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INTRODUCTION

In 1985, an unofficial Round Table was called in Rome under the auspices of the FAO Fishery Resources Division to discuss new methods and approaches for the development and distribution of fisheries software. At the Round Table some of the world's most important fishery application "developers" at that moment participated, starting with Norman Abramson who was considered the precursor of this discipline.

At that time the micro-computer fever was spreading rapidly because of the processing power and possibilities available at a reasonable cost/use access. Since fishery software was much needed, there was already evidence, and therefore the risk, of inappropriate use of this equipment to develop fishery software (programs and tools) in an uncontrolled manner both methodological and procedural. These were among the most important reasons that induced FAO to organize the Round Table in 1985 seeking collaboration from individuals and institutions on how to control this phenomenon.

In 1990 the FAO Fisheries Department had neither the resources nor the internal structure to deal with this problem. Several initiatives were undertaken to cope with it problem; after Abramson's Fishery Technical Paper (Abramson, 1971), FAO proceeded with the publication of a catalogue of stock assessment software (Caddy, 1981) and a second revised compilation of programs in FORTRAN (Sims, 1985). This preliminary work resulted in the establishment in 1991 of an activity in the Division under the Regular Programme dealing with "Assistance to Fishery Analyses, Management and Research to meet the requests related to the practical use of the databases, resources information and computer tools". The strategy applied for this activity was oriented towards two major lines (i) the in-house applications developed by FAO and (ii) establishing links with some of the most important Institutions in this field such as ICLARM, ORSTOM, IFREMER (France), NORAD (Garcia, 1993). The aim of this collaboration was the joint production of fishery software for management and development-oriented advice, including resources assessment and bio-economic analysis, where FAO is responsible for quality control, editing, translation, publication, distribution and follow up.

Another important milestone was the establishment by FAO of a Series "FAO - Computerized Information Series" that comprises software products from all the Technical Departments of FAO.

In Fisheries the "Departmental Task Force on Fishery Data and Information" is operative at the FAO Departmental level. Its terms of reference are to review all databases and information systems within the Department with the

objective of identifying means of improving their cohesion and availability to member countries, as well as identifying methods to harmonize and standardize database coordination within the Department. In order to improve the dissemination of the Department databases and associated computer software, the Task Force prepared an inventory of databases which can be disseminated, and these have been included in this document.

Many of the programs and program packages produced by FAO, often in cooperation with other agencies, have been used and tested in training courses and workshops organized by the FAO/DANIDA project "Training in fish stock assessment and fishery research planning". This applies in particular to the programs FiSAT and BEAM4 and, to a lesser extent, to BEAM 1 and 2, the NANSIS package, ARTFISH and ARTSER.