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DEVELOPING AGREED STANDARDS

The experience of the Co-ordinating Working Party on Fishery Statistics (CWP)

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Management Summary

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Any international data compilation programme such as that executed by FAO/FIDI is based on the development of internationally harmonized definitions and on the use of standard international classifications, and on the co-ordination and promotion of their use, in order to achieve international data comparability.

FAO has implemented such an approach mainly through systematic consultation and co-ordination with other fishery agencies responsible for international fishery statistical activities, but also with national administrations.

The CWP[1] is an inter-agency body, active since 1960, to which FAO provides the Secretariat. The CWP was established to keep under review requirements for fishery statistics for research, policy making and management purposes. At the same time it was also meant to lead agencies to find a minimum common reporting denominator in order to reduce the international data reporting burden of national counterparts.

The CWP has initially invested great efforts in seeking harmonization and standardization of concepts and definitions that affect data comparability (e.g. reporting catches in live weight equivalent, agreeing on effort measures, agreeing on the attribution of nationality to catches), and in developing common coding of species classifications. Fishing vessels and gears classifications and methodologies for the collection of fishery data required by all or some of the participating agencies have also figured in the CWP agendas.

One of the backbones of the system is the classification of aquatic species. FAO maintains the taxonomic list of species as part of the Reference Series of ASFIS (The Aquatic Science and Fisheries Information System). The original list, compiled in 1960, has been continuously revised and expanded and is also used for indexing the research

[1] ***The Coordinating working party on fishery statistics: its origin, role and structure*** FAO/FIDI C 903, Rome 1995

information included in ASFA (Aquatic Science and Fisheries Abstracts). The taxonomic terms and codes are used in the annual statistical compilation that the Fishery Information, Data and Statistics Unit disseminates as Yearbooks and databases.

Species are identified by a numeric taxonomic code that includes identification at the species level. A three character alphabetic code is used to correspond to data, originally developed on the common name used by FAO for each species. A two digit code is used to summarize data according to broad biological group. The latter code is not compatible with using the data for economic studies.

In summary, three types of codes are assigned to each species item: 1) ISSCAAP code; 2) taxonomic code; and 3) 3-alpha code. The ISSCAAP code is assigned according to the FAO 'International Standard Statistical Classification for Aquatic Animals and Plants' (ISSCAAP) which divides commercial species into 50 groups on the basis of their taxonomic, ecological and economic characteristics. The taxonomic code is used by FAO for a more detailed classification of the species items and for sorting them out within each ISSCAAP group. The 3-alpha identifier is a unique code made of three letters that is widely used for the exchange of data with national correspondents and among fishery agencies.

Upon receipt for the first time of production statistics for a species item, or requests from national institutions and fishery commissions to provide 3-alpha codes to species items of local interest, FIDI used to assign on an *ad hoc* basis new codes before entering the corresponding production data in the statistical databases. In order to facilitate such processes, taxonomic and 3-alpha codes have been assigned to a broader number of species. The ASFIS list has been made available on the Internet to [**http://www.fao.org/fi/statist/fisoft/asfis/asfis.asp**] to provide external users with a standardized codification system covering most of the species items related to fishery activities.

Issues related to the species classification –and to the associated forms to report catches- have constantly been on the CWP agenda. For instance the *Language of species lists on the STATLANT forms* was addressed at CWP XIII:

"*FAO sought views on the current system in which forms variously listed scientific or English species names. In particular it was queried whether the use of the English on forms of non-English speaking countries caused difficulty. The representative of the EC Commission said that there had been problems when only the English name was used, but the 3-alpha identifier has helped to resolve this problem. Participating countries were content with the present system, preferring either English or the scientific name, along with the identifier. FAO concluded that there was no strong feeling for any change of the existing system".* (**CWP XIIIth Session, 1987- FIDI R/379**)

Most of the proposals to improve the species classification and species grouping were discussed at times when the system was computerized and resided in a mainframe environment. The XIV Session of CWP (February 1990) discussed the classification issue in some depth and reported:

"The ISSCAAP system is hierarchical with a structure determined by the chosen biological and taxonomic system. A combination of codes for each level of the hierarchy provides a unique 14-digit numerical identifier for each species or group. However the implementation of the numerical system failed to recognize the indenting in the presentation of the original classification, thus not taking into account of the totally exclusive and hierarchical nature of the classification. This results in some redundant digit series. A further error in the general implementation of the system is that in some cases a number of groups have been ascribed to the same digit series.

