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	منظمة الأغذية والزراعة للأمم المتحدة	联合国 粮食及 农业组织	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations	Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'alimentation et l'agriculture	Продовольственная и сельскохозяйственная организация Объединенных Наций	Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Agricultura y la Alimentación
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WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION (WECAFC)

TWELFTH (VIRTUAL) SESSION OF THE SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY GROUP (SAG)

19-20 June 2023

Recommendations to the 19th session of WECAFC for SAG review

Amendment to Recommendation WECAFC/XVIII/2022/4

**(Updated 15 March 2023 at
the Fifth Meeting) of the**

CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM-Working Group on Spawning Aggregations (SAWG)

Cover Note

The SAWG has held two meetings since the adoption of the Recommendation WECAFC/17/2019/14 “*On the Sustainable Management of Spawning Aggregations and Aggregating Species*” at the 17th Session of the Commission (WECAFC17) held from 15-18 July 2019. This document enshrined 10 recommendations which emerged from commitments made to an associated 2018-2020 work plan at the second meeting of the SAWG in March 2018. These recommendations were subject to review at the third meeting of SAWG in December 2019, during which many of these recommendations were found to have been accomplished through diligent intersessional efforts.

The advancement of the formal adoption process for the *Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Draft Fishery Management Plan* (FSAMP) and completion of the “*Big Fish*” Regional Communications Strategy now demand elevated levels of commitment for their most needed implementation. Annual calls for regional harmonization of closed seasons and strengthened enforcement have been issued, along with short films for stakeholder engagement. Many activities have also been implemented at the member State level, including status assessments, passing of legislation and the creation of protected areas.

It is recognized that at the regional level, many of the data-dependent recommendations have not been achieved, impeded by data scarcity and resource limitations for implementation of associated high-level tasks. Fundraising efforts are ongoing to support the development of projects to determine the status of all known FSA sites, and to produce a set of standard monitoring protocols and sustain an associated regional monitoring database.

Another gap is the lack of national implementation of a seasonal closure for Nassau grouper and mutton snapper as called for in FSAMP. Recognizing the need for this measure, the Chair of the WECAFC Executive Committee sent a letter to the WECAFC membership in August 2020 strongly encouraging member States to establish synchronized regional closed seasons for Nassau grouper and mutton snapper to safeguard their spawning aggregations, and promote their effective conservation, management, and development.

The transition from the 2018-2020 workplan to the 2021-2025 workplan reaffirms the commitment of the SAWG to procure funding to pursue its data dependent objectives, and to establish a framework to facilitate regional monitoring of FSA management trends by WECAFC. The Fifth meeting of the SAWG had to be re-scheduled given Covid-19 travel restrictions, and as such, opportunities to achieve concrete results toward conservation and recovery of the FSAs continue to be postponed. The need for strong education and communication should be highlighted.

In the meantime, existing recommendations have been modified to reflect the status of deliverables. These recommendations call for adoption and implementation of the FSAMP, and actions to advance improved data collection, assessment, communication, and outreach for the conservation of FSAs. They also promote capacity building and the mobilization of resources to assist WECAFC members conduct priority research, monitoring, management, and enforcement activities.

The ramifications of not adopting these recommendations include the perpetuation of gaps in knowledge and critical information necessary to guide decision makers, inadequate protection and management of FSAs, and overexploitation of FSAs that [further] threatens their sustainability.

Preamble

The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC):

- RECALLING that the objective of the Commission is to promote the effective conservation, management and development of the living marine resources within the area of competence of the Commission, in accordance with the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication and to address common problems of fisheries management and development faced by members of the Commission;
- REAFFIRMING its commitment to support management and implementation of regional strategies and regulations to protect spawning aggregations and aggregating species through the establishment of the WECAFC Working Group on Spawning Aggregations (SAWG) at the 14th session of WECAFC in 2012.
- NOTING that stocks of many species of groupers and snappers in the Caribbean have declined significantly in the last three decades, some of their fish spawning aggregations (FSAs) have declined or disappeared and that immediate action is required to stop further reductions.
- MINDFUL that many fishers' livelihoods are dependent on harvest from spawning aggregations and the fisheries that they support, but also that these fishers have experience and expertise that could be invaluable in the conservation, management, and possible tourism at such sites and that the development of economic alternatives for affected fishers should accompany efforts to halt fishing during spawning periods or close areas where spawning occurs.
- REAFFIRMING the recommendations of the Declaration of Miami (2013) issued at the 1st CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM Working Group on Spawning Aggregations.
- REAFFIRMING and supporting the recommendations and the workplan from the 2nd meeting of the CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM Working Group on Spawning Aggregations.
- NOTING members' commitment to the 2018 SAWG workplan, various planned actions and that activities are well underway,
- COMMITTED to individually and collectively taking measures and actions to further improve the management and conservation of fish spawning aggregations and species that aggregate to spawn in the Wider Caribbean Region

