Friend of the Sea Audit Guidance

FOS – Audit Guidance on the Wild Welfare Standard for pole and line fisheries

www.friendofthesea.org

REV	DATE	REASON	VALIDATION	APPROVAL
1	29/07/2025	Provide guidance to the checklist	Paolo Bray	

Foreword

Friend of the Sea has been established in 2008. Its objective is safeguarding the marine environment and its resources, encouraging a market and implementing specific conservation projects.

The Friend of the Sea certification program allows for the assessment of fisheries and aquaculture products according to criteria and requirements. The certification, granted following an audit by independent certification bodies, ensures that a product complies with the requirements.

This standard shall be considered a pilot project with the purpose of checking the applicability and feasibility of the requirements in fisheries.

Requirements are classified as Essential, or Recommended, according to their level of importance.

Essential Requirements: The unit of certification shall be 100% compliant with essential requirements to be recommended for certification by the Certification Body (CB). Failure to comply with essential requirements is a major non-conformity. To achieve certification, corrective actions shall be implemented within three months from the date of assessment of non-conformities.

Recommended: It is not compulsory for the unit of certification to comply with recommendations to achieve certification. Nonetheless, compliance with recommendations shall be verified during the audit and any non-conformities shall be highlighted in the audit report as a "recommendation". The unit of certification shall inform the CB, during the following audit, regarding any corrective measures implemented.

Requirements that are not applicable to the audited unit of certification will be marked with "N.A."

Carefish/catch project

The welfare of wild-caught fish has been overlooked in practice, research, advocacy, and policy. The Carefish/catch project (https://carefish.net/catch/) aims to promote better fishing standards by addressing 5 main goals:

1. Assess global animal welfare impacts in fisheries,
2. Identify the potential of reducing animal suffering in various fishing methods and species,
3. Analyse the economic and social feasibility of the improvements suggested,
4. Raise problem and solution awareness in general and specific audiences,
5. Implement welfare guidelines into the Friend of the Sea fisheries certification scheme.

The international consortium responsible for this project is formed by:

- Fair-fish international,
- FishEthoGroup,
- Friend of the Sea,
- Centre of Marine Sciences (CCMAR),
- DeMoS Institute.

The funding is awarded through a grant from **Open Philanthropy**.

This project is an absolutely pioneering approach to a highly complex field, integrating both animal, social, economic and policy perspectives, and the outcomes will impact the way we look into fisheries.

Animal Welfare

Animal welfare is an emerging issue in aquaculture and fisheries, relating to ethics, animal health, and product quality. A growing number of researchers, decision-makers, and advocacy groups have been pushing for fish welfare to be thoroughly researched and integrated into the conversation about the future of seafood standards. In scientific and technical terms, welfare is defined as the state of the animal as it copes with its environment. The welfare of fish throughout the catching process can therefore be monitored.

Following these lines, the Carefish/catch project aims to promote better fishing standards by assessing animal welfare impacts in fisheries and improving fishing practices.

One important objective of the project is to identify key points of welfare hazards and suggest improvements to reduce the suffering of individuals in specific fishing methods. This would enable the establishment of welfare standards in the fisheries sector through a series of recommendations and guidelines to be implemented in the fisheries certification program Friend of the Sea.

Definitions and Abbreviations

(2) **Bycatch**: Part of a catch of a fishing unit taken incidentally in addition to the target species towards which fishing effort is directed. Some or all of it may be returned to the sea as discards, usually dead or dying.

(1) **Endangered** (threatened with extinction):
1 - Endangered Species is used as an Element within the GSSI Benchmark Tool and is explained below. The related term "Threatened" appears in the text of two Indicators as an example of bycatch species that are particularly vulnerable. The phrase "threatened…with serious risk of extinction" appears in the FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries (paragraph 31.1).
2 - Endangered: Taxa in danger of extinction and whose survival is unlikely if causal factors continue operating. Included are taxa whose numbers have been drastically reduced to a critical level or whose habitats have been so drastically impaired that they are deemed to be in immediate danger of extinction. Also included are those that possibly are already extinct, in so far as they definitely have not been seen in the wild in the past 50 years.
3 - Threatened with extinction: A category of organisms listed in CITES Annex 1. The vulnerability of a species to threats of extinction depends on its population demographics, biological characteristics, such as body size, trophic level, life cycle, breeding structure or social structure requirements for successful reproduction, and vulnerability due to aggregating habits, natural fluctuations in population size (dimensions of time and magnitude), residency/migratory patterns. This makes it impossible to give numerical values for population size or area of distribution that are applicable to all taxa.
"Protected" refers generally to any plant or animal that a government declares by law to warrant protection; most protected species are considered either threatened or endangered. A species that is recognized by national legislation, affording it legal protection due to its population decline in the wild. The decline could be as a result of human or other causes.

