

## Twenty Sixth SPREP Meeting of Officials

Apia, Samoa  
22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> September 2015

### Agenda Item 10.1.2 : 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 approve these initiatives and to adopt the work programme proposed for the Year of the Whale in the SPREP region.

#### Background

2. Three species groups are covered by the SPREP Marine Species Action Plan:
- Dugong
  - Turtles
  - Cetaceans (whales and dolphins)
3. Although not as yet included in the Action Plan, SPREP has also been developing a work programme on sharks, and with funding from the PEW Charitable Trusts has recently established a Shark and Ray Conservation Officer position to assist Members to introduce conservation measures for sharks and rays in their waters.
4. 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

5. A US\$5.88 million global programme for the conservation of dugong and seagrass, funded by the GEF and implemented by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), was initiated in 2015. The Solomon Islands and Vanuatu will both benefit directly from this programme. SPREP attended the inception workshop in Honiara in April, and has been working with the CMS Dugong Secretariat in Abu Dhabi to scope a possible collaboration on management for both dugong and seagrass, not only for the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, but also other SPREP range states.

6. 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, in which it is anticipated that ecotourism will provide an important role given the economic benefit of this activity. This initiative provides a unique opportunity to secure the survival of dugong for future generations of Pacific Islanders.

### **Turtles**

7. With the support of the New Zealand Government, SPREP is implementing a programme in Fiji, Kiribati, and the Solomon Islands to promote community-based monitoring of turtle nesting beaches, with a view to developing ecotourism ventures. Technical training has been provided, and a presentation was made at the Blue Days conference on ecotourism and iconic marine species, held in French Polynesia in May 2015.

8. By-catch in fishing operations is an unknown, but likely significant, threat to turtles and other non-target threatened and migratory species in the Pacific Islands. The Secretariat is part of a consortium led by FFA that is preparing a Concept Note to the European Union under the EDF 11 funding round for a Comprehensive Fisheries Project for the Pacific ACP Countries (CompFish). If the proposal is accepted, one of SPREP's roles will be to lead the development and implementation of a five-year programme to mitigate the by-catch of turtles in commercial and subsistence fisheries.

9. Although turtles face additional threats from marine debris and climate change, directed take remains a major threat to turtle populations in the SPREP region. 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.*

10. At the last SPREP meeting, Members agreed 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.

11. Members were requested through a Circular issued on 1 July to provide the above information in timely fashion to allow a report to be compiled for this SPREP Meeting.

## Whales and Dolphins

12. Almost half of the world's 80 or so species of whales and dolphins have been reported from the SPREP region. 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.

13. SPREP has recently developed a closer relationship with the Secretariat of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). Ten SPREP Members are also Parties to the IWC. 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 are most urgently required.

14. SPREP Members have designated 2016 and 2017 as the Pacific Year of the Whale. The Secretariat intends to use this opportunity to develop educational products for dissemination in the region and to raise public awareness about whales and dolphins. It is also intended to use whales as the vehicles to deliver broader messages about SPREP's mission in addressing the state of our oceans.

15. At last year's meeting, Members directed the Secretariat to work with interested countries, international organisations, institutions and NGOs to develop an appropriate work programme. A draft work programme has now been developed, and a workshop on 19 September is proposed for all Member governments and other interested parties to review the draft work programme and explore funding opportunities.

## Sharks

16. 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 in oceanic longline fisheries. The lucrative market for shark fins has contributed to reported declines of up to 90% for some shark species (e.g., oceanic white-tips). Recovery of these populations will require international collaboration.

17. Pacific island nations have led the way in introducing shark conservation measures within their EEZs, including shark sanctuaries in the Marshall Islands, Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and Tokelau, a total of some 5.8 million sq. km. Bans on shark finning or the retention of fins without accompanying carcasses have been introduced in the EEZs of many other SPREP Members. A Commission Conservation Measure to prohibit the use of shark lines or to ban wire traces on longlines was adopted in December 2014 by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC).

18. The Secretariat has been collaborating with CROP agencies, James Cook University, the Australian Government and NGOs in the development of a Rapid Assessment Toolkit for Members to assess the status of shark populations in their waters.

19. Following the success of a workshop held in Moorea in October 2014, SPREP has prepared a policy paper on the conservation of sharks, which is available to Members.

20. At the last SPREP meeting, Members agreed that the Regional Plan of Action for Sharks drafted by FFA, SPC and SPREP in 2008, now needs to be updated, and agreed that, in association with competent and interested parties, SPREP should draft a Shark Action Plan, to be incorporated into the next round of Marine Species Action Plans (2018-2023).

