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The Pacific environment, sustaining our livelihoods and natural heritage in harmony with our cultures.

Twenty Fifth SPREP Meeting of Officials

Majuro, Marshall Islands
 30 September – 2 October 2014

Agenda Item 10.1.4: Conservation of Threatened and Migratory Marine Species

Purpose

1. To advise Members of recent initiatives related to the conservation of threatened and migratory marine species covered in SPREP's Marine Species Action Plan; and to invite the meeting to formally endorse these initiatives and to nominate 2016 as the Pacific Year of the Whale in the SPREP region.

Background

2. Four species assemblages are covered by the SPREP Marine Species Action Plan:
- Dugong
 - Turtles
 - Cetaceans (whales and dolphins)
 - Sharks
3. The following is a brief summary of activities undertaken or planned by SPREP and partners for the conservation of the Pacific region's most iconic marine species.

Dugong

4. Dugong, the only herbivorous marine mammal, is found in over 40 countries globally, five of them (New Caledonia, Palau, PNG, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) in the SPREP region, which is the easternmost extent of its range. Australia has the world's largest dugong population. It is widely predicted that dugong will disappear from the majority of its range without significant and immediate conservation interventions. The combination of the dugong's life history of being long-lived and slow breeding, its extensive geographic range, capacity to move across national boundaries and dependence on tropical seagrass habitats, makes it highly vulnerable.

5. With the exception of New Caledonia, only limited resources have been available for research and conservation management of dugong in the SPREP region, and knowledge of abundance, distribution, status and trends is very limited.

6. However, this is about to change, with the approval by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in July this year of a \$5.88 million global programme for the conservation of dugong and seagrass, to be implemented by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu will both benefit directly from this programme, having committed all or some of their STAR allocations under GEF.

7. SPREP has been working with the CMS Dugong Secretariat in Abu Dhabi to collaborate on this project and more generally on conservation management for both dugong and seagrass, not only in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, but also in the other SPREP range states.

8. The economic benefits to coastal communities of seagrass protection are very significant. Seagrass ecosystems provide nurseries, shelter, and food for a variety of commercially, recreationally, and ecologically important species (e.g. fin-fish, sharks and rays, marine turtles, inshore cetaceans, seahorses, crustaceans and molluscs). Additionally, seagrasses filter estuarine and coastal waters of nutrients, contaminants, and sediments (reducing algal blooms from nitrogen and phosphorous run-off) and sequester carbon, mitigating the impacts of ocean acidification. They are closely linked to other community types in the tropics such as coral reefs and mangrove forests. Seagrass ecosystems thus provide key ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, support for ecotourism, fisheries habitats and water filtration. The potential role of seagrass in mitigating ocean acidification has also been recently demonstrated.

9. SPREP's proposed collaboration with the CMS Dugong Secretariat and the Governments of the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and other dugong range states will be dependent on community-based management of this endangered species and critical habitat. This initiative provides a unique opportunity to secure the survival of dugong for future generations of Pacific Islanders.

Turtles

10. Turtles are iconic species in the Pacific islands and feature prominently in many cultures. Their lengthy migrations between breeding grounds and feeding grounds require international collaboration for successful conservation management.

11. Six species of marine turtle have been reported from the SPREP region, four of which (green, hawksbill, loggerhead and leatherback turtles) are widely distributed and have suffered catastrophic population declines over the past century, due to a variety of human-induced causes. They are now classified under the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as either Critically Endangered (hawksbill), Endangered (green and loggerhead), or Vulnerable (leatherback).

12. There is an urgent need to assess the current status and trends of turtles in the SPREP region. Funds are currently being sought to support an expert workshop to be convened, in conjunction with a conference on ecotourism and iconic marine species, in French Polynesia in May 2015 to contribute to this assessment.

13. In partnership and with the support of the New Zealand Government, SPREP is implementing a programme in four countries (Fiji, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Tonga) to promote community-based monitoring of turtle nesting beaches, with a view to developing ecotourism ventures. Technical training has been provided to communities in Fiji and Solomon Islands, and further training will be provided this year in Kiribati and Tonga.

