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



Twenty Seventh SPREP Meeting of Officials

Alofi, Niue

19 – 21 September 2016

Agenda Item 9.1.3: Revision of Marine Species Action Plans

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 the initiatives proposed.

Background

2. Three species groups are currently covered by the SPREP Marine Species Action Plan:
 - Dugong
 - Turtles
 - Cetaceans (whales and dolphins)
3. The SPREP Marine Species Action Plans cover a five-year period, and the current Plan is due to expire at the end of 2017. The Secretariat will seek funding support to convene a regional workshop in the latter half of 2017, to develop a draft Marine Species Action Plan for the period 2018-2023.
4. Although not yet included in the Action Plan, SPREP has also been developing a work programme on sharks and rays, and with funding from the PEW Charitable Trusts has been assisting Members to introduce conservation measures for sharks and rays in their waters. 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.
6. SPREP's collaboration on this project with the CMS Dugong Secretariat and the Governments of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu has been focused on supporting community-based management of this endangered species and its critical habitat, seagrass, which is also a vital plant for the protection of coastal communities from storms and one of the few ecosystems capable of mitigating the impacts of ocean acidification.

Turtles

7. SPREP recently completed a programme in Kiribati and the Solomon Islands that was supported by the New Zealand Government, to promote community-based monitoring of turtle nesting beaches, with a view to developing ecotourism ventures. Completion of the programme in Fiji has been extended for a year, because of the impacts of Cyclone Winston.
8. The Secretariat has been invited to become a partner in a regional initiative led by Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) on the conservation of hawksbill turtles, which was launched at a 'Hawksbills in Crisis' workshop in August 2016.
9. By-catch in fishing operations is an unknown, but likely significant, source of turtle mortality in the Pacific islands region, and SPREP participated in the First Workshop on Joint Analysis of Sea Turtle Mitigation Effectiveness, organised by the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission in Honolulu in March 2016, and expects to also participate in the Second Workshop in November 2016.
10. The Secretariat is also part of a consortium of CROP agencies and NGOs that are involved in the PEUMP (Pacific European Union Marine Programme) in the EDF (European Development Fund) 11 funding programme. The programme implementation has been delayed for a year, but funding is now likely to become available in late 2017. One of SPREP's roles will be to lead the development and implementation of a programme to mitigate the by-catch of turtles in commercial and subsistence fisheries.

Sharks and rays

11. The populations of many shark species in the Pacific have declined significantly in abundance in recent years, largely because of the lucrative market for shark fins, which has contributed to reported declines of up to 90% for oceanic white-tip sharks and significant declines for other species.
12. Thanks to a funding arrangement with the Pew Charitable Trusts, SPREP has been able to appoint a Shark and Ray Conservation Officer, who has been working with Members on shark and ray conservation issues. The SRCO has given particular attention to supporting Fiji with its proposal to list all nine species of mobula rays on Appendix II of the Convention for International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) at the forthcoming Conference of Parties in September.
13. The Secretariat has also 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; and in delivering a training workshop on the development of Non-Detriment Findings, which are required under CITES to demonstrate that trade in any species will not have a significant impact on its conservation status.
14. 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). As the next step in this process, the Secretariat will support an expert workshop on the status of coastal sharks and rays in the SPREP region, to be held in Noumea in April 2017.

International Conventions

15. Over the past year, SPREP has significantly developed its relationship with CITES, including hosting a visit to Samoa by the CITES Secretary-General. 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. The Secretariat welcomes the recent decision by Tonga to accede to CITES.
16. 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.

