

DRAFT Minutes

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting via Teams

28 September 2021

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair Paddy Walker welcomed all participants especially the new members Solène Prévalet (FROM Nord), Rosalie Crespin (CNPMEM) and Johnny Woodlock (Irish Seal Sanctuary). A quick round of introductions was carried out. Apologies were received from Linda Planthof (North Sea Foundation) and Tamara Talevska (NSAC Secretariat). The agenda and the minutes from the last meeting (30 March 2021) were adopted. The slides from the meeting can be found [here](#).

2. Appointment of Chair and Vice-Chair

The Dutch Elasmobranch has decided not to continue their membership in the North Sea AC due to financial and capacity issues. Therefore, this was the final meeting with Paddy walker as Chair of the FG.

John Lynch volunteered as Chair for this FG.
Johnny Woodlock volunteered for Vice-Chair position.

John Lynch: I am quite sad about the DES leaving the ACs as they were at the forefront of the work on the Skates & Rays and I would like to thank them for their contributions.

The Chair and Vice-Chair were approved.

3. FIP update (Solène Prévalet)

The presentation on the Thornback Ray Fisheries Project can be found [here](#).

Geert Meun: First, I think it would be good if we could have some more information on the Pandora project (<https://www.pandora-fisheries-project.eu/>). Secondly, one of the aims is to minimise the impact on red striped mullet, why was this particular species chosen and not one of the other commercially important ones as well as the one specific gear?

Solène Prévalet: The aim of the FIP is to reach the MSC standard at the end of its 5 years. When looking at the MSC standard the red striped mullet is referred to as secondary species because it is fished for over 5% by Danish Seine. If the FIP does not have more than 60 points in the assessment on the Danish seine, then the standard cannot be reached. I am not sure regarding the contents of the Pandora project, but the FIP goal is to reach the MSC standard which is why there is not such a big overlap with the Pandora project.

Chair: Should someone be invited to share information on the Pandora project?

ACTION: Geert Meun to supply contact information on the Pandora project to the Secretariat to invite for a potential presentation at the next meeting of this group.

Sander Meyns: within the SUMARIS project the partners were thinking about the group TAC including a proportion of thornback ray. In the FIP it looks like you are thinking about a specific Thornback Ray TAC. Do you think this can be achieved?

Solène Prévalet: It is our goal but first we need to reach consensus on a national level after which it can be brought to a European level. The current global TAC does not reflect the stock accurately as some of the ray stocks are showing a decreasing biomass index while the Thornback Ray is increasing. What is the Belgian position on this?

Sander Meyns: For Belgium, Blonde ray is the most important stock followed by Thornback ray and Spotted ray. Within this FG, I think we can have useful discussions regarding the TAC topic. In addition, ILVO, our scientific partner, is involved in the Raywatch project, and an update could be added to the agenda of the next FG meeting.

John Lynch: Regarding the 45 centimetre minimum size, is that a national measure in one of the countries, or it is a European measure, or is this an agreement among the fishermen? We included it in our letter to the Commission as part of our request on advice on the size restrictions.

Solène Prévalet: Since 2017, fishing vessels flying the French flag have been subject to a minimum catch and landing size for skates and rays of the Rajiformes family, including the Thornback ray: 45 cm (by the decree of 28 January 2013).

Chair: You mentioned a benchmark of Thornback ray next year and for that we need survival and discard rate, and I think this is related to the next agenda point on the Dutch project "Bridging knowledge gaps". In addition, it has been identified that the Commission is evading the issue on what to do with management stating that actually the Member States and the ACs should be making bespoke plans etc. We will discuss this later in this meeting. Is the meeting on 13 October open for FG members to attend?

Rosalie Crespin: It's the National Commission and I do not think FG members can attend. We can update you if there are any results.

Chair: there are a lot of things happening at the moment in the different countries, and the really important thing is that we get all the information and knowledge and insights together at some point and make a decision what to do about this. The idea of the single TAC has been around for the last six years, and I think at some point maybe this FG could bring it forward. Regarding the ICES advice on delisting thornback ray from OSPAR, what ICES advised was that Thornback Ray did not meet the criteria for being listed in the first place, but it was still necessary to have management. ICES does not decide on the delisting, this is up to OSPAR.

Johnny Woodlock: Will the minimum size and the TAC apply to all areas covered by the ACs or just the Channel?

Chair: Each country has their own their own size and TAC. There are 5 or 6 TAC areas in in the whole of the Northeast Atlantic covering skates and rays. There is no single species TAC for skates and rays.

ACTION: Engagement letter to be put forward for approval to the respective Working Groups and if approved through ExCom approval procedure in both ACs.

4. Update on project 'Bridging knowledge gaps for sharks and rays in the North Sea'

The project is EMFF funded and will examine survivability of skates and rays on board, DNA analysis as well as how shark and rays utilise the Dutch coast, the latter funded under LIFE-IP. A lot of the work had to be postponed due to COVID. The metier/species combinations were analysed with regards to what work has been carried out by other countries and a decision was made to look specifically at beamtrawl and flyshoot in relation to spotted and Thornback ray. Trips are being planned to carry out the survivability research.

Tagging has been done to find out the migratory patterns for spotted in blonde rays. We have 290 data storage tags which release after 18 months. We also developed an A5 flyer which I can share with this group.

DNA samples are also being collected to validate the stock structure for the assessments for example.

Next year a number of stocks are being put forward for a benchmark. Normally these are only done for species with sufficient data. When looking at the different ICES categories for assessment, Cat 1 is the most data hungry, and there are specific rules as to which data can be include. A benchmark next year for skate and ray species will be very important, and we need to keep an eye on this.

This project runs until the end of 2022 by which time the exemption under Landing Obligation will probably have run out. It may be an idea to hold a workshop at the end of 2022/beginning of 2023 to collate all the information and knowledge that is being collected now and revisit the idea of active management for skates and rays.

As part of this project the Dutch Elasmobranch Society is carrying our dialogue sessions which need to be held physically. We will invite members of this FG to a future meeting possibly before April 2022.

5. COM response to joint NWWAC/NSAC request to the Commission for updated scientific advice on skates and rays

Chair: The 2017 STECF expert group developed several suggestions and the FG asked in its request how these can be moved on further. The Commission's reply was very disappointing as they were referring back to the STECF 2017 recommendations and put the onus back on the ACs and the Member States to develop