14. It has become apparent, however, that in some areas where it was thought during the planning of the programme that there would be significant numbers of nesting turtles, there may no longer be any mature females returning to nest. Besides the adverse impacts of subsistence take of eggs, juveniles and adults over many decades, turtles now face additional new threats from by-catch in fishing operations, marine debris and climate change.

15. Directed take, however, probably remains the largest single threat to turtle populations in the SPREP region, and a recently-published paper in the journal *Diversity and Distributions*¹, provides best available estimates of the levels of legal directed take of turtles around the world.

16. According to the authors, of the ten countries around the world that make up the great majority of legally-permitted turtle catch, five are SPREP members, and two of them are in the top three, which between them account for almost two-thirds of the global total.

17. These estimates do not include the probably significant cases of illegal take. Clearly, more effort needs to be made to reduce the directed take of turtles, especially in the light of additional threats presented by climate change, marine debris and by-catch in fisheries.

18. SPREP's Marine Species Action Plan for Turtles (2013-2017) notes under Objective 1, Theme 3 (Threat Reduction / Hazard Mitigation):

Action 3.4 :Assess and document information on the amount of turtle harvesting, including those harvested for traditional ceremonies and collection of turtle eggs, at the national level where possible; and

Action 3.5: Encourage sustainable turtle harvesting (where harvesting is allowed) and eliminate the take of turtle eggs and nesters.

Whales and Dolphins

19. Almost half of the world's 80 or so species of whales and dolphins have been reported from the SPREP region. The most recent species of whale to be recognised in the scientific literature, *Mesoplodon hotaula*, was described as a result of a chance visit to a remote island in what was then known as the Gilbert Islands(Kiribati) and subsequent genetic analysis of some dried tissue left from a stranding some weeks earlier.

20. While many of these species live their entire lives within the SPREP region, most of the large whales undertake long annual migrations, between summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic Ocean and winter breeding grounds in member countries. The populations of many of these species have been devastated by whaling. Between 1900 and 1965, industrial fleets killed over 2 million large whales on their summer feeding grounds in the Antarctic, and almost extirpated the Oceania population of humpback whales.

¹ So excellent a fish: a global overview of legal marine turtle fisheries.

Frances Humber, Brendan Godley, and Annette Broderick; (*Diversity Distrib.*) (2014) 1–12

21. SPREP has recently developed a closer relationship with the Secretariat of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Ten SPREP members are also members of the IWC. In June, the IWC released the results of a comprehensive assessment of humpback whales in Oceania. Much of the data used in the assessment had been collected by members of the South Pacific Whale Research Consortium, with whom SPREP has an MoU, and whose work SPREP has supported for many years. The analyses were largely conducted by members of the IWC Scientific Committee - the world's foremost group of whale scientists. Their conclusion was that by 1965, the population of humpbacks that overwintered in Oceania was reduced from more than 14,000 whales to less than 1% of that number. Thanks in no small part to the declaration of whale sanctuaries in their EEZs by several SPREP members, that number has now increased to around 5,000 whales, and forms the basis of valuable whale-watch industries in several countries. It is one of the world's most encouraging conservation success stories.

22. However, whales now face many other threats, including entanglement in fishing gear, ingestion of plastics and other marine debris, pollution and climate change. SPREP has been collaborating with the IWC to address some of these issues. A joint workshop was held in Tonga in July for participants from Vanuatu and Tonga, to learn how to manage whale strandings and how to safely disentangle whales caught up in rope or fishing gear. SPREP also participated in a global conference in Honolulu in August to discuss the impacts of marine debris on whales and dolphins. Both SPREP and the IWC wish to further develop this relationship, and the IWC has sent a representative from the IWC Secretariat to attend this meeting.

23. Another important partner for SPREP in cetacean conservation is the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). 15 SPREP members are signatories to the CMS Pacific Cetaceans MoU, which has identified medium term implementation priorities to identify areas where resources were most urgently required. The US has agreed to fund an electronic workspace to further strengthen the collaboration between and amongst signatories and the MoU Technical Advisory Group. Additionally, progress made on the implementation of the MoU Action Plan (based on the SPREP Whale and Dolphin Action Plan) was delivered to the CMS Standing Committee in November 2013.

