



Twentieth SPREP Meeting

Apia, Samoa
17 – 20 November 2009



Agenda Item 9.1.1: Updates of the Regional Marine Species Programme

Purpose of paper

1. To update the Meeting on the progress on the:
 - development of the regional action plan for sharks;
 - regional arrangements for the conservation of cetaceans (whales and dolphins), dugongs and marine turtles under the auspices of the Convention for the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) in the Pacific Islands Region; and
 - production of the regional guidelines for whale and dolphin watching.
2. The paper also seeks the endorsement of the Meeting for:
 - the development of the recovery plan for Oceania humpback whales, and
 - collaboration for the initiative to improve information of turtle stocks in the region through the collection of turtle tissues for genetic analysis.

Background

3. During the 18th SPREP Meeting (18SM) in 2007, the Secretariat submitted Working Paper WP.8.1.1 which sought the Meeting's approval of the revised Regional Marine Species Programme Framework with action plans for 2008-2012, along with the proposal of including sharks as one of the marine species of special interest, as well as providing an update on the progress of regional arrangements for the conservation of Cetaceans, Dugongs and Marine Turtles under the auspices of CMS in the Pacific islands region. The 2007 Meeting subsequently:

- Endorsed the revised marine species programme framework for 2008-2012;
- Agreed to the inclusion of sharks as a species of special interest to the regional marine species programme framework 2008-2012;

- Directed the Secretariat to collaborate with other relevant regional IGOs, in particular, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), SPC, and FFA in progressing an appropriate approach in developing a regional action plan for sharks, noting the decision 2006/05 by the Third Regular Session of WCPFC on Conservation and Management Measure for Sharks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean;
- Encouraged participating PICTs who have not signed the MoU for the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands region under the auspices of CMS to consider signing the MOU;
- Encouraged dugong range states and territories to sign the MoU for conservation and management of dugongs in the southeast Asian region under the auspices of CMS when it is open for signature; and
- Urged Members who are parties to CMS and the CMS Secretariat, in collaboration with SPREP, to initiate the first meeting to develop the MoU for the conservation of marine turtles in the Pacific.

a. Regional Action Plan for Sharks

4. Following the decision by the Meeting in 2007, the Secretariat initiated communication with SPC, FFA and WCPFC to establish a working group, consisting of one representative from each, to progress the development of a regional action plan for sharks. This working group met in March 2008 and decided that a consultant was necessary to facilitate the development and production of a draft regional action plan. A joint proposal was developed and submitted to FAO for funding this work. The proposal was approved in late 2008 and advertisement for the consultancy was circulated in early 2009. A total of 24 individuals and firms submitted proposals. The consultancy work will include the following steps:

- Gathering information on National Plan of Action (NPOA) – Sharks implemented by WCPFC Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs) and on existing regional action plans for other marine species.
- Producing an outline for a PI-RPOA Sharks, reflecting the Objective and Scope.
- Meeting with focal points from FFA, SPC, SPREP and WCPFC, to discuss the outline and potential contents of the PI-RPOA Sharks.
- Gathering data, information and advice on fisheries monitoring (i.e. shark species identification, catch reporting, etc.) and options for scientific analysis, including catch estimation, the feasibility of shark stock assessment and interim indicators of fishing impacts.
- Producing a draft PI-RPOA Sharks for review by focal points from SPC, WCPFC, SPREP and FFA.
- Incorporating comments on the draft PI-RPOA Sharks as directed from the focal points.

- Attending a secondary meeting with the formal contacts if required.
 - Preparing a final draft of the PIRPOA Sharks document for presentation by the focal points to FFC, SPREP Governing Council, and SPC Heads of Fisheries
5. The consultancy is scheduled to complete the draft action plan by October 2009 after which it will be circulated to members for review before finalization and submission to each respective Governing Council for endorsement in 2010.

b. Regional arrangements for Cetaceans, Marine Turtles and Dugongs under the auspices of CMS

MoU for the Conservation of Cetaceans and their Habitats

6. By June 2009, eleven SPREP member countries and five collaborating organizations have signed the MoU for the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands region. The MoU was concluded under the auspices of CMS in partnership with SPREP and was open for signature during the SPREP meeting in 2006 in Noumea. The First Meeting of Signatories to the MoU was held in March 2007, while the second meeting is scheduled in July 2009. The second meeting will include a signing ceremony for new signatories, discussion on coordination of the MoU, and the adoption of the regional whale and dolphin action plan 2008-2012 as its action plan.

