

IUCN Grouper/Wrasse Specialist Group news

Members of the Specialist Group met again, this time in Bali, at the International Coral Reef Symposium, and there will be another meeting in Durban, for those fortunate enough to attend the Indo-Pacific Fish Conference in May. We continue to gather speed with our Red List Assessments with the welcome addition of a research assistant, Andy Cornish, to the Hong Kong office. Andy will be collecting information on a key list of about 30 species of groupers and wrasses that we have identified as priority species for listing because of concerns expressed over their status in some areas. These include, from the Indo-Pacific, the red grouper, *Epinephelus akaara*, the longtooth grouper, *E. bruneus*, the orange-spotted grouper, *E. coioides*, the tiger grouper, *E. fuscoguttatus*, the potato grouper, *E. tukula*, the humpback grouper, *Cromileptes altivelis*, the California sheepshead wrasse, *Semicossyphus pulcher*, with a revision of the listing of the humphead wrasse, *Cheilinus undulatus*, because more information is available on this species. From the tropical Atlantic, we are currently looking at the gag

grouper, *Mycteroperca microlepis*, and the red grouper, *E. morio*, amongst other species.

We should be very grateful to learn of any unpublished information on any of these species. Also, we would be interested to learn from readers what other species need to be assessed as a priority. Note that it is the ultimate aim of this group to assess the condition of all groupers and wrasses, irrespective of their conservation or management status, to better understand the overall status of these two families, to enable us to take a closer look at species that might need management follow-up and to identify where we need to address data shortfalls. We shall soon have a website to keep those of you who are interested up-to-date with the activities of this group.

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Jack Randall sees dramatic decline in large reef fish in Indonesia

A recent conversation with Jack Randall, the most experienced coral reef fish taxonomist in the world, revealed some alarming observations he has made on the state of populations of large fish in eastern Indonesia. In response to my request for a written account of his observations for this publication, he emailed me the following. Bob Johannes

I have been diving in Indonesia since 1975. In late 1980s I was guest lecturer for several cruises from Ambon to Bali or vice versa on the dive vessel *Island Explorer*. To ensure that the divers would see sharks and large bony fishes, most of our dive locations were well away from heavily populated areas where fishing was already impacting the numbers of larger fishes.

In 1994 I was guest on a dive cruise on the 43-m *Cehili* to the Sangihe Islands north of Manado. These islands are sparsely populated compared to most of the islands of Indonesia, so we were expecting to see reefs with an abundance of large fishes. After several days of diving I asked the other divers if they had seen any groupers, snappers, emperors, or jacks of any reasonable size. All said no. We went ashore at one of the islands and asked why there were so few large fishes. The answer was that Taiwan fishing vessels had been fishing off the islands.

Commencing on 29 September 1999 I was guest on the 35-m *Pelagian* for a two-week dive cruise from

Sulawesi to Bali via the Molucca Islands and the Banda Sea. The person who chartered the vessel asked Captain Matt Hedrick to go to remote islands and reefs with the hope of seeing some large fishes and sharks for underwater photography (all the divers were ardent underwater photographers). Here is what I wrote in my Christmas Newsletter, "I did not see a single shark the whole cruise, only one grouper larger than 18 inches, and no Napoleon wrasses." In the late 1980s where I had dived on some of the same reefs, there were always large fishes to be seen.

My observations on the severe depletion of the large food fishes from Indonesian reefs are those of many other concerned persons. What needs to be done, and soon, is the establishment of a system of no-take marine reserves throughout Indonesia so that breeding populations of these valuable fishes can be restored, and their larvae can then seed the areas where unrestricted fishing is allowed.

