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**STRATEGIC RESEARCH PLAN OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE  
2012–2016  
(Adopted by SC7)**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **1. The Convention and the Commission**

The Commission for the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (WCPFC) was established by the Convention for the Conservation and Management of Highly Migratory Fish Stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean (the Convention). The objective of the Convention is to ensure, through effective management, the long-term conservation and sustainable use of highly migratory fish stocks in the western and central Pacific Ocean.

The Commission is tasked with developing and adopting specific measures to promote these objectives, as detailed in Articles 5 and 6 of the Convention. The fundamental duties of the Commission must be supported by science-based information concerning:

- assessments of the impact of fishing on the marine resources of the western and central Pacific Ocean (WCPO);
- protection of biodiversity and promotion of ecosystem based approaches to management;
- minimization of waste, pollution and impacts on both target and non-target or associated or dependent species (NTADS);
- prevention or elimination of overfishing and excess fishing capacity;
- collection, compilation and dissemination of complete and accurate fisheries data and information from national and international research programmes.

To implement and enforce these goals, the Commission is required to utilize the best scientific evidence available. This evidence must then be incorporated into a fishery management regime consistent with the principles of the precautionary approach and in consideration of target species, NTADS, environmental factors and habitats of special concern.

### **2. The Scientific Committee**

Article 11 of the Convention establishes a Scientific Committee, the functions of which are described in Article 12. They include reviewing the results of research, analysis and status assessments of target stocks

or NTADS in the Convention Area and to assist development and assess information resulting from a regional observer programme.<sup>1</sup>

The Convention requires that the Scientific Committee recommend a research plan to the Commission<sup>2</sup>. The first Strategic Research Plan was prepared as an adaptive research plan to support the Scientific Committee's objective of providing the best available scientific advice. It had an initial period of five years, from 2007 to 2011. This second five-year Strategic Research Plan is prepared for the period 2012 to 2016. It will be used to guide the development of annual work plans of the Scientific Committee and will be periodically reviewed to ensure that it remains responsive to the Commission's needs.

## **II. RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

The Commission has four overall research and data collection priorities:

- Monitoring of fishing activities through the collection, compilation and validation of data from the fishery
- Monitoring and assessment of target stocks
- Monitoring and assessment of NTADS and of the pelagic ecosystems of the WCPO
- Evaluation of existing Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs) and of potential management options

### **1. Monitoring of fishing activities through the collection, compilation and verification of data from the fishery**

Data from the fishery are required to monitor catch and effort, and are an essential input to stock assessment. Increases in data quality and coverage will enable more accurate estimates of catches and are key to reducing uncertainty in stock assessments. Data are also required for tracking fleet dynamics and monitoring changes in the fisheries. A critical role of the Scientific Committee is to promote the collection and compilation of all necessary data and to assist in increasing data accuracy and coverage. Research activities include:

- estimating total fishing effort which includes incremental increases in effective effort, catches and related mortalities of target and non-target species, stratified, as appropriate, by area, time, species or stock, size, sex and other characteristics;
- monitoring the accuracy and coverage of operational-level catch and effort data, aggregated catch and effort data, and size composition data compiled by the Commission, and developing programmes to improve accuracy and coverage and to address data gaps that are identified;
- developing programmes for the collection and compilation of related fisheries data, such as gear and vessel attributes, and other information, that can be used to standardize fishing effort and estimate fishing capacity and changes in effective fishing effort;
- rescuing historical fisheries data and related metadata useful for stock assessment and effort standardization;
- developing draft standards for the collection of operational catch and effort data, port sampling data, observer data and other types of data, as required, including minimum standards for data collection forms;
- developing and testing sampling designs, including sampling protocols, for the collection of these data through observer and port sampling programmes; and

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<sup>1</sup> Including work undertaken by scientific experts engaged by the Commission under Article 13, and for the observer programme, in conjunction with the Technical and Compliance Committee.

<sup>2</sup> Article 12(2)(a).

- developing programmes to assist Members, Cooperating Non-members and Participating Territories (CCMs) in meeting data-related Convention obligations.

