

DRAFT Minutes

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting via Teams

15 December 2023

Participants

Pauline Delalain	CNPMEM
Falke Desager	Rederscentrale
John Lynch (Chair)	IS&EFPO
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat
Geert Meun	VisNed
Joanne Morgan	ICES
Solène Prévalet	FROM Nord
Amerik Schuitemaker	Nederlandse Vissersbond
Kateryna Urbanovitch	NSAC Secretariat
Matilde Vallerani	NWWAC Secretariat

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair John Lynch welcomed all participants to the meeting and thanked Joanne Morgan, ICES ACOM Vice-Chair, for taking the time to join the members and present the latest ICES advice. Apologies were received from Jurgen Batsleer (DG MARE) ahead of the meeting. The agenda and minutes from the last meeting were adopted.

Action points from the last meeting (14 September 2023)

1	Secretariat to follow up with Ciaran Kelly, Marine Institute
	Secretariat sent follow up email on 18 September, no reply received

ACTION: John Lynch to follow up directly with Ciaran Kelly in 2024.

2. Latest ICES advice on selected elasmobranch stocks— Joanne Morgan, ICES ACOM Vice-Chair

Advice was released in October for a lot of Elasmobranch stocks with some others having been given advice in 2022. Some changes have been made to the basis for the assessments which can be found in the sheets.

Advice on conservation aspects

- Some stocks for which ICES provides fishing opportunities advice are more affected by other anthropogenic pressures than by fishing. In these cases, ICES will now include 'conservation status advice' in the respective fishing opportunities advice sheet.
- Often "ICES has not identified any conservation aspects"
- But for these stocks:

ICES advice on conservation aspects: Management measures to account for conservation aspects may exist at a national or regional level.

Conservation status: ICES has not reviewed any information on stock-specific conservation status

Elasmobranchs are slow growing which needs to be accounted for in the advice.

Thornback ray North Sea, Skagerrak, Kattegat, E English Channel (3a47d)

- Advice for 2024 5274 t, for 2025 5307 t (+116%) due to application of SPiCT
- F below F_{msy}, Biomass above MSYBtrigger
- Skates and rays managed under single TAC - prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species.
- Not known how increase in TAC might affect discards
- Advice based on MSY approach

Blonde ray North Sea and West of Scotland (4a6)

- Precautionary landings advice for 4 years when hopefully more information on catch and survey data is available.
- Category 5 – no information on abundance or exploitation

Blonde ray central and south North Sea and E English Channel (4bc7d)

- MSY advice for 2024 1262t and 2025 1209 (+554%) based on SPiCT
- Benchmark carried out in 2023

Spotted ray North Sea, Skagerrak, Kattegat and E English Channel (3a47d)

- MSY advice for 2024 1517t and 2025 1415 (+561%) based on SPiCT
- Benchmark carried out in 2023

Cuckoo ray North Sea, Skagerrak and Kattegat (3a4)

- MSY Advice for 2024 and 2025: landings 79 t in each year (-11%)
- Change due to new method: rfb and decrease in biomass

Other stocks of interest – advice in 2022

Celtic Seas

Thornback ray *Raja clavata* in western Channel 7e to k

- rjc.27.afg Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea north: MSY landings 1833 t
- rjc.27.7e western English Channel: PA landings 170 t
- raj.27.67a-ce-k hkj other skates and rays West of Scotland, Celtic Sea and West English Channel

Blonde ray *Raja brachyura* e to k

- rjh.27.7afg Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea north: PA landings 573 t
- rjh.27.7e western English Channel: PA landings 213 t
- hjk no specific data in other rays as no data disaggregated by species

Spotted ray *Raja montagui* e to k

- rjm.27.7ae-h Celtic Seas, western English Channel: MSY landings 814 t
- raj.27.67a-ce-k hkj other skates and rays West of Scotland, Celtic Sea and West English Channel

Cuckoo ray *Leucoraja naevus* e to k

- rjn.27.678abd west of Scotland, south Celtic Seas, western English Channel, Bay of Biscay: MSY landings 2023 7826 t 2024 8064 t