21. Thanks to a new funding arrangement with the Pew Charitable Trusts, SPREP advertised in July for a Shark and Ray Conservation Officer on a short-term contract to December 2016. A priority for the appointee will be to work with Members who wish to develop domestic legislation to improve the protection for sharks and rays, and to draft a Shark Action Plan to be incorporated into the next round of Marine Species Action Plans (2018-2023).

### **International Conventions**

22. Regional initiatives have been complemented by the recent inclusion of several shark and ray species on the Appendices of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). SPREP works closely with the Secretariats of both these Conventions.

23. At the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Migratory Species in October 2014, Fiji successfully proposed the listing of nine species of mobulid rays on Appendix I. The same meeting adopted additional resolutions of relevance to the region, including cetacean culture, wildlife watching from boats, management of marine debris, and the adoption of an action plan for loggerhead turtles in the South Pacific Ocean. Regrettably, the CoP was unable to secure funding to retain the post of CMS Pacific Officer, based at SPREP, and that position has now been disestablished, although it is still available in the CMS budget for funding through voluntary contributions. Despite limited resources, SPREP will continue to support and promote CMS and the relevant action plans and MoUs to the best of its ability, and congratulates Samoa and New Zealand on their recent signing of the CMS MoU on Migratory Sharks.

24. Over the past year, SPREP has significantly developed its relationship with CITES. Unfortunately, the Pacific Islands region is the most poorly represented region in the world amongst the 186 signatories of CITES. There is an urgent need to both increase the level of membership amongst SPREP Members and also to ensure that non-signatories to CITES maintain equivalent levels of control over the import and export of CITES-listed animals and plants.

25. SPREP will continue to collaborate with the CITES Secretariat as resources permit, and will actively pursue opportunities to establish a CITES Pacific Islands Officer, based at SPREP, to provide support for Members who are signatories to CITES or who wish to adopt similar regulatory measures for sustainable trade in wildlife.

### **Regional collaboration**

26. To investigate the likely scope and impacts of marine debris generated by commercial fishing vessels in the region, BEM and WMPC recently collaborated in the review of over 8,000 Observer Reports of waste disposal from observed vessels (mainly purse-seine vessels).

27. This is covered in more detail in Paper 10.3.3, but in brief, these reports indicated that the potential hazards to threatened and migratory species from carelessly-discarded debris such as nets, rope, oil and plastic debris were considerably more significant than had been previously reported.

28. The Secretariat is therefore proposing that a similar analysis be undertaken for Observer Reports of by-catch in commercial fishing of non-target threatened species and species of special interest. These reports are archived by SPC, and each country will need to approve the release of all the Observer Reports collected within their Exclusive Economic Zone. SPREP believes that the information contained within these reports could be extremely valuable in identifying the scope and circumstances surrounding by-catch of threatened and migratory species.

### Recommendation

29. Members are invited to:

#### 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) **endorse** SPREP's leadership of a programme under development for EDF 11 funding to reduce and mitigate the impacts of by-catch in commercial and subsistence fisheries on turtles and other non-target species;
- d) **reiterate** 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

- e) **note with approval** that SPREP has begun planning for the implementation of 2016 as the Pacific Year of the Whale; and
- f) **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 - 2017, Pacific Year of the Whale;

## Sharks

- g) **note** that many species of sharks in the SPREP region have declined significantly in abundance in recent years and **welcome** the steps taken by many SPREP members and partners to protect sharks within their EEZs through a variety of conservation measures;
- h) **note** with **approval** that SPREP has appointed a Shark and Ray Conservation Officer and **agree** that the Officer should work with Members, and in association with other competent and interested parties, to draft a Shark Action Plan, to be incorporated into the next round of Marine Species Action Plans (2018-2023);

## International Conventions

- i) **note** that the position of CMS Pacific Officer has been disestablished due to a lack of funding and **appeal** to donors and supporters to consider making a voluntary contribution to CMS to have the position reinstated;
- j) **endorse** SPREP's increased level of engagement with the CITES Secretariat and **call on** donors and supporters to consider funding the establishment of a CITES Officer at SPREP, to support Members who are signatories to CITES or non-signatories who wish to adopt similar regulatory measures for sustainable trade in wildlife;

## Regional collaboration

- k) **endorse** the proposal to seek the release to SPREP of Observer Reports on by-catch of non-target threatened species and species of special interest in commercial fishing operations, by seeking the consent of Members to allow the release of Observer Reports collected in their EEZs and archived by SPC.