## **2. Monitoring and assessment of stocks**

Stock assessment and modeling are the primary scientific tools used to estimate the status of fish stocks and to evaluate the effectiveness of CMMs. Structural uncertainty in stock assessment derives, in part, from inaccurate or incomplete data from the fishery, mistaken assumptions about underlying biological and ecological processes, and an incomplete understanding of fishing gear and vessels operations. Statistical uncertainty derives from inadequate sampling protocols and inaccurate measurement of key input data. Addressing uncertainties in stock assessment provides a useful focus for assigning priorities to stock-assessment related components of the Strategic Research Plan.

### ***Stock assessment and modeling***

Research activities directly supporting stock assessments include:

- Routine application of existing methods for stock assessment, including the characterisation of statistical and structural uncertainty;
- Improvement of existing methods and development of new methods;
- Identification and refinement of biological reference points for use in stock status determination;
- Use of simulation models for testing stock assessment models and to evaluate the sensitivity of stock assessment results to violation of structural assumptions
- Improvement of data inputs to stock assessment models, in particular analyses to standardize fishing effort or catch-per-unit-effort to provide reliable indices of abundance.

### ***Biological studies***

Understanding of key biological processes and the identification and definition of regional variability in these processes in an area as large as the WCPO is required to underpin stock assessments. Enhanced understanding of these processes will reduce structural uncertainty and possible bias in stock assessments.

Required studies include:

- age and growth of pre- and post-recruit segments of the population;
- reproductive parameters and capacity;
- the dependency of natural mortality on age
- length, weight and sex composition in response to environmental and anthropogenic factors;
- characterisation of stock structure;
- movement and migration;
- behavior and habitat utilisation;
- recruitment variability and the environmental influences thereon; and
- tagging studies.

Stock assessments for small pelagic and demersal species of fish benefit greatly from “fishery independent” survey data, which provide information on population size independent of data from the commercial fishery. Such data can reduce the bias and uncertainty in stock assessments. Unfortunately, routine scientific survey methods are not applicable to HMS because of the large geographical scales, the limitations of fish surveying technology and the resultant high costs. Tagging studies on all scales are the closest approximation to fishery independent data currently available to support the WCPFC.

Tagging studies provide information on rates and direction of movement, mortality, habitat utilization, aggregation and vulnerability, all of which are directly used in the stock assessments. Tagging is therefore an important tool for biological and behavioral studies of fish and has special importance in the assessment highly migratory fish stocks. Tagging activities include:

- mass tagging with conventional tags to determine large-scale population movement and mortality rates;
- specialized deployment of data storage tags, both conventional archival tags and pop-up satellite tags, to better define horizontal and vertical habitat preferences;
- deployment of other types of electronic tags to determine small-scale movements or residence times in relation to natural features and floating objects, such as seamounts and fish aggregating devices; and
- implementation of comprehensive tag recovery procedures, and studies (e.g. tag seeding) to estimate the rates of reporting of recaptured tags.

### **3. Monitoring and assessment of the ecosystem**

The ecosystem approach to fisheries requires managers to consider more than the impact of the fishery on single target stocks. Additional considerations include assessing the impact of environmental variability on target stocks, and assessing the impact of the fishery on other species including prey, competitors, NTADS and on habitat. Research activities for the WCPFC include:

- Undertaking periodic ecological risk assessments, using productivity-susceptibility analysis or other approaches, to identify priorities for enhanced monitoring, biological research, stock assessment and management intervention;
- Developing and undertaking the Shark Research Plan, including assessments to determine the status of WCPO shark stocks and the impacts from tuna fisheries; research to better understand shark biology and ecology; and improvement of shark catch data from commercial fisheries;
- establishing ecosystem indicators to monitor the effects of fishing, other anthropogenic effects and natural variability on ecosystem structure, function and biodiversity;
- identifying habitats of special significance,
- quantify fishery impacts, other anthropogenic impacts and the effects of environmental and climate variability and change on ocean ecosystems;
- estimating maximum aggregate yield of all species that can be safely removed from the ecosystem without disrupting ecosystem structure and function;
- identifying oceanographic features, processes and fishing practices that influence the distribution and abundance of fish stocks and their vulnerability to fishing gear;
- investigating trophic (predator/prey) relationships ;
- synthesising data and ideas across disciplines into ecological and ecosystem-based models; and
- conducting bycatch mitigation research including technical options to minimise bycatch and discards, including undesirable sizes of target species, and investigating depredation.
- Use of ecosystem models and related tools to assess the combined effects of fishing, oceanographic variability and socioeconomics in the context of multispecies fisheries and multiple management objectives.
- Assessment of the discards of food fish in industrial fisheries and evaluation of implications for food security.