Irish Sea

Blonde ray *Raja brachyura* 7a

- rjh.27.7afg Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea north: PA landings 573 t

Thornback ray *Raja clavata*

- rjc.27.afg Irish Sea, Bristol Channel, Celtic Sea north: MSY landings 1833 t

Spotted ray *Raja montagui* 7a

- rjm.27.7ae-h Celtic Seas, western English Channel: MSY landings 814 t

Cuckoo ray *Leucoraja naevus* 7a

- rjn.27.678abd west of Scotland, south Celtic Seas, western English Channel, Bay of Biscay: MSY landings 2023 7826 t 2024 8064 t

Channel

Undulate ray *Raja undulata* 7d and e

- rju.27.7de English Channel: MSY landings 2023 4839 2024 4675

Other rays and skates Rockall, W of Scotland, Celtic Sea and W English Channel (7a-c and 7e-k)

- Lack of reliable catch and survey data
- This covers skates (order *Rajiformes*) not reported to species level, species reported outside of defined stock boundaries (e.g. blonde ray) and deepwater skates and northerly species
- Reported landings of skates in Celtic Seas that are not specified to species had declined from more than 2562 tonnes in 2009 to 58 tonnes in 2021 – improved reporting
- Stock identity for many unknown

These stocks (individual and ‘other’) include advice: Management of the catches of skates and rays under a combined TAC prevents effective control of single-stock exploitation rates and could lead to overexploitation of some species.

Where to find these: ICES library <https://ices-library.figshare.com/>, best to search stock code, e.g. rju.27.7de

<https://ices-taf.shinyapps.io/adviceexplorer/>

The Chair thanked Morgan for the information provided. He wondered what it would take to raise the data deficient stocks up to those that have full SPiCT advice.

Morgan stated that in order to do a SPiCT, catch needs to be disaggregated and assigned to the right stock and one survey index to be considered a good index regarding the abundance of the population. There are several other assumptions that go into SPiCT which are rarely derived from data but more often from literature.

Geert Meun asked why SPiCT was used for some stocks and rfb for others.

Morgan explained that in 2024 the third benchmark for elasmobranchs will be carried out and that ICES is trying to bring as many stocks as possible into the SPiCT model approach. ICES examines various diagnostics for the various models to see if the model fits the stock. Time series which are not contradictory are needed, and if indices are going into different directions this can cause problems for SPiCT. If that is the case, then ICES will use a model for data limited stocks such as rfb.

Pauline Delalain asked if advice based on the 15th percentile has become the example for elasmobranchs under the SPiCT model.

Morgan explained when SPiCT was first used for elasmobranchs a range of percentiles was employed. However, if anything lower than 15 was used, estimates would become poor. There is always uncertainty in XX, and elasmobranchs are generally stocks that cannot recover quickly. So, if mistakes are made, damage might be done. Therefore, advice was considered needed which was more conservative than MSY. Using 15 seemed to provide more stable predictions with less risk to the stocks. In a number of years if the populations are still increasing then this may be revisited, but for now this is used to avoid any unintended consequences.

Regarding the models predicting good increases for the stock size in the following year, the Chair asked if this could show when the growth levels out or could it include influences from availability of food etc.

Morgan explained that the carrying capacity is estimated in the model, usually as twice BMSY. She stated that a multi-year projection could be carried out to see when and if carrying capacity would be reached, however, the farther away this prediction was from the available data, the more uncertain the results would be. Stocks may fluctuate around their carrying capacity which then could be reflected in allowable catches.

3. Discussion on advice development

The Secretariat explained that the question raised for members in the FG was to evaluate what stocks could be removed from the group TAC either for commercial or conservation purposes.

The Chair felt that in future some very good advice can be expected based on the information available, for example from the Thornback Ray FIP in the Channel.

Amerik Schuitemaker felt that for Thornback ray and Blonde ray in the North Sea where there was a big increase, the combined TAC may also increase due to those species that are doing well. Should Thornback ray and Blonde ray be taken out of the group TAC, would this be enough for the fishermen to base their catches on for 2024?

