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SPREP Statement

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



STATEMENT TO THE 11TH SESSION OF THE WESTERN CENTRAL PACIFIC FISHERIES COMMISSION BY THE SECRETARIAT FOR THE PACIFIC REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME (SPREP)

Mr Chairman, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates

On behalf of the Director-General of SPREP, I should like to extend our thanks for the opportunity to address the meeting. As you know, SPREP is not a regular participant in the meetings of the WCPFC, but as the only regional agency based here in Samoa, and one that takes a great interest in the deliberations of the Commission, we are delighted to be able to participate in this week's discussions.

As the Pacific regional agency for the environment, SPREP is recognized as the lead on 4 key areas: biodiversity and ecosystems; climate change; waste management and pollution; and environmental monitoring and governance in the Pacific Region. We focus on strengthening partnerships and cooperation among Pacific Island countries & territories on these areas. Environmental management & protection is SPREP's priority focus. Sustainable management of marine habitats and resources is at the core of our mission.

Tuna are not the only migratory marine species to feature extensively in Pacific Island cultures and history. Whales, dolphins, turtles and sharks are also iconic species, and additionally, they provide an increasingly economically valuable niche for Pacific Island countries in the growing ecotourism market. SPREP is engaged in a number of projects to conserve and protect endangered and threatened species and to provide an economic benefit for those coastal communities involved as guardians for these emblematic species.

However, the populations of many species of cetaceans, turtles and sharks in the region are at historically low levels, and many are critically endangered or endangered, often through by catch from commercial fishing. Migratory species are particularly vulnerable because their journeys between breeding grounds and feeding grounds often take them through the EEZs of various Pacific Island countries and international waters. Efforts made to promote protection and conservation within EEZs can be nullified unless similar measures are taken on the high seas.

Sharks are highly valued in the Pacific Islands, and this has been reflected in recent years by the declaration of shark sanctuaries in many countries, such as Palau, the Marshall Islands and Tokelau; the introduction of bans on shark finning in the EEZs of many other countries; and the leadership role taken by several countries in signing the Convention on Migratory Species MoU on migratory sharks. SPREP is very concerned at the impacts of both targeted take and by-catch of sharks in the region's tuna fisheries and SPREP members, which include all Pacific island countries and territories, have requested that SPREP develop a Shark Action Plan.

It has become clear that many species of pelagic sharks have been over-fished in recent years, most notably silky sharks and oceanic white-tips. SPREP has been working closely with several of its member countries to improve the protection afforded to a number of shark species in the region through the Convention on Migratory Species and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

We are hopeful that the Commission will this week agree to pass a new Conservation Management Measure that will effectively address the problem of shark by-catch and targeted catch in both longline and purse-seine fisheries. SPREP is also committed to working with the Commission, other regional agencies and stakeholders to better understand the extent and significance of by-catch of turtles and cetaceans in both longline and purse-seine fisheries, and to the development of mitigation measures.

SPREP has recently become more actively engaged in the problem of marine debris and its impacts on marine megafauna, and is currently sponsoring a research programme on the provenance and distribution of plastic and other debris in the Pacific Islands region, and will be contributing to UNEP's Global Marine Litter Campaign. In that regard, SPREP is concerned about the possible impacts of drifting FADs on turtles and other migratory species, and is anxious to learn more from this week's meeting. We also seek to work closely with all fishing fleets and Pacific Island states to improve the region's port facilities for the reception of damaged nets and other fishing gear and to encourage all vessels to retain their non-degradable waste on board for safe disposal on shore.

SPREP supports and promotes the establishment of Marine Protected Areas, both large and small, which present tremendous opportunities for Pacific Islands to improve the resilience and conservation of biodiversity in the face of increasing threats from climate change and over-exploitation. Although most Pacific Islands have small land masses, they are in fact Large Ocean States, with jurisdiction over nearly 10% of the global ocean. Many Pacific Island Governments, such as Kiribati, Cook Islands, and New Caledonia, have in recent years declared very large MPAs within their EEZs. SPREP believes that well managed MPAs can play an important role in protecting pelagic fisheries from over-exploitation, while also protecting other important ecosystem services including carbon sequestration, resilience for coral reefs and other marine biodiversity from the impacts of global warming, coastal protection from storms, and replenishment of local fisheries.

The issue of climate change is of enormous concern to all Pacific Island States. Ocean acidification caused by rising levels of carbon dioxide in the ocean, is a clear and growing threat to the region's pelagic tuna fisheries, as well as coastal fisheries and coral reef structure throughout the region. In association with the Governments of the USA and New Zealand, SPREP convened a workshop on ocean acidification immediately prior to the recent SIDS conference here in Apia. This workshop noted the adverse effects of increasing acidification on the survival of yellowfin tuna larvae. SPREP will continue to be strongly engaged in developing a monitoring network for ocean acidification within the Pacific Islands region, and welcomes the support of Pacific Island governments, members of the Commission, regional organisations and other stakeholders in this initiative.

Pacific Island nations are uniquely dependent on the Ocean, and can rightly claim to be at the forefront of global efforts to improve sustainable management and conservation of marine resources. SPREP is committed to a leadership role for Pacific communities in the preservation of their iconic marine fauna for future generations, and looks forward to an increasing collaboration with the Commission and its members and other stakeholders to achieve this.