### **4. Evaluation of existing CMMs and potential management measures**

The impacts of existing and potential CMMs and potential management measures on target stocks, NTADS and the ecosystem as a whole (including socioeconomic impacts) should be considered by the Commission, where possible, before the implementation of such measures, including the potential impact of any conditions and exclusions. Scientific research may inform the Commission when considering management options, through the provision of information on the effectiveness of management measures in achieving their objectives and the trade-offs associated with reconciling multiple objectives.

Further insights can be obtained from computer simulations incorporating uncertainty in our current understanding of population, fishery and ecosystem dynamics. Such simulations may range in complexity from simple projections or equilibrium yield analyses incorporated into single species stock assessment models, to more complex multi-species management strategy evaluation (MSE) models. MSE models consider the stock, fleet and ecosystem dynamics, fishing impacts, data collection, stock assessment, potential management response and the degree of implementation and compliance as a single integrated system. The research required to develop an MSE framework for the WCPFC Convention Area includes:

- Development of an appropriately structured multi-species operational model that incorporates, inter alia, the effects of oceanographic and climate variability and change;
- Development of behavioral models of fleet dynamics, including bio-economic models which integrate resource and fleet dynamics;
- Quantification of management objectives and the development of biological, social and economic performance indicators against which the achievement of management objectives can be assessed;
- Development of candidate feedback decision-rules for updating management measures in response to assessment outcomes;
- Characterisation of uncertainty and risk in the evaluation of management measures;
- Development of computer software, or adaptation of existing software, to integrate the above models with modules simulating data generation, assessment, management response and implementation.
- The development of user-friendly software to assist fishery managers in understanding the implications of potential management measures and longer-term strategies.

### **III. IMPLEMENTATION AND REVIEW**

Monitoring the implementation of this Strategic Research Plan will be the responsibility of the Chair of the Scientific Committee in collaboration with the Executive Director. Members of the Commission, including Cooperating Non-members, Participating Territories, observers, scientific experts and the Secretariat will share responsibility for implementation of the Plan. Opportunities to take responsibility for activities supporting implementation of components of the Plan will be considered at each meeting of the Scientific Committee.

At each regular session of the Scientific Committee the Ecosystems and Bycatch, Management Issues, Statistics, and Stock Assessment Themes will be convened. The Fish Biology, Fishing Technology, and Methods Themes will meet as required by the SC. Issues relating to biology, methods, and fishing technology that are of relevance to the stock assessments to be undertaken in a given year will be considered by the stock assessment preparatory workshop. Theme sessions will review the elements of the Plan relevant to their respective terms of reference and will develop operational work programmes consistent with the Plan. Coordination of the review and work programme development will rest with the Chair of the Scientific Committee in consultation with conveners of the Theme Groups, the manager of the Scientific Services Provider and the Executive Director.

Opportunities to involve individuals and institutions from developing countries and territories should be a strong feature of the implementation of the Plan. Promoting such involvement should be aimed at both utilising available expertise from developing countries and territories, and at providing important opportunities for building scientific and technical capacity within those countries and territories.

Full implementation of the Strategic Research Plan will likely be beyond the means of the Commission's core budget. Extra-budgetary funds from voluntary contributions of Members and other sources will be required and actively sought by the Commission. Nevertheless, adoption of the Plan by the Scientific

Committee and subsequent strong support from the Commission is a prerequisite to securing the necessary extra-budgetary funds.

An independent external review of the Plan may periodically be requested by the SC. The Scientific Committee will be responsible for preparing the terms of reference for the review. The Scientific Committee will present the report of the review to the next regular session of the Commission.