Falke Desager explained that for the Belgian fleet Thornback and Blonde ray are very important with a lot of vessels fishing in UK waters as well. To remove these from the group TAC could be very difficult due to losses related to Brexit.

The Chair agreed that the changes would impact those stocks where the advice is poor. So, while this seems to be the right thing to do, it is difficult to assess if little information is available on the remaining stocks. Possibly the national research institutes should be asked if data is available on these other stocks.

Schuijtemaker stated that next year those skates and rays may not be choke species, but for example sole is of concern for the Dutch fleet. There is a risk of choke from those stocks that do not have good advice, which plays a role for advice on sole if they would be taken out of the group TAC.

The Chair agreed that the situation with sole is very serious. He felt that next year the AC could contact the scientific institutes regarding data on the other stocks and how improvements could be achieved so that these could go into better models. In addition, they could clarify what data is available to feed into the ICES benchmarks.

Schuijtemaker asked what taking stocks out of the group TAC actually would mean in reality, for example when Thornback or Blonde ray are removed from the group TAC.

The Chair mentioned that the Commission attempted this separation a few years ago but that this was not received well at the time. He stated that the Marine Institute was involved in providing figures for Ireland at the time, but information would be needed from all national institutes to carry out this exercise.

Solène Prévalet felt that this was more of an issue for the Commission and not for scientists as it is a management issue. It would be difficult to provide advice on this without having the full picture. The AC should ask the Commission for these numbers, for example if Thornback ray was removed from the group TAC. She felt that new simulations are being carried out by the Commission and it would be important for the AC to have access to these.

ACTION: Secretariat to contact DG MARE to establish if work is being carried out on simulations removing certain stocks from the group TAC and if this could be presented to the FG.

The Chair felt it might be useful to review the advice provided today for the different stocks and the different areas and establish where advice is good or poor for these stocks. It had been discussed before to put catch limits on certain species to protect them and based on the information received today this could be revisited.

Meun stated that regarding the splitting up of the TAC, the SCF also discussed splitting the TAC for turbot and brill which led to some problems with the TCA and this split was finally not established for the North Sea as there was no possibility in the TCA to do this.

ACTION: Secretariat to contact DG MARE to clarify if the splitting of TAC can be carried out under the TCA.

Delain asked if the Commission has shared the timetable regarding the EU-UK discussions on skates and rays management.

ACTION: Secretariat to add skates & rays topic to Inter-AC Brexit Forum agenda to understand the timetable for these discussions.

4. Next steps

Next meeting: 12 February 10:00 CET

5. AOB

None

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

1	John Lynch to follow up directly with Ciaran Kelly in 2024
2	Secretariat to contact DG MARE to establish if work is being carried out on simulations removing certain stocks from the group TAC and if this could be presented to the FG
3	Secretariat to contact DG MARE to clarify if the splitting of TAC can be carried out under the TCA.
4	Secretariat to add skates & rays topic to Inter-AC Brexit Forum agenda to understand the timetable for these discussions.

Response received on 19 December from DG MARE based on request sent by NWWAC Secretariat:

“In September 2022 the STECF meeting on skates and rays management took place. The meeting had various objectives, one of which was exploring alternatives to the current combined TAC for skates and rays. The group assessed different options, including defining a TAC based on genus, or ICES assessment category as well as the option of excluding of a specific stock such as thornback ray in the North Sea or cuckoo ray in the Celtic Sea. Based on the STECF work the EU and UK agreed to jointly develop an indicative roadmap to come up with alternatives to the current combined TAC. The development of this plan will be overseen by the Specialised Committee on Fisheries with several workshops in 2024 (and 2025). I’ve attached the STECF report of 2022 for your reference.

Regarding the splitting of the TAC, creating a new TAC requires a decision by the Partnership Council and an agreement to open and modify the TCA. This is not straightforward or the preferred course of action. Therefore, we aim to adopt a similar approach as was done for turbot/brill and lemon sole/witch flounder, employing an “of-which” statement. Subsequently, the Council will have to decide on the new relative stability key for the of-which stock.”

In attachment 2022 STECF 22-08 skates & rays report ([link](#))