(2) **Fishery:** A unit determined by an authority or other entity that is engaged in raising and/or harvesting fish. Typically, the unit is defined in terms of some or all of the following: people involved, species or type of fish, area of water or seabed, method of fishing, class of boats, and purpose of the activities.

Unit of Certification (UoC): a vessel, fleet, or individual operator using a certain gear type, fishing on a particular target stock that is undergoing audit.

References:
(1) GSSI Glossary https://www.ourgssi.org/assets/GSSI-Benchmarking-Tool/GSSI-Global-Benchmark-Tool-V.1-October-2015.pdf
(2) FAO Term Portal http://www.fao.org/faoterm/en/?defaultCollId=21

Pole and line Fisheries

Pole and line or bait boat makes use of a simple apparatus, a pole or a rod attached to a line comprised of a single barbless hook at the end and live bait. The fisheries target mostly fast-moving schools of large pelagic fish, e.g. tuna species such as *Thunnus obesus* (bigeye tuna), *Thunnus alalunga* (albacore tuna), *Thunnus albacares* (Yellowfin tuna) or *Katsuwonus pelamis* (Skipjack tuna), but also tuna-like and billfish species.
Owing to its high species selectivity and low bycatch relative to other important fisheries such as purse seines, trawls and nets, it is generally seen as a more sustainable fishery. Furthermore, it is an important source of employment, sustenance, and food security for communities in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, the Maldives, among others, but also with economic and cultural relevance in Japan, Hawaii (USA), the Canary Islands (Spain) and the Azores (Portugal).
The fishing process is rather straightforward and includes various technical and methodological specifications dependent on the fishing location and the species being targeted. Firstly, fishing involves searching for live bait fish, such as natural tuna prey item species (e.g. small pelagics). Once caught and crowded, fish are picked into specialised live bait holding tanks filled with seawater. The following steps comprise a search operation to detect and identify tuna schools. In artisanal vessels, this is a time-consuming stage which might take around 70 to 80 per cent of the full fishing process. In more modern vessels, the use of SONARs to track fish and estimate school size considerably reduces this effort. Schools are often detected by seabird presence or surface foaming effect, usually around natural fishing aggregating devices (FADs) such as floating pieces of wood or around artificial fixed and drifting fads, the most advanced with communication and schools detecting systems.
Once a school of a sufficient size is detected, the vessel quickly intercepts the front of the shoal, and the main fishing operation begins from the aft, the starboard, or the port side of the vessel, or in combination from all three sides. This next fishing stage begins with the process of throwing the live bait fish, where a single or multiple fishers scoop out the bait fish into the sea near the vessels to attract the target fish, a process that continues throughout the fishing operation. Parallel to this, a process called spraying, which involves splashing water around the vessels either manually, using wooden logs, or mechanically, using water pumps, is commonly carried out, and the gear, sometimes attached to a lure that resembles one of the baitfish species, is dipped into the water. The tuna gets hooked if it inadvertently bites the hook instead of the baitfish and is instantly jerked out of the water onto the vessels using a swing action. However, other forms of retrieval, such as gaffing and manual dehooking, are also observed in certain fisheries.
Finally, on-board handling can range from leaving the hooked tuna on the vessel's deck until they are landed, to having a hydraulic conveyor belt that carries individual tunas into and under-deck storage chambers. Most vessels featured a ramped floor for landing tunas into a storage chamber, which freezes the animals at low temperatures using ice, ice slurry, or refrigerated seawater, with some equipped for blast freezing at -20°C to -40°C.

Reference: *Carefish report – Welfare assessment in pole and line fisheries.*
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1 – CAPTURE

	Requirement	Level
1.1	**Reduce operation time as much as possible.**	**Recommended**

Operation time: The full duration of a pole and line operation might differ depending on several aspects, e.g., target species, fishing area, etc.

The reduction of such a period would reduce the risk of pain, injuries, exhaustion or death by depredation, suffocation, exhaustion, physical injuries (e.g., mouth and internal injuries, bleeding wounds) or psychological impact due to restraining stress during dehooking, which should be done manually instead of jerking it out.

