

Japanese tuna boats accused of killing thousands of sea birds 11/9/94

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AUCKLAND, New Zealand—Japanese tuna fishermen are killing tens of thousands of albatrosses and petrels a year with long lines, the Royal Forest and Bird Society of New Zealand says.

The society's quarterly journal, *Forest and Bird*, said conservative estimates are that the Japanese kill 44,000 of the sea birds a year while fishing for bluefin tuna in the South Pacific.

The toll in New Zealand's waters is estimated at 54,000 birds in the last 20 years, including about 15,000 breeding female grey petrels.

Forest and Bird says Japanese use lines that are an average of 130 kilometers long.

Set once a day from each boat, a longline contains 3,000 hooks, each with bait of dead fish or squid.

Albatrosses and petrels like

the bait, which they pounce on when it first hits the water, before it sinks. While trying to eat it, they often become hooked.

The quarterly said simple changes in the fishing method would reduce the slaughter. It recommended setting the lines at night so the birds wouldn't pounce on the bait and using thawed rather than frozen bait because thawed bait sinks faster.

A tori pole, a system of streamers connected to a pole protruding from the end of the boat, also can frustrate bird attempts to take bait, it said.

Forest and Bird said a 1993 Australian study shows that six of the 14 South Pacific albatrosses species are experiencing population declines.

Sandy Bartle, curator of birds at the Museum of New Zealand, said the populations

most at risk are an Auckland Island subspecies of wandering albatross and the grey petrel.

Others suffering high levels of mortality are the southern Buller's mollymawk, New Zealand black-browed mollymawk and grey-headed mollymawk.

Wandering albatross numbers on Auckland Island have fallen 45% since 1973. Black-browed mollymawk numbers at Campbell Island have fallen between 40% and 60%, he said.

Bartle noted that although the number of Japanese long line vessels in New Zealand waters is declining, "there is regular talk in fisheries circles of a rogue fleet of 250 Taiwanese long liners that hardly ever calls into regular ports, and China has now commissioned a fleet of over 100 longliners."