

## Minutes

### Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

14 September 2023

Teams

#### 1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair John Lynch welcomed all participants to the meeting. Apologies were received from Sander Meyns and Jasmine Vlietinck (Rederscentrale) The agenda was adopted.

#### Action points from the last meeting (30 March 2023)

1	Secretariat to contact Kenn Skau Fischer directly regarding his changes. <a href="#">Finalised 30 March</a>
2	Secretariat to circulate the updated version to FG members for immediate review prior to circulation for approval into the Working Groups <a href="#">Circulated 30 March</a>
3	Secretariat to write to Ciaran Kelly, Marine Institute, to follow up on this event. <a href="#">Email sent 30 March, no response</a>

**ACTION:** Secretariat to follow up with Ciaran Kelly, Marine Institute

#### 2. Tracking skate movement on the southern Irish coastline – Dr Damien Haberlin (MaREI)

You can find the presentation here.

Dr Damien Haberlin introduced the work of MaREI where the CETUS project is being carried out in partnership with Inshore Fisheries Ireland.

He referred to Ireland's ambitious ORE target of seven gigawatts by 2030 expanding to 37 gigawatts by 2050. Large areas are under investigation for these developments which require a lot of infrastructure. It is hard to identify the impact all this infrastructure is going to have on certain species as for some good information is lacking. The CETUS project is looking at gathering baseline data on sensitive species, specifically elasmobranchs, sea birds and cetaceans with the work split along taxonomic lines. New and existing data will be analysed for example to look at habitat distribution, seasonal residency, migration etc.

To date, the project has tagged:

- 25 dogfish
- 6 tope sharks
- 13 skate types.

Camera monitoring was undertaken at the start of the project to survey the area, and acoustic tracking is being carried out using small internal trackers on individual animals and passive acoustic receivers in the water. The transmitters create coded pulses every 120 to 180 seconds which are unique to each tag. As the animal swims within a certain radius of each receiver, the receiver kick picks up the coded pulse and it records just the time and the date with some additional functionality added in certain receivers.

Courtmcsherry Bay contains seasonal hotspots making the capture of animals for tagging easier. These hotspots seem to be concentrated in mud and depressions in between the elevated rocky reef. A line of receivers is deployed across the bay so that when animals caught within the array leave, the timing of that event and when/if they return will be captured. Deployment of temporary receivers is being considered by using static fishing gear, for example pots, as well as roving receivers over short periods of time.

A variation has been observed in the size of tagged animals. Blood samples are collected from each individual to look for stable isotopes certain blood markers, e.g. hormones that might indicate productivity or pregnancy which may help identify if the area is important from a conservation point of view. In addition, ultrasounds were carried out on each animal, and parasites were removed which will be used for genetic analysis. Finally, a fin clip was taken from every animal and that's across the board, all species, every animal that we tag donates generously, I think clip and a blood sample for stable isotopes and for other blood markers as well.

The Chair thanked Dr Haberlin for his presentation and is looking forward to an update once results are available from the project. He mentioned that large flapper skate are being caught and tagged in the Irish Sea and offered to provide this information.

Dr Haberlin stated that there is a huge interest in this project by all stakeholders in Courtmcsherry Bay. Their involvement from an early stage of the project helped with buy-in to the project.

The Chair confirmed that the majority of skate caught in the Irish Sea over the past years are also large females.

Woodlock commented that by involving the local community evidence of hatched eggs being washed up could be collected by local beachcombers.

Dr Haberlin mentioned that some large egg cases have been found from various species. He added that a study on EMF is planned for 2024 in Cork Harbour using dogfish placed in a cage above the power cable to identify if there is any influence on behaviour.

Paulo Vasconcelos asked if the unbalanced sex ratio of the observed animals was characteristic of the species or would this already be a preliminary indication that this area is an important mating and breeding ground.

Dr Haberlin stated that sex segregation is typical for elasmobranchs. Behavioural differences between males and females have been observed with both temporal and spatial elements regarding aggregation. He added that sharks are cannibalistic and will eat their young which provides a reason for younger cohorts to stay separate from older ones.

He advised that first results for this study are expected in June/July 2024 which will help map out how to proceed over the following years.

### 3. Update from the Thornback Ray FIP – Solène Prévalet, FROM Nord

You can find the presentation here.

Solène Prévalet began by recalling some of the background to the project which began in 2019 with the carrying out of a pre-assessment according to MSC guidelines. The operational phase of the FIP started in June 2021. All progress can be found on the Fishery Progress website.

2024 will see cross-cutting action to carry out an update of the pre-assessment as the MSC standard has been updated to version 3 meaning some of the changes will need to be included.

Action plan: Progress on the actions & next steps (May 2023)

- Action 1: To improve knowledge about the Thornback Ray stock in 7d
- Action 2: Management options for TACs, Monospecific TAC of Thornback rays
- Action 3: Improved data on fishing activities to support the management strategy
- Action 4: Flyshoot fishery and red striped mullet
- Action 5: VMEs in the Eastern Channel
- Action 6: Management plan for Thornback Ray fishing activities in 7d
- Action 7: Identification – traceability of ray species, in particular Thornback ray

The Chair thanked Prévalet for her detailed presentation and commented this work could serve as a roadmap for other species. He asked regarding the improvement of spatial coverage (recommendation of the APECS project) if the project recommended to go outside the normal fishing areas.

