

ISOFISH

ISOFISH Netting the toothfish poachers

At the 1997 meeting of CCAMLR (Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources), the Australian delegation's conservation and industry observers decided that, if the toothfish poaching problem was to be fixed, it could not be left to governments—we would have to do it ourselves! A remarkable partnership was formed, based on coinciding interests – industry wanted to save their lucrative fishery from collapse while we conservationists wanted to save albatrosses (caught on the longliners' hooks and drowned) from extinction. Conservationists and licensed fishers pooled their networks and, backed by industry money, the TCT launched an initiative led by Alistair Graham: the International Southern Ocean Longline Fisheries Information Clearinghouse – or ISOFISH, for short. In 1998 a series of reports, based on information derived from the licensed fishers' intimate knowledge of their illegal competition, had a devastating media impact around the world. The poachers knew the limits of government power but had never been attacked by NGOs before – the advantage of surprise was complete! Estimates of levels of toothfish poaching fell from 50–60,000 tonnes per annum (tpa) to 10–15,000 tpa – and the price of toothfish trebled (so licensed fishers gained huge financial benefits from supporting ISOFISH – a debt they have never forgotten).

CCAMLR's rather legalistic way of describing the problem (illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing) rapidly became a globally recognised acronym, 'IUU fishing'. By 2001 the world's peak fisheries body, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), had adopted an International Plan of Action to deal with IUU fishing. Meanwhile, the

poachers had not given up. In 2003, in a move that shocked the world of fishing, a Hong Kong-based fish trader put back together the poaching networks that ISOFISH had helped disrupt and ran a fleet of longliners – the so-called 'Alphabet boats' – in an operation stealing more than US\$100m-worth of fish a year from the Kerguelen Plateau. This entry of organised crime into the previously anarchic world of IUU fishing was enough to persuade the TCT that it was time to close down ISOFISH and leave it to the bigger boys. This poaching operation has also been disrupted by concerted efforts by governments now fully aware of the dangers posed by IUU fishing. The estimated levels of incidental deaths of albatross that have been caught on longline hooks, however, means that many Southern Ocean populations still face extinction unless more is done.