#### **IV. RELATIONS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS**

Article 22 of the Convention provides that the Commission will consult, cooperate and collaborate with other relevant organizations, particularly those with related objectives and which can contribute to the attainment of the objective of the Convention. In relation to this Plan, relationships with the following institutions are of particular significance.

##### **1. Technical and Compliance Committee**

The Executive Director, in consultation with the Chair of the Scientific Committee, will ensure that the Technical and Compliance Committee is consulted on any element of the Plan directly relevant to the functions of the Technical and Compliance Committee. The Executive Director will provide the Technical and Compliance Committee with copies of reports of the Scientific Committee relating to implementation and review of the Plan.

##### **2. International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean**

The Executive Director, in consultation with the Chair of the Scientific Committee, will ensure that the International Scientific Committee for Tuna and Tuna-like Species in the North Pacific Ocean (ISC) is informed of relevant elements of the Plan that may have a bearing on the research conducted by the ISC. This commitment, together with a commitment to collaboration, consultation and coordination, is reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding developed between the Commission and the ISC. The ISC will be invited to participate in each regular session of the Scientific Committee.

##### **3. Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission**

The Executive Director, in consultation with the Chair of the Scientific Committee, will ensure that the Director of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) is informed of any element of the Plan directly relevant to the functions of IATTC. This commitment, together with a commitment to collaboration, consultation and coordination, is reflected in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Commission and the IATTC. The MOU provides for collaboration with respect to the collection and sharing of data and information, subject to data sharing protocols of each organization, the development and implementation of joint research initiatives and the harmonization of conservation and management measures. Due to the fact that frozen tagged tuna will move between ocean basins for processing, collaboration with IATTC on tagging programmes would be desirable. Collaboration in developing and implementing joint research activities would also be useful. The IATTC will be invited to participate in each regular session of the Scientific Committee.

##### **4. Secretariat of the Pacific Community – Oceanic Fisheries Programme**

As the provider of scientific services, provided for under Article 14 of the Convention, the Secretariat of the Pacific Community – Oceanic Fisheries Programme (SPC-OFP) will have a pivotal role in the Scientific Committee's monitoring, review, implementation and periodic refinement of the Plan. SPC-OFP is a standing member of the Scientific Committee and, as scientific experts to the Commission, has

the capacity to report directly to the Commission on science matters. The Executive Director, in consultation with the Chair of the Scientific Committee, will ensure that SPC-OFP is consulted at regular intervals between regular sessions of the Scientific Committee on progress with implementation of the Plan. An MOU between the Commission and SPC-OFP reflects these arrangements.

## **5. Indian Ocean Tuna Commission**

The Executive Director, in consultation with the Chair of the Scientific Committee, will ensure that the Director of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) is informed of any element of the Plan directly relevant to the functions of the IOTC. Strong similarities exist between the fisheries and fishery management concerns and objectives of each regional fisheries management organization (RFMO). Implementation of research plans by both organizations will benefit from open and transparent communication in many areas, including research related to purse seine and longline fisheries, data collection and verification, illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fleets, capacity and vessel registries. The geographic areas of concern to each party overlap in Southeast Asia, further reinforcing the need for collaboration. Tuna tagging programmes are active within both Commission areas, which will test the ability of both organizations to organize a single, coherent tag recovery and reward system in cooperation with coastal states and distant water fishing nations.

## **6. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**

The Commission's Rules of Procedures provide for the participation of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in the meetings of the Commission and its subsidiary bodies. In relation to the Scientific Committee and this Research Plan, potential areas for collaboration include the Coordinating Working Party on Fishery Statistics (CWP, [www.cwpnet.org](http://www.cwpnet.org)) and the Fishery Resources Monitoring System (FIRMS) which is part of the FAO Fisheries Global Information System (FIGIS, a network of integrated fisheries information). FIRMS draws together a unified partnership of international organizations, regional fishery bodies and, in the future, national scientific institutes, collaborating within formal agreement to report and share information on fisheries resources. For effective fisheries information management, FIRMS also participates in the development and promotion of agreed standards.