“The APECS project objective was to identify functional areas of Thornback rays in 7d. It used data from Obsmer campaign (national program of observer at sea), DATRAS data (NS-IBTS, BTS, FR-CGFS), APECS data when boarding on CGFS to gather information on elasmobranch and collect egg cases, and lastly from the CapOera program (collection program of egg cases on French coasts).

The analysis of the datasets brought some pieces of evidences on RJC functional areas, but still, to precisely localised areas such as egg laying site or mating site, recommendations were made. One was to increase the spatial and temporal coverage of elasmobranch data collection via the optimization of existing surveys or by setting up dedicated surveys such as:

- Setting up the collection of egg cases in the BTS survey (time period associating with peak spawning) - encouraged by the ICES WGBEAM.
- Continue collecting capsules on CGFS and to start collecting them on IBTS.
- Increase data acquisition effort on BTS in a more central area of 7d (oversampling).
- Relaunch coastal collections of egg cases at regular time interval (on the basis of CapOeRa sentinel protocol)
- Clearly identify the egg-laying areas and the hatching peak by setting up a dedicated campaign. It could be a beam trawl sampling from September to January both in coastal and further at sea areas.

The APECS report: <https://www.normandiefraicheurmer.fr/media/rapport-d-etudes-apecs-wwf-habitats-de-la-raie-bouclée.pdf>

The final presentation: <https://www.normandiefraicheurmer.fr/media/copy-presentation-avancees-apecs-etude-habitats.pdf>

Regarding the correlation of injuries and survivability he wondered if it could be predicted that there would be a high percentage of animals not surviving that were initially assessed as in poor condition. The report can be found here : <https://www.normandiefraicheurmer.fr/media/rapport-from-nord-quotetude-survie-rejets-senne-danoisequot.pdf>

Prévalet identified that when there was a larger extent of injury rate, the survival rate was lower. However, in some individuals kept in the aquarium, recovery could be observed as well. Extrapolation of this information could prove highly useful.

The Chair felt that the data could later be used directly during catching and for modelling which could be included in the management model.

Vasconcelos added that the information on high survival rates is crucial for Member States to support the high survivability exemptions under the Landing Obligation. He wondered whether the performed experiments reflect in practice the normal fishing activities on board, handling, duration of aerial exposure of fish on deck. Having a link between damage rate of individuals and their survivability in the long-term would be another important proxy to further support the exemptions under the LO.

Prévalet commented that the handling procedure during the experiments was reflecting of actual activities on board.

Woodlock mentioned the BIM survival study on cuckoo ray which concluded that the most vulnerable time for rays was when being held on board before being out into holding tanks.

The Chair stated that cuckoo ray are very difficult to maintain in captivity and similar results as to the FIP regarding survivability were arrived at. Facilities for holding on board could be improved as it seemed that individuals were in good condition when brought on board but as soon as they were placed in captivity their condition deteriorated. It is hoped that further trials may be carried out.

Woodlock referred to the potential impact of the closure in the Channel for squid fishing and felt that there were alternative methods available to overcome this. Regarding restaurants being unable to identify what type of ray was being served in restaurants, this could be related to animals having been skinned before being brought to the restaurant.

Dr Haberlin referred to acoustic tagging for evaluating post capture survival and asked if the FIP research could be augmented by this technology.

Prévalet stated that the FIP considered this in collaboration with Wageningen University but ultimately it was decided against this approach.

The Chair commented that BIM are looking for acoustic tags for blonde ray research.

#### 4 Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

- NWWAC/NSAC advice on skates & rays management ([advice](#), [COM response](#))
- Joint NWWAC/NSAC letter on the prohibited species list ([letter](#), [COM response](#))

The Chair felt that both letters were positive and encouraging and that some of the proposals on the management.

Anabel Andujar-Vazquez stated that concerning the long-term management of the group TACs, the EU and UK have developed an indicative roadmap for the group TACs. Both parties established guidelines for further work over the coming years, which is only indicative and subject to changes. The ACs' recommendations were taken into account when developing this roadmap. The COM is hoping that when this work is started in 2024 the FG will continue contributing to this work. The roadmap will be likely available after the SCF meeting on 22 September and the COM is happy to be involved in another meeting with FG members.

The Chair thanked Andujar-Vazquez for this update and agreed that the FG would continue its work as well as encouraging the MS to continue their research work.

Woodlock stated his disappointment regarding the COM response as he felt it had not addressed any of the specific recommendations that had been made. He hoped that in future communications individual recommendations could be responded to more specifically.

Vasconcelos replied that sometimes the responses need to be vague and generic as certain topics are sensitive especially when it comes to ongoing or forthcoming negotiations with other partners.

The Chair agreed that to follow through with certain management measures includes a great deal of work and in the long-term a good management structure can be expected.

#### 5. AOB

None raised

#### 6. Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

1	Secretariat to follow up with Ciaran Kelly, Marine Institute
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The Chair thanked all participants and especially the Commission representatives.

## Participants

Michael Andersen	Danmarks Fiskeriforening
Anabel Andujar-Vazquez	DG MARE
Damien Haberlin	MaREI
Marie Lecomte	MSC
John Lynch (Chair)	IS&EFPO
Mo Mathies	NWWAC
Geert Meun	VisNed
Maria Moset-Martinez	DG MARE
Solène Prévalet	FROM Nord
Tamara Talevska	NSAC
Kateryna Urbanovych	NSAC
Paulo Vasconcelos	DG MARE
Johnny Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary