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Update on the ABNJ (Common Oceans) Tuna Project's Shark and Bycatch Components

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Abstract

This paper presents a brief overview of progress with the ABNJ (Common Oceans) Tuna Project activities being led by the WCPFC Secretariat and the SPC. These activities are comprised of three components: i) shark data improvement and harmonization; ii) shark stock assessment and management; and iii) global bycatch management and information. Under the first component the project is contributing to the harmonization of observer longline bycatch data fields, the t-RFMO bycatch data exchange proposal, whale shark post-release mortality tagging, and compilation of shark life history information. Under the second component, one of four pan-Pacific shark stock assessments is commencing in the form of a southern hemisphere porbeagle stock status assessment, and priorities for the remaining three assessments are being considered. Under the third component of bycatch mitigation, SPC has begun re-development work on the Bycatch Management Information System (BMIS) and is proposing to hold sea turtle mitigation analysis workshops in 2016. Feedback from stakeholders is invited on current and proposed activities, and opportunities for synergistic collaborations are continuously sought.

1 Introduction

The WCPFC, along with the four other tuna Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (t-RFMOs), is a partner in the Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (ABNJ) – often referred to as Common Oceans – Tuna Project (www.commonoceans.org). The objective of this project is to achieve efficient and sustainable management of fisheries resources and biodiversity conservation in marine areas that do not fall under the responsibility of any one country. Within this set of activities WCPFC has committed to leading three components:

- Shark Data Improvement and Harmonization
- Shark Assessment and Management
- Global Bycatch Information and Management

The first two components involve working in partnership with the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) to improve shark monitoring and management across the pan-Pacific region. The third component is global in scope and focuses on developing a database of bycatch mitigation and management information and conducting workshops to analyse mitigation data. A description of the work programme was presented to SC10 (Nicol and Clarke 2014) and has now become the basis for an Execution Agreement between the implementing agency, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the WCPFC which was signed on 25 October 2014. A Memorandum of Understanding between WCPFC and SPC for activities under the ABNJ Tuna Project was signed on 20 January 2015. The project runs through January 2019 and reports every six months to FAO, and to the WCPFC at the annual Scientific Committee and Commission meetings.

2 Shark Data Improvement and Harmonization

The objective of this component is to work toward developing a practical and consistent approach to monitoring the status of sharks caught by ABNJ tuna fisheries. It focuses on identifying the data deficiencies which inhibit management and proposes strategies to obtain more data through field studies and better information return from fisheries.

Highlights for the first year of the project include:

- A study on harmonizing key data fields collected by longline observers which was suggested at the Keelung Tuna RFMO Expert Working Group meeting has been undertaken (see Gilman et al. 2015).
- A proposal for a bycatch data exchange protocol (BDEP) which was suggested at the Keelung Tuna RFMO Expert Working Group meeting has been circulated to the t-RMFO Secretariats and will be presented to WCPFC at SC11 (see Clarke et al. 2015a).
- At the request of ABNJ Partner NOAA, which has donated ten satellite tags for post-release mortality studies, WCPFC and SPC trained observers in Papua New Guinea (a whale shark hotspot) in June 2015 to deploy tags (see NOAA Fisheries-USA et al. 2015).
- In support of WCPFC funding for a Shark Life History Expert Panel the ABNJ provided organization, chairing and reporting for the workshop held in Cairns, Australia in April (Clarke et al. 2015b).
- A proposal for streamlining and clarifying the shark-related content of SPC's annual report on "Scientific Data Available to the WCPFC" was submitted to SC11 (see Clarke 2015).

In the second year of the project the following activities are planned:

- A "Global Shark Browser" product will be released in November 2015. This is being designed in an easily updated format and will be an heuristic tool for comparing data holdings and shark status between regions.
- Coordination of proposals for observer data harmonization and the bycatch data exchange protocol across the t-RFMOs and advancement of other data improvement studies.
- Expansion of the post-release mortality tagging programme to other species.

3 Shark Assessment and Management

The objective of this component is to identify risks and priorities for shark conservation through assessment, using new data generated by the component above and improved tools developed under this component as appropriate. It will evaluate the existing management framework and develop measures to strengthen shark management by t-RFMOs.

Highlights for the first year of the project include:

- Papers on constructing catch histories for sharks from shark fin trade data were presented to IOTC (Clarke 2014a) and ICCAT (Clarke 2015a).
- Papers on the nexus between CITES and t-RFMO shark management were presented to WCPFC (Clarke et al. 2014) and IOTC (Clarke and IOTC 2014).
- In response to a request from CCSBT in March, the ABNJ Tuna Project and WCPFC Secretariat agreed to coordinate a southern hemisphere porbeagle stock status assessment. Work will commence in August 2015 (WCPFC 2015).

In the second year of the project the following activities are planned:

- Coordination of the southern hemisphere porbeagle stock status assessment leading to production of a Draft Stock Status Assessment Report by 30 June 2016.
- Identification, and potentially initiation, of a second pan-Pacific shark stock status assessment.
- Work with IATTC to advance stock status assessment methods for data poor sharks.

4 Global Bycatch Information and Management

The objective of this component is to collate, catalyze and disseminate new information that will direct effective management to mitigate impacts on bycatch species including sharks, seabirds, sea turtles and cetaceans. This is expected to help reduce technical uncertainties across a range of stakeholders, allowing t-RFMO discussions to focus on management issues such as cost and feasibility.

Highlights for the first year of the project include:

- SPC updated the information in the Bycatch Management Information System with funding from ABNJ partner ISSF.
- A paper describing the proposed re-design of the Bycatch Management Information System (BMIS) was submitted to SC11 (see Fitzsimmons et al. 2015).
- A proposal for an analysis of sea turtle mitigation measure effectiveness in tuna longline fisheries was submitted to SC11 (see Clarke et al. 2015c).
- A proposal for improving mitigation reporting and safe release methods for whale sharks encircled in the purse seine fishery was submitted to SC11 (see Clarke 2015c).

In the second year of the project the following activities are planned:

- Plan for and hold the first of a pair of workshops to analyse the effectiveness of mitigation measures for sea turtles in tuna longline fisheries.
- Progress the re-development of the BMIS including new modules to contain management information and stock status.
- Identify and begin planning for a second pair of workshops on mitigation likely to focus on sharks in the Pacific and possibly relating to spatial/temporal management.

5 Consultation

The work programme for the second year of the project will be flexible with respect to recommendations from SC11, either as a result of comments on ABNJ Tuna Project papers presented there or in response to major bycatch initiatives such as the new Shark Research Plan. A further update on the second year work programme will be presented at a Sharks and Bycatch Consultative Committee session to be held in the margins of WCPFC12. WCPFC CCMs and other interested parties are welcome to contact the ABNJ Tuna Project's Technical Coordinator-Sharks and Bycatch at any time with ideas for collaborative projects.

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