Marine debris

17. At the 2015 meeting, the Secretariat reported on the review of over 10,000 Observer Reports of waste disposal from observed fishing vessels in the SPREP region, which 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.
18. The Secretariat took this issue forward at the December 2015 meeting of the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, and sponsored a side event that was well attended. As a consequence, the delegation of the Republic of the Marshall Islands called on the Commission to take action to address the issue of marine debris generated by fishing vessels in the region.
19. The Secretariat was also represented at an Expert Consultation convened by FAO in April at their Rome headquarters, to make recommendations on the Marking of Fishing Gear. FAO senior officials paid particular attention in the final report to the requirement that fishing vessels should abide by the provisions of the MARPOL Convention, which prohibits the discharge at sea of plastics and other non-degradable materials. The Secretariat drew to the attention of the Expert Group the potential for Fish Aggregating Devices (FADs), of which it is estimated more than 100,000 are currently drifting in the area covered by the Noumea Convention, to entangle marine megafauna such as sharks, turtles and whales.
20. Members are referred to Agenda Item 9.3.2, in which it is noted that New Zealand is proposing to take certain initiatives to focus attention on the need to address the issue of marine debris, and discarding of non-degradable litter and rubbish from fishing vessels, and to support such initiatives, including through discussions with their colleagues in Fisheries.

Regional Cooperation

21. The Secretariat proposed last year that Members request SPC to release GEN-3 Observer Reports, in order that an analysis might be undertaken for of by-catch of non-target threatened species and species of special interest taken in commercial fishing operations. These reports are archived by SPC, and for reasons of data confidentiality, each country needs to approve the release of all the Observer Reports collected within their Exclusive Economic Zone. The Secretariat understands that at least one Member has so far agreed to the release of these data for analysis, and urges other Members to request their Fisheries Departments or relevant government agency to also give their permission to release by-catch data collected in their EEZs.

Ecotourism

22. It is anticipated that ecotourism will provide an important future role in the conservation of threatened and migratory species, and following the success of the Blue Days conference in Papeete in June 2015, the Secretariat has continued to investigate the potential for ecotourism to promote the conservation of threatened species and to provide an economic benefit for communities.
23. SPREP has been supporting two important initiatives on ecotourism. The first is to convene a workshop at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Honolulu on 2 September on 'Ecotourism as a tool to protect threatened species in the Pacific Islands'.
24. With support from Fonds Pacifique and the INTEGRE programme, an international consulting company was recently engaged to undertake a comprehensive review of the state of development of wildlife-based ecotourism in the region. The consultants will visit French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Palau, Tonga and Vanuatu, and will also collect relevant information from other Members. Their report will guide the development of ecotourism as a tool to secure the survival of threatened species, and to provide economic benefits to both current and future generations of Pacific Islanders.

Marine Species Action Plan

25. The Secretariat's Marine Species Action Plan is reviewed every five years, and is due for renewal in 2018, to cover the period 2018-2023. As noted above, it is proposed that for the next iteration of the MSAP, a new section of sharks and rays should be included. Additionally, with the new information now available on marine debris and ecotourism, it is likely that a week-long workshop would be required to develop a draft MSAP for 2018-2023. Currently, there is no funding available to support such a workshop.

Recommendation

26. Members are invited to:

Dugong

- a) **note** the engagement of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in the global initiative for the conservation of dugong and seagrass habitat funded by the Global Environment Facility and the Convention on Migratory Species;

Turtles

- b) **reaffirm** SPREP's commitment to a programme under the EDF 11 PEUMP project, to reduce and mitigate the by-catch of turtles in commercial fisheries;
- c) **endorse** the Secretariat's engagement in a new regional initiative on hawksbill turtles, led by WWF;

Sharks and rays

- d) **note with approval** the progress made through the appointment of a Shark and Ray Conservation Officer and **agree** that the Secretariat should continue to actively support Fiji in its proposal to list mobula rays on CITES Appendix II;

International Conventions

- e) **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;

Marine debris

- f) **Endorse** efforts to reduce the amount of non-degradable marine debris, in particular that which is generated by the fishing industry;

Regional cooperation

- g) **Agree** to lobby those government agencies of Members who have not already done so to approve the release to the Secretariat of the GEN-3 Observer Reports, held by SPC, on by-catch of non-target threatened species and species of special interest in commercial fishing operations in Members' EEZs;

Ecotourism

- j) **Agree to** participate in the Secretariat's review of ecotourism in Member countries.