Action Items

The CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA-/CRFM-Working Group on Spawning Aggregations, at its Third and Fourth Meetings on 18-19 December 2019 and 9-10 November 2020, ADOPTS in conformity with the provision of Article 6 (h) of the Revised Statutes of the WECAFC the RECOMMENDATION that:

1. WECAFC, CFMC, and as appropriate CRFM, OSPESCA, and CEP-SPAW support the national adoption and strategic implementation of a **Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fisheries Management Plan by all Member States**.
2. WECAFC Secretariat and Members invest resources and support the **standardization of existing monitoring programs**, or introduction where these do not exist, to coalesce them into a unified regional monitoring program utilizing standard protocols to share data designed to track the status and trends of aggregations and the species that form them and thus contribute to local, national, and regional management efforts.
3. Members of WECAFC call for **standardized and appropriate measures to protect Fish Spawning Aggregations (FSAs)** at the national, regional, and international scale, including strengthening enforcement of closed seasons, closed areas, sales bans during the closed season, and international collaboration and communication around law enforcement.
4. Members of WECAFC agree upon and adopt, as a precautionary measure, a **regional seasonal closure for all commercial and recreational fishing of Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)**, at least for the period 1 December – 31 March and that Members will not permit export or commercial sale of Nassau grouper or its products (e.g., roe, fillets) for the duration of the seasonal closure.
5. Members of WECAFC **determine the status and timing of spawning seasons** known Fish Spawning Aggregation (FSA) sites with emphasis on FSAs of mutton snapper and Nassau grouper.
6. WECAFC Secretariat supports an **assessment of the direct and indirect economic value of FSA fisheries and FSA-associated species** and the **socio-economic impact of proposed management measures** to inform future management decision-making.
7. **Members are encouraged to offer training and/or resources to fishers** (displaced due to FSA closures) **in monitoring, research, assessment, best practice for fish release (e.g. descending devices) and suitable economic alternatives**. Fishers and other stakeholders to be involved in cooperative research and FSA management.
8. The WECAFC Secretariat and Members support and promote a **regional outreach and communication strategy** on conservation and management of FSAs.
9. Members of WECAFC prioritize **FSAs, Nassau grouper, mutton snapper and other aggregating species for monitoring, conservation, and management based on status, vulnerability, interval since last assessment and Members' institutional capacity**. Member states should provide information to the SAWG and WECAFC Scientific Advisory Group (SAG) to facilitate prioritization of FSAs for allocation of regional support.
10. The WECAFC Secretariat, together with the Members of WECAFC, seek to **mobilize resources to assist the Members in the implementation** of priority research, monitoring, enforcement, management and conservation of FSAs and the species that form them, with particular focus on mutton snapper and Nassau Grouper.

11. Recommends the establishment of a **Fish Aggregation Management Plan Coordination Committee** within the SAWG as recommended in the FSA regional management plan that could be comprised by no more than 10 members with broad regional representation (1 from the 6 WECAFC marine ecoregions, 1 from Cartagena Convention/SPAW-RAC, 1 from English speaking fisher organization, 1 from Spanish speaking fisher organisation, and a general coordinator). This is considered a priority to support mainstreaming of the implementation of the Regional FSA Management Plan.
12. The SAWG recommends that Nassau grouper and mutton snapper be elevated to WECAFC Group 1 species for the implementation of the FSAMP.

Amendment to Recommendation WECAFC/XVIII/2022/3

(Updated 16 March 2023 at

the Sixth Meeting) of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen
Conch

**Draft AMENDED RECOMMENDATION WECAFC/XVIII/2022/3 ON INCREASED EFFORTS
IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL QUEEN CONCH FISHERIES
MANAGEMENT AND CONSERVATION PLAN IN THE WECAFC REGION**

“Managing queen conch fisheries presents a broad range of challenges, including the complex biology of the species, uncertainty of catch and effort data, illegal trade, weak surveillance and enforcement mechanisms, unsustainable fishing practices, and even the frequency of severe dive accidents impacting on the quality of life and living conditions of entire towns. Problems in the fishery are dynamic, adding to the complexity of the issues which fishery sector managers have to face and for which they typically do not have enough human, technical and/or financial resources¹.” “Queen conch fisheries are believed to be fully developed in most areas, and that the alleged increase in levels of illegal fishing often occurs due to a lack of knowledge, awareness and enforcement².”