24. Other initiatives that have been undertaken by SPREP in 2014 include the launch of a web-based system (<http://www.apodstrandings.org>), to record strandings of whales and dolphins in the region; and a SmartPhone app (MOBI), now available for free download, that provides information to enable cetaceans sighted at sea to be accurately identified and reported.

25. The designation of 2016 as the Pacific Year of the Whale was suggested in 2013, and SPREP and BEM will begin planning for a number of activities, if this proposal is formally endorsed by the 2014 SPREP Meeting.

Sharks

26. Sharks are iconic species in the Pacific islands and feature prominently in many cultures. Many species have declined significantly in abundance in recent years, because they have been actively targeted by longline fisheries and are taken as by-catch in tuna fisheries. The lucrative Chinese market for shark fins has driven the practice of shark finning (removing the fins and discarding the carcass), which has contributed to reported declines of up to 90% for some shark species. Recovery of these populations will require international collaboration.

27. Pacific Island nations have led the way in introducing shark conservation measures within their EEZs, including shark sanctuaries in the Marshall Islands, Palau and Tokelau; and bans on shark finning or the retention of fins without accompanying carcasses in the EEZs of many other SPREP members.

28. These regional initiatives have been complemented by the inclusion of many shark species on the Appendices of the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS). In recent years, additional complementary measures for the conservation of sharks have been adopted by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), the relevant Regional Fisheries Management Organisation,

29. To be effective in halting the decline in regional shark populations, however, these conservation initiatives need to be supported by technical measures, including vessel and catch inspections, that will require significant capacity building and a clear action plan for their implementation. The Regional Plan of Action for Sharks was drafted by FFA, SPC and SPREP in 2006, and while it provided a valuable summary of the situation as it was eight years ago, it now needs to be updated.

30. SPREP's Marine Species Action Plans take account of the best available scientific evidence to provide guidance for a five-year period and are regularly reviewed. The current Action Plans for whales and dolphins, turtles, and dugong are valid from 2013-2017.

31. It is proposed that, in association with competent and interested parties, SPREP draft a Shark Action Plan, to be incorporated into the next round of Marine Species Action Plans (2018-2023).

Recommendations

32. It is recommended that Members:

Dugong

- a) **Note** that the Global Environment Facility and the Convention on Migratory Species have recently launched a global initiative for the conservation of dugong and seagrass habitat, and congratulate the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu for their commitment to this initiative;
- b) **Endorse** SPREP's engagement with CMS in developing this programme in the SPREP region; and **urge** donors and supporters to facilitate a similar level of engagement for the other SPREP Range States for dugong;

Turtles

- c) **Note** that marine turtles in the SPREP region appear to be declining in abundance, and that the most iconic species are classified as Endangered or Critically Endangered;
- d) **Note** that a recently-published scientific paper asserts that the levels of legally-permitted take of turtles in SPREP member nations are amongst the highest in the world and may be a major threat to the continued occurrence of turtles in some areas;
- e) **Agree** that where the take of turtles is still permitted, Members should provide to SPREP any reliable estimates that may be available on the level of permitted take, as called for in Action 3.4 of the SPREP Turtle Action Plan; **consider** prohibiting or more strictly regulating the take of turtles, particularly for major gatherings that involve the harvesting of large numbers of individual turtles; and **prohibit** the take of turtle eggs and nesters, in line with Action 3.5 of the SPREP Turtle Action Plan.

Whales and dolphins

- f) **Note** that SPREP has implemented several important initiatives related to whales this year, including developing a collaboration with the International Whaling Commission;
- g) **Approve** the designation of 2016 as the Pacific Year of the Whale;
- h) **Request** SPREP to begin planning for the implementation of 2016 as the Pacific Year of the Whale; and **invite** members, supporters and potential collaborators, including the International Whaling Commission and the Convention on Migratory Species, to provide technical and financial assistance in the planning and implementation of 2016 - Pacific Year of the Whale;

Sharks

- i) **Note** that many species of sharks in the SPREP region have declined significantly in abundance in recent years;
 - j) **Welcome** the steps taken by many SPREP members and partners to protect sharks within their EEZs through a variety of conservation measures;
 - k) **Agree** that, in association with other competent and interested parties, SPREP draft a Shark Action Plan, to be incorporated into the next round of Marine Species Action Plans (2018-2023).
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3 September, 2014