

Outcomes from Eighth Regular Session of WCPFC disappointing

The Eighth Regular Session of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) met in Guam from 26–30 March 2012. This was a much-anticipated meeting that was originally scheduled to be held in December 2011 in Koror, Palau, but was delayed due to electrical power troubles that occurred in Palau. The meeting was attended by SPC's Oceanic Fisheries Programme Manager John Hampton, Principal Fisheries Scientist (Stock Assessment) Shelton Harley and Principal Fisheries Scientist (Data Management) Peter Williams.

Over 500 participants from member and cooperating non-member countries and territories attended the meeting. There were also many delegates from various non-governmental organisations, who were representing industry and environmental interests.

On the meeting agenda was the new conservation and management measure (CMM) for the tropical tuna fishery. The scientific advice clearly indicated that the previous CMM needed strengthening. Also on the agenda and of interest to WCPFC members were:

- highlighting the recent large increases in South Pacific albacore catches, and seeking ways to give this stock, which is very important to many domestic longline fisheries, better protection;
- taking steps to reduce fishing impacts on oceanic whitetip sharks (where the science indicated some real sustainability concerns); and
- offering protection to whale sharks and cetaceans, which are potentially extremely vulnerable to fishing mortality and impacted on by the purse-seine fishery.

It is fair to say that the outcomes of most of the key issues were very disappointing, and represented a “wake-up call” to the WCPFC. While all members were able to agree that more restrictions were needed for the tropical tuna fishery, they were unable to agree on which fleets were to take on the additional restrictions. A further disappointment was that previously highly contentious measures, such as the closure of the high seas pockets to purse-seine fishing, lapsed and it was impossible for members to agree to keep the closure in place. The final

outcome on the management of tropical tunas was a simple “carry-over” measure aimed to keep most of the same limits in place for 2012 with a view to continue development of a new CMM at the Ninth Regular Session, which will be held in the Philippines in December 2012.

Of particular concern to the more southern countries, the South Pacific albacore discussion was held on the final afternoon. This was also disappointing to some industry and environmental groups who expressed particular concern about South Pacific albacore in the lead-up to the meeting. A new stock assessment is currently being undertaken for this stock and will be reviewed during the annual session of the WCPFC's Scientific Committee, which will be held in South Korea in August 2012.

There were some accomplishments during the meeting, these being an agreement on “no-retention” of oceanic whitetip sharks as an initial step for managing this stock while a new stock assessment is being undertaken (also due for review in August 2012) and potential management options evaluated. Members also agreed on the need for a CMM to protect cetaceans from purse-seine fishing. In addition, some important information on the South Pacific swordfish fishery is now available and there will be concerted research on this stock beginning in 2012.

One outcome of particular interest to those members with fisheries either under Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification or currently seeking it, was the agreement to terms of reference and the scheduling of the WCPFC's first workshop on management objectives. This should give WCPFC members the opportunity to discuss what they hope to achieve from the fishery, which should lead to improved negotiations and, more importantly, some discussion of reference points and harvest control rules, which are critical components of MSC-certified fisheries. This meeting is scheduled to be held immediately prior to WCPFC 9 in December 2012, and will feature analyses from SPC's Oceanic Fisheries Programme on reference points and harvest control rules.



A significant accomplishment of the meeting was the agreement to “no-retention” of oceanic whitetip sharks by tuna fishing boats (Image: Terry Goss Photography USA/Marine Photobank).

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