The auditor shall find out how long the operation time lasts by interviewing the crew and find out if there is a margin to reduce the operation time as much as possible, and if dehooking can be done manually. If there is space to reduce it, the UoC shall do it, and the auditor is requested to verify it.

	Requirement	Level
1.2	**When possible, instead of gaffing, the UoC shall use scoops to collect catches.**	**Recommended**

Gaffing leads to severe cuts and bruises on the fish's body, causing profuse bleeding, and its use should be reduced as much as possible.

Use of large diameter and highly resistant scoops net to bring fish on board should be an alternative to the use of gaff hooks.

The auditor shall verify that the UoC uses scoops to collect catches, instead of gaffs.

	Requirement	Level
1.3	**The vessel's deck should be padded with soft material to avoid injuries to fish.** **This soft material should be kept moist during all the fishing operations.**	**Recommended**

The UoC should implement measures to reduce damage from impact with the boat deck during the hauling on board phase (e.g. use of soft, moist, cloth-like panels).

The auditor shall verify compliance with the requirements through photos and interviews with the crew.

Requirement		Level
1.4	**When fishing for live bait, the UoC shall implement all applicable welfare measures.**	**Recommended**

The UoC, while fishing for live bait for pole and line fishing activities, shall implement the welfare measures applicable to the fishing method used in such activity.

The auditor shall verify and collect evidence that the UoC respects the welfare of live bait.

Requirement		Level
1.5	**The UoC shall use barbless hooks.**	**Recommended**

Barbless hooks are fishing hooks designed without a barb—the small, backwards-facing projection typically found on conventional hooks. Their smooth design allows the hook to penetrate the fish's mouth easily but also to be removed quickly and with minimal tissue damage.
Using barbless hooks significantly reduces physical injury and stress in fish during capture and handling. The absence of a barb 7inimize7 tearing of the mouth and surrounding tissues, shortens handling time, and facilitates a quicker release if non-target or undersized individuals are caught. This contributes to a lower post-release mortality and improves overall animal welfare within the fishing operation.
From a sustainability perspective, barbless hooks support more responsible fishing practices by decreasing unnecessary harm to marine organisms and enhancing the survival rates of released fish. They also simplify compliance with selective fishing and bycatch reduction programs. Adoption of barbless hooks aligns with Friend of the Sea's principles of environmental stewardship and ethical treatment of marine life.

The auditor shall verify compliance with the requirements through photos and interviews with the crew.
Please attach photos of hooks used by the UoC and provide technical details.

2 – ONBOARD HANDLING

Requirement		Level
2.1	**The UoC shall create and apply a codified procedure for handling catches, which shall take into account the welfare of target catches.**	**Essential**

There shall be a written procedure that considers what is addressed in the requirements of this section.

All the staff involved in fishing operations shall undergo training on the procedure.
Appropriate refresher courses shall be 8inimize8 by the UoC annually and for all new employees.
A designated and identifiable person in charge of training and monitoring shall be appointed.
The auditor shall report in the checklist:

- If a procedure exists.
- When the last course has been done or when it is scheduled.
- Who is the designated person in charge, by stating the name and role in the company.

The auditor shall attach the procedure and relevant documents to the audit report.

Requirement		Level
2.2	**Ensure efficient handling methods to 8inimize stress and injuries to the catch during dehooking.**	**Essential**

The UoC shall implement procedures to ensure that the handling and the dehooking are conducted with as little stress and damage as possible.
The UoC shall invest in training and awareness to increase the fishers' skills.

The auditor shall review the procedure and interview the crew to assess compliance with this requirement.

Requirement		Level
2.3	**Minimise air exposure.**	**Essential**

The removal of catches from their natural environment and their prolonged air exposure can produce stress and pain in catches. The UoC shall reduce to the minimum as much as possible the capture's air exposure from the time when catches are hauled on board until they are dead.
The use of a ramp or a conveyor belt to reduce the time fish spend on deck is recommended.

The auditor shall review the procedure and interview the crew to assess compliance with this requirement.