The need for coordinated management of the queen conch has long been recognized by fisheries scientists and managers in the Wider Caribbean region. The Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan provides a set of management measures that can be applied at the regional or sub-regional level for the sustainability of queen conch populations, the maintenance of a healthy fishery and the sustenance of fishers and fishers’ communities. As the Plan is progressively implemented, improvement in the long-term governance of queen conch fisheries across the Caribbean is expected, as stated in strategy 4B of the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) of the “Sustainable Management of the Shared Marine Resources of the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem (CLME) and Adjacent Regions.”

The 14 management measures recommended in this Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan were analyzed by experts participating in the Second Meeting of the WECAFC/CFMC/OSPESCA/CRFM Working Group, held in Panama from 18 to 20 November 2014. Implementation status of the 14 management measures have been discussed at the Third and Fourth meetings of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on queen conch respectively held in 2018 and 2019. In general, Member States have made improvements in the management of their queen conch fisheries at the national level through implementation of the measures. However, given the differences in scales, gear types, products, markets and geographic locations of Member States, harmonization of management measures at the regional level has not occurred yet. The degree of implementation of the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan was preliminarily evaluated using quantitative values collected in 2019-2020, and the Queen Conch Working Group found that some progress was made.

To help address the issue of illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, it is important to note the management measure for traceability of queen conch throughout the value chain identified in the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan. Traceability can be advantageous by helping

¹ Prada, M. C.; Appeldoorn, R. S.; Van Eijs, S. & Pérez, M. M. 2017. Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan. FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper No. 610. Rome, FAO. 70 pp.

² Theile, S. 2005. Status of the queen conch, *Strombus gigas* stocks, management and trade in the Caribbean: A CITES review. Proc. Annu. Gulf Caribb. Fish. Inst., 56: 675–694.

to ensure that seafood caught by legal versus illegal fishing practices can be distinguished, allowing legally harvested products to fetch higher prices³. This management measure is also aligned with the objectives of the Regional Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate IUU Fishing in WECAFC Member Countries (RPOA-IUU) (2019-2029). These objectives aim to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing in the area of competence of the WECAFC through effective information-sharing and regional cooperation; and contribute to promoting the effective conservation, management and development of the living marine resources in the WECAFC area, in accordance with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

The Fifth meeting of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch was held during 13-14 December 2021 in Puerto Rico and virtually. The purposes of the meeting were to continue monitoring the implementation of the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan, and to discuss implementation of the Recommendations developed by the Working Group and the Scientific, Statistical and Technical Advisory Group (SSTAG), as well as other items for collaboration called for in the Terms of Reference for the Working Group. Meeting participants also discussed the progress of activities as called for in the Work Plan for 2019 – 2021 and the implementation of Recommendation WECAFC/XVII/2019/12 on Improved Compliance with Trade Measures for Queen Conch and Recommendation WECAFC/XVII/2019/13 on Queen Conch Conversion Factor adopted at WECAFC17. An updated Work Plan for 2021-2024 was also developed. The Fifth Meeting of the Working Group agreed that any gaps in implementation of the management measures in the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan should be addressed, and continued monitoring of the implementation status was required. There was also discussion about the ongoing issue of IUU fishing and the possibility of using genetic techniques to determine the origin of queen conch products. The Fifth meeting agreed that the Queen Conch Working Group should liaise with the IUU Working Group to develop a joint recommendation to address IUU fishing in queen conch fisheries in the region.

The Sixth meeting of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch was held on March 16, 2023 in Puerto Rico and online. The purposes of the meeting were to monitor the implementation of the various queen conch recommendations and resolutions, and continue monitoring implementation of the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan. The progress of activities as called for in the Work Plan for 2022 – 2024 were discussed and some additional activities were added. A review of the CITES CoP19 decisions and recommendations was also provided. COP Decision 19.233 calls for Range States to provide progress reports on activities to the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CRFM/CITES working group on queen conch. This led to an amendment in the Working Group Recommendation.

It is expected that additional human, technical and financial resources will be required by the Members and the WECAFC Secretariat in order to continue supporting the implementation of the management measures outlined in the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan.

Failing to approve this amended recommendation will undermine the sustainable management and conservation of the queen conch resource and hinder the development of genetic tools to help combat IUU fishing in the queen conch fisheries.

1. Continued support for implementation of the QC regional management and conservation plan

³ Prada, M. C.; Appeldoorn, R. S.; Van Eijs, S. & Pérez, M. M. 2017. Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan. FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Technical Paper No. 610. Rome, FAO. 70 pp.