Arrangement for the Conservation of Marine Turtles in the Pacific

7. The first meeting to develop and negotiate an arrangement for the conservation of marine turtles in the Pacific under CMS still has not taken place yet, though SPREP continues to negotiate with the CMS Secretariat and the Oceania CMS lead party to initiate this first meeting.

8. During the International Sea Turtle Symposium in Brisbane in February 2009, SPREP, in collaboration with partners, coordinated a Pacific Islands region marine turtle meeting where the envisaged arrangement was one of the topics discussed. The meeting recommended that a gap analysis of existing arrangements which also takes into consideration the protection of marine turtles be conducted in light of the envisaged arrangement. It was also felt that it would be ideal to also plan for another turtle arrangement meeting at the scheduled meeting of signatories to the Cetacean MoU in Noumea in July 2009 where the gap analysis, scope and the type of arrangement preferred can be discussed in detail.

MoU on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their habitats

9. The dugong MoU under the auspices of CMS was opened for signature in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates in October 2007. The MoU covers the whole dugong range and includes six SPREP member states: Australia, PNG, Solomon Islands, Palau, New Caledonia and Vanuatu. SPREP assisted in facilitating the participation of SPREP dugong range states in meetings leading up to signing. SPREP also circulated a paper encouraging range states to sign the MoU given its relevance to regional effort and in particular the SPREP regional Dugong Action Plan. To date only Australia has signed the dugong MoU.

c. Pacific Islands regional guidelines for whale and dolphin watching

10. Whale and dolphin watching is becoming a very important income generating avenue in the Pacific Islands and thus its sustainability is of utmost importance, not only for the industry itself but ensuring that there is negligible impact on the animals “being watched”. The current regional whale and dolphin action plan 2008-2012 recommends the development of region-wide whale and dolphin watching guidelines as a priority. In collaboration with IFAW and Operation Cetaces, a working group was established and met in April 2007 to formulate the guidelines. These were subsequently submitted to member countries and territories for review before finalization. The guidelines were launched at the International Marine Mammal Marine Protected Areas on Maui (Hawaii) at the end of March 2009. The guidelines aim to minimize the potential impacts of tourism activities on whales, dolphins and their environment and are meant to assist member countries and territories develop their own national guidelines as well as conditions and regulations relevant and appropriate to their own situation for a more responsible and sustainable environment. The guidelines are attached as Attachment 1.

d. Recovery plan for Oceania humpback whales

11. The 2008 IUCN Red List update of threat listing for cetaceans moved humpback whales globally from “vulnerable” to “least concern”. However, due largely to work conducted in the Pacific Islands region, an exception was made for the Oceania humpback population (as well as that in the Arabian Sea) which was re-classified from “vulnerable” to “endangered”. This decision was based on the fact that this humpback population is likely to have declined more than 70 per cent in the last 3 generations (since 1942), i.e. from the population size prior to whaling. While humpback whales in many parts of the world are showing signs of recovery from whaling, most of the small breeding populations in the South Pacific remain at extremely low levels with some (e.g. Fiji) still remaining vulnerable to local extinction. The Oceania humpback population is genetically and demographically isolated from adjacent breeding stocks and includes sub-stocks in Eastern Australia, New Caledonia, Tonga, Cook Islands and French Polynesia.

12. Humpback whales also underpin the economic benefits derived from the whale watching industry in many Pacific Island states, recently valued at more than USD \$21 million.