A proposal was presented to divide Group 33 into 2, one containing the Basses and their allies (Perciform fishes with demersal habits), from the remainder of the group (Redfishes, congers and minor non-related groups).

The CWP recognized that the logistic problem involved in introducing the split into the 14-digit coded system would be considerable. Although it would permit a more realistic and useful aggregation of data, it recommended that FAO should examine the feasibility and cost of implementing it before agreeing to it. The main purpose of the 14-digit code is for aggregating data for presentation in the FAO Yearbook of Fishery Statistics. It is possible that some offices are using these numbers as species identifiers. It is preferable that the 3-alpha identifier be used as species identifiers because they are fixed, unlike the 14-digit code- which can change if the taxonomic classification changes". (**from CWP Report FID/R 429, XIVth session, Paris, France 5-9 February 1990**)

Rapid technological changes and the wider accessibility to computers have made easier -and less costly- to implement even radical changes to the classification. The XIXth Session of CWP, held in July 2001, recommended important revisions to Groups 33 (separated into two groups), Group 34 (new name and entirely new species composition) and Group 37 (renamed to reflect inclusion of species formerly in Group 34), which have been implemented by FAO in 2002.

Code	Present ISSCAAP group	Proposed revision	Demersal/Pelagic	Species items to be added	Species items to be removed
31	Flounders, halibuts, soles	Flounders, halibuts, soles	D		
32	Cods, hakes, haddocks	Cods, hakes, haddocks	D		
33	Redfishes, basses, congers	**Miscellaneous coastal fishes**	D	Mullets & threadfins	Demersal species from group 33
34	Jacks, mullets, sauries	**Miscellaneous demersal fishes**	D	Demersal species from group 33; snoeks & cutlassfishes	All species from group 34 except lanternfishes
35	Herrings, sardines, anchovies	Herrings, sardines, anchovies	P		
36	Tunas, bonitos, billfishes	Tunas, bonitos, billfishes	P		
37	Mackerels, snoeks, cutlassfishes	**Miscellaneous pelagic fishes**	P	All species from group 34 except mullets & threadfins	Snoeks & cutlassfishes
38	Sharks, rays, chimaeras	Sharks, rays, chimaeras			
39	Miscellaneous marine fishes	**Marine fishes not identified**			

Source: Report of the XIX Session of CWP, Noumea, New Caledonia, 10-13 July 2001, FIDI/R656, Rome 2001

How the CWP works

The Working Party has held 19 sessions, meeting regularly about every two years. FAO, that provides the Secretariat, supports the costs associated to the implementation of the annual statistical inquiry (these costs in the past included the maintenance and printing of the STATLANT-type questionnaires and associated notes for completion in 3 languages, and the expedition costs) and that of publishing Session Reports. Each agency sponsors its own participation, and occasionally the participation of an invited national representative. Agency requirements as recommended by the CWP resulted often in changes to the forms. More recently additional costs were associated to the development of

electronic questionnaires. The sessions are held in English, with no translation provided, and the Reports have so far been issued in one language only.

To participate to CWP for the participating agency the cost is that of the travel of the officer representing the agency. Member agencies have been hosting sessions on a rotation basis in their premises. In these occasions the host agency covers the additional costs of making available meeting rooms, and the necessary documentation.

Ad hoc Inter-Agency Consultations are informal inter-sessional meetings usually involving one representative from each of the organizations participating in the CWP. The main purpose of these Consultations is to plan the CWP Sessions and to monitor progress on following up recommendations from previous CWP Sessions. Usually one Consultation takes place between CWP Sessions.

The communication among members is very informal, and has gained in efficiency by the possibility of communicating by e-mail. A quarterly Newsletter is issued to members.

In order to understand all the implications of using a common reference system and for increasing the comparability of the data collected, a Handbook was published in 1990. The Handbook has been extensively revised and the new edition renamed "Handbook of Fishery Statistical Standards" will be made available in Internet before the end of 2002.

In summary:

CWP is a forum for agencies (i) to discuss concepts and methodologies, (ii) to agree on standardization in fishery statistics, with the ultimate goal (iii) to improve data comparability and (iv) to lessen the burden of national reporting to international bodies associating countries more effectively to the use of established internationally accepted standards. The process through which it works is consultative, and decisions are based on consensus. CWP operates by means of a Technical Secretariat,

ad hoc intersessional session of generally limited participation and biennial sessions of full participation.