The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC),

RECALLING that the objective of the Commission is to promote the effective conservation, management and development of the living marine resources within the area of competence of the Commission, in accordance with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication and to address common problems of fisheries management and development faced by members of the Commission;

RECALLING the establishment of the WECAFC Working Group on Queen Conch by WECAFC 14 in 2012;

REAFFIRMING the commitments made by Queen Conch Range States at the sixteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP16, Bangkok, 3–14 March 2013) to implement the Decisions on “Regional cooperation on the management of and trade in the Queen Conch (*Strombus gigas*)” agreed at CoP16;

FURTHER REAFFIRMING Recommendation WECAFC/16/2016/1 and the Decisions 17.285–17.290 related to queen conch adopted at 17th Conference of the Parties to CITES (CoP17, Johannesburg, 24 September–4 October 2016) (see FAO Technical Paper No. 610), calling upon WECAFC members to implement the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan;

COGNIZANT of the fact that National CITES Management Authorities are required to make a “Legal Acquisition Finding” before issuing an export permit for queen conch and noting that a resolution on guidance to CITES Parties for making Legal Acquisition Findings was adopted at CoP18 (Geneva, Switzerland 17–28 August 2019).

ALSO COGNIZANT of COP 19.233 Decision directed to Range States of *Strombus gigas* which calls for Range States to provide progress reports on activities to the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CFRM/CITES working group on queen conch;

RECALLING the outcomes of the Third and Fourth meetings of the CFMC/OSPESCA/WECAFC/CFRM/CITES Working Group on Queen Conch, respectively held in Panama, 30th October- 1st November 2018 with support from the European Union, NOAA Fisheries and FAO; and in San Juan, Puerto Rico, from 16 to 17 December 2019 with support from NOAA Fisheries and FAO.

RECALLING that the Commission adopted Recommendation WECAFC/16/2016/1 “on the regional plan for the management and conservation of Queen conch in the WECAFC area – addendum to recommendation WECAFC/15/2014/3 on the management and conservation of queen conch in the WECAFC area; and Recommendations WECAFC/17/2019/12 on improved compliance with trade measures for Queen Conch and WECAFC/17/2019/13 on Queen Conch conversion factor.

NOTING with concern the limited implementation of the conservation and management plan for QC to date and that some WECAFC Members are facing significant challenges in implementing the plan.

NOTING the Regional Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing in WECAFC Member Countries (2019-2029) which was developed by the Joint WECAFC/CFRM/OSPESCA Regional Working Group on IUU (RWG-IUU) Fishing and endorsed at the 17th Session of the Commission;

RECALLING that the RPOA-IUU Fishing sets out 28 measures and actions to prevent, deter and eliminate IUU fishing in the Wider Caribbean Region and to fulfil the WECAFC Members' obligations in the capacities as port, flag, coastal and market State under the aspects of Policy and legal framework, MCS and operations, Regional information-sharing and cooperation Capacity development;

ADOPTS in conformity with the provision of Article 6 (h) of the Revised Statutes of the WECAFC the RECOMMENDATION that:

Given the importance of evaluating the degree of implementation of the Regional Queen Conch Fisheries Management and Conservation Plan, the qualitative values collected in 2019-2020 should be updated with additional data from all countries in the Wider Caribbean participating in the queen conch fishery using the information presented at the 2021 Working Group meeting. The update on the implementation status should be completed by April 2023 and a progress report provided to the CITES Secretariat. Monitoring the plan's implementation should be done on an annual basis to increase communication, coordination, and planning towards the application of ecosystem-based approaches to fisheries of this valuable resource.

Genetic work utilizing the Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms (SNPs) technique or other similarly advanced genetic techniques should be considered in order to develop appropriate and validated genetic markers. The SNPs technique has the potential to identify spatial distribution of the species, and thus would provide useful information for queen conch connectivity and traceability. This would also support the development of Legal Acquisition Findings as required under CITES. The SNPs technique also has the potential to map the genes and provide information about population genetic structure and thus allow for identification of spatial variability (or distribution) of the species.

WECAFC Members are strongly encouraged to participate in the development of this genetic work. In order for the genetic work to be statistically robust, at least 15 countries would be required to provide genetic samples of queen conch.

The Queen Conch Scientific, Statistical and Technical and Advisory Sub-group (SSTAG) should liaise with the Regional Working Group on IUU Fishing to further strengthen activities to counteract IUU fishing of queen conch and advance implementation of the 28 measures and actions identified in the RPOA-IUU fishing.