13. Given the increase in threat status for the Oceania humpback population, the development of a recovery plan should be pursued. The regional Whale and Dolphin Action Plan 2008-2012 highlights objectives and actions that promote recovery of depleted cetacean stocks and reducing threats to them. At its annual meeting in February 2009, the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium (SPWRC) initiated work towards the development of a recovery plan for the Oceania humpback population. The development of the recovery plan is proposed as a joint coordinated undertaking between the SPWRC and SPREP involving input from a multidisciplinary recovery team. The recovery plan will contribute to 8 of the 9 theme areas in the regional WDAP, including capacity-building with objectives as follows:

- the recovery of populations of humpback whales utilising waters of the Oceania region so that these populations and sub-populations can be considered at very low or no risk from human impacts;
- the recovery of the distribution and abundance of humpback whales utilising the Oceania region to levels similar to the pre-exploitation levels for this species;
- the mitigation of anthropogenic impacts;
- increased public awareness of humpback whales and their habitat requirements within the Oceania region; and
- the sustainable development of whale watching tourism for the economic benefit of Pacific Island communities.

14. The general outline of steps in developing the recovery plan is as follows:

- development of an issues and options concept paper by the Steering Group with input from a multidisciplinary recovery team (this includes the draft framework for the recovery plan, recovery plan objectives, research priorities, effort, threats, partnerships etc.);
- submission of the issues and option concept paper for endorsement by signatories to the CMS Cetacean MoU and by the SPREP Meeting in 2009;
- drafting of a recovery plan by steering group, with input from the recovery team;
- circulation of a draft recovery plan to members for comments; and
- finalisation and submission of the recovery plan for SPREP Meeting endorsement in 2010.

15. The issues and options concept paper for the development of the Oceania humpback whale recovery plan is attached as Attachment 2.

e. Marine turtle tissue sampling and analysis

16. Very little information is available on the often small and scattered marine turtle nesting populations in the Pacific Islands region. Apart from migration data from flipper and satellite tagging, there is limited information relative to the life history of the populations in the region including their genetic relation to other populations. This information is vitally important in the formulation of management strategies. The regional marine turtle action plan 2008-2012 gives priority to the research issue of identifying turtle stocks in the region to assist in managing these stocks.

17. In March 2008, SPREP, via a Circular, requested the assistance of members in facilitating a study to identify major turtle stocks in the Pacific Islands. This involves the collection of turtle tissue samples, obtaining the necessary permits and shipment.

18. During the Pacific Islands region marine turtle meeting at the International sea turtle symposium in Brisbane, February 2009, it was agreed that members need to collaborate to ensure the project for the collection and analysis of turtle tissues from the region is successful. It was agreed that basic supplies for collection and storage of samples will be provided and that assistance will also be provided for the shipment of the materials as well as facilitating permits where necessary in particular, CITES permits. It was also agreed that samples for US-affiliates as already initiated will continue to be sent for analysis to Dr Peter Dutton of NOAA while samples from other members will be sent for analysis to Dr Nancy FitzSimmons of the University of Canberra, Australia. A recent development for samples going to Australia is that samples can be sent to USP for DNA extraction and then DNA material sent to Australia for analysis. Dr FitzSimmons and Dr Dutton are coordinating their laboratory methodologies and are collaborating on the meta-analysis of the data with the primary goal to characterize all the key nesting populations to determine the genetic stock structure through-out the Pacific for all species of marine turtles.

Recommendations

19. The Meeting is invited to:

- **note** the status of the progress to develop the regional action plan for sharks;
- **note** the outcomes of the second meeting of Signatories to the MoU on the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands region;
- **encourage** member countries that have not yet sign the MoU on the conservation of cetaceans and their habitats in the Pacific Islands region to sign;
- **note** the outcomes of the “informal” meeting on a marine turtle arrangement in the region in Noumea, New Caledonia, July 2009, in particular, the results of the gap analysis;

- **urge** Members who are parties to CMS and the CMS Secretariat, in collaboration with SPREP, to initiate the first meeting to negotiate an arrangement for the conservation of marine turtles in the Pacific;
 - **encourage** members that are dugong range states to sign the CMS MoU on the Conservation and Management of Dugongs and their habitats throughout its range;
 - **encourage** members to use the Pacific Islands regional guidelines for whale and dolphin watching in the development of national guidelines, conditions and regulations for whale and dolphin watching;
 - **endorse** the development and process for the recovery plan for Oceania humpback whales;
 - **invite** nominations of appropriate national officials to be included in the Recovery Team for the recovery plan for Ocean humpback whales;
 - **endorse** the project to collect turtle tissues for genetic analysis and urge all members to fully cooperate in its implementation where possible.
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8 May 2009