in 1985 with licenses given to foreign flagged vessels (operating beyond 75 nm, within the Maldives' EEZ) until a ban on issuing licenses to foreign vessels was introduced in 2010. Although the longline fishery was reopened in 2011, the government stopped licensing longliners in 2019 due to **non-compliance of vessels and irregularities in the data reporting** (Maldives Tuna Fisheries Management Plan)¹, highlighting the difficulties in managing this fishery and the associated risks.
2. Longlining can lead to **overfishing** of target and bycatch species, adding increased pressure on already-overfished tuna populations that local fishers depend on. Longlining can undermine the livelihoods of local communities whose income is derived from traditional fishing practices, thus exacerbating the challenges faced by local communities, a concern expressed by members of the Yellowfin Tuna Fishermen's Union. Longline fishing can compromise food security due to the depletion of fish stocks that are crucial for the dietary needs of coastal communities. This raises a significant humanitarian concern.²

¹ <https://www.informea.org/en/content/legislation/maldives-tuna-fishery-management-plan-2021#:~:text=This%20Plan%20is%20made%20pursuant,and%20trade%20in%20the%20Maldives.>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X06000960>

This fishing technique poses significant risks to the traditional pole-and-line and the more recently established handline fishers through market competition, including the ability to undercut fishers' supply. Meanwhile, one-by-one fishing provides vital employment and preserves marine biodiversity since it is a highly selective fishing technique, only catching targeted species. Historically, vessels that use longlines tend to employ mostly foreign crews, thus competing with local Maldivian fishers who are not trained to use longline vessels. Furthermore, allowing longline fishing would potentially open the door to foreign longline vessels due to the lack of such vessels in Maldives.

3. Longline fishing is associated with high **bycatch** rates, including endangered species such as sharks, seabirds, turtles, manta rays and even whale sharks. Longline fishing would, therefore, *de facto* recommence shark fishing in Maldives, with all its concomitant impacts on ocean health and the prosperity of the tourism industry. Bycatch puts pressure on the survival of these already vulnerable populations and would undermine the impressive conservation achievements made in Maldives in the past 15 years. The mortality rate among these non-target species is alarmingly high and exceedingly difficult to mitigate, leading to significant disruptions in marine ecosystems.

Longline fishing is inherently highly unsustainable for most of the bycatch species. The high mortality rates of non-target species like sharks and seabirds would have negative impacts on marine biodiversity. Reintroducing longline fishing would reverse the significant progress made in shark conservation and would undermine the Maldives' global reputation as a leader in sustainable fishing practices.

In contrast, bycatch rates in pole and line fishing are extremely low, at around 0.65%.³ Most of these bycatch species are other pelagic fish species (and not the vulnerable megafauna species caught by longlining and so important to tourism) and are sold on the local market or consumed directly by the fishers, which leads to almost zero discards of dead animals at sea. At the same time, handline fishing is known for its low bycatch rates since fishers can immediately release any non-targeted or undersized fish back into the water with a high survival rate.

4. Allowing longline fishing could lead to significant and long-term **reputational losses** for the Maldives since sharks are an unavoidable and large element of the catch. The depletion of shark populations would impact biodiversity and potentially diminish the

³ <https://www.cen.uk.com/post/pole-and-line-fishing#:~:text=The%20most%20important%20part%20of,total%20tuna%20catch%20by%20weight>

Maldives' attractiveness and reputation as a premier destination for marine tourism, which could significantly reduce tourism revenue. On top of this, healthy shark populations are a feature of healthy coral reefs, which significantly contribute to the national economy.

At the same time, the Maldives has taken a significant step in promoting sustainable coastal fisheries by co-championing the Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Group. With this action, the Maldives aims to advocate for a robust coastal fisheries industry that can withstand the challenges posed by climate change and overfishing. The reopening of longlining would not be aligned with the efforts put forward in recent years.

5. The longline fishery operates over considerably long distances and requires crews to be at sea over extensive periods of time. This can lead to many issues for fishers including poor conditions on board, impacts on communities of fishers being away for long periods, as well as increased health and safety risks. The lack of proper rest, nutrition and hygiene can affect even the hardest-working individuals and have long-term health implications. Also, being away from home for extended periods disrupts family and community ties. Traditional Maldivian fishing methods typically allow fishers to return home more frequently, maintaining social stability and community cohesiveness.
6. Almost 60% of coral reef associated shark and ray species are threatened with extinction, while oceanic shark populations have declined over the past 50 years by 70%; on average, some species have experienced a higher fall.⁴ Despite the positive benefits of the shark fishing ban, sharks are still highly vulnerable to overfishing due to their slow growth and low reproductive rates. The sustained recovery of sharks in the Maldives following the implementation of the shark fishing and export ban in 2010-2011 is applauded globally. This recognition of the Maldives' sustainability leadership brings economic benefits to the country not just from tourism but also, importantly, by ensuring the health of Maldivian ocean, coral reefs and coastal communities. Longline fishing profits are often shortlived due to overfishing and outweighed by the hidden costs of damage to local marine ecosystems. These costs burden governments and drain financial resources that could be invested in more sustainable and lucrative sectors⁵

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-020-03173-9.epdf>

⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308597X06000960>

7. **Longlines are often lost in the ocean** and never retrieved, killing animals long after the boats have left. In 2022, it was estimated that 740,000 km (roughly 18.5 times the circumference of the Earth) of longline mainlines littered the ocean each year.

By supporting the traditional one-by-one practices and continuing the restriction on longline fishing, the government can ensure the long-term health of its marine ecosystems and the prosperity of its local fishing communities. We urge the Maldives, whose economy and society are so dependent on its unique and precious marine environment and whose environmental stewardship has to date been exemplary on the world stage, to continue its leadership in supporting its one-by-one fishers by not issuing new longline fishing licenses. We stand ready to support the Maldives in its continued efforts to protect its marine biodiversity and the livelihood of its communities.

Respectfully