3 - STUNNING AND SLAUGHTER

Requirement		Level
3.1	**A codified procedure for stunning and slaughtering, focused on fish welfare, must be in place, with a designated supervisor and trainer.**	**Essential**

The procedure shall take into consideration the target species, type, and dimension of the vessel. The procedure shall include refresher courses for all crew directly involved in fishing operations.
General recommendations to decrease pain or suffering are to stun and slaughter animals as soon as possible when they arrive on board.
All the staff involved in fishing operations shall undergo training on the procedure.
Appropriate refresher courses shall be organised by the UoC annually and for all new employees.
A designated and identifiable person in charge of training and monitoring shall be appointed.
The auditor shall report in the checklist:

- If a procedure exists.
- When the last course has been done or when it is scheduled.
- Who is the designated person in charge, by stating the name and role in the company.

The auditor shall attach the procedure and relevant documents to the audit report.

Requirement		Level
3.2	**Use of appropriate and effective stunning and slaughtering tools by trained staff.**	**Essential**

Stunning and slaughtering tools should be effective to ensure rendering fish unconscious and to ensure a quick demise of the target species (e.g. use of Ikejime, fishing priest, or captive bolt pistol).
Tools shall be safely stored when not used.

The auditor shall attach to the report pictures of these tools.

Requirement		Level
3.3	**The UoC shall put catches in ice slurry, refrigerated seawater or blast dry freezers only after stunning to ensure swift hypothermia. Directly slaughtering by severing the aorta while unconscious could be an alternative.**	**Recommended**

The UoC must act as quickly as possible in stunning and freezing the fish.

The auditor shall verify compliance with the requirement.

4 – BY-CATCH

Requirement	Level

4.1	**There shall be a written procedure to manage appropriately the welfare of all bycatch species.**	**Essential**

This procedure shall address the sorting and release to ensure minimal stress and damage to bycatch.
The auditor shall read and assess the procedure to ensure its efficiency.

It is requested to attach the procedure to the audit report.

Requirement		Level
4.2	**The unit of certification subjects its employees to a course taught by experts on how to manage the release of accidental catches.**	**Recommended**

The course must include general notions on the biology of the potential bycatch present in that marine area.
The auditor is requested to gather information on:

- Who is handling the course?
- The frequency of the course.
- Attendance.
- Verify the modality and the training material.

Requirement		Level
4.3	**The unit of certification does not use Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs) or uses non-entangling FADs, Biodegradable FADs, Smart FADs, and reduces the time the FAD remains at sea.**	**Recommended**

1. Non-entangling FADs
Structures are designed to prevent accidental entanglement of species such as sharks and turtles.
They use rigid materials or no suspended nets.
Reduces the risk of suffocation or injury to animals circling the FAD.
2. Biodegradable FADs
Made from natural materials (palm leaves, jute ropes, bamboo) to prevent marine pollution from plastic and microplastics.
Less harmful to the environment if lost.
3. Smart FADs with sensors or cameras
They use echosounders or cameras to monitor which species are aggregating.
4. Minimum soaking time:
Reducing the time the FAD remains at sea decreases the likelihood of attracting species other than the target

tuna.
A practical example shall be attached as evidence of conformity.

	Requirement	Level
4.4	**The unit of certification is in contact with rescue centres or other competent entities specialised in the care of sea turtles and/or other species, on which it relies if there is a need to treat one or more injured animals. The crew must be instructed on how to manage these emergencies.**	**Essential**

This requirement covers sea turtles, marine mammals (cetaceans or seals), and sea birds.
The auditor shall report with which rescue centre or competent entity the UoC is in contact.

The auditor shall also verify the presence and the quality of instructions given to the crew.
Note: the rescue centre or the competent entity shall provide appropriate instructions to the crew.

	Requirement	Level
4.5	**The unit of certification informs the Port Authority and the nearest rescue centre in case of accidental catches.**	**Essential**

This requirement covers sea turtles, marine mammals (cetaceans or seals), and sea birds.
The auditor shall verify that the UoC has the right contacts of the Port Authority and the nearest rescue center.

5 – TRAINING

	Requirement	Level
5.1	**UoC staff involved in fishing operations must undergo fish welfare training conducted by experts.**	**Essential**

The auditor shall collect evidence of the training course held by experts (e.g. Fair Fish, FishEthoGroup) for all of its employees involved in fishing operations.

Requirement		Level
5.2	**The UoC must train one of its staff members as a fish welfare expert.**	**Essential**

The person chosen to become a fish welfare expert must complete the course required in requirement 5.1 and will be the point of reference for all fish welfare activities in their company.

The auditor shall indicate the person and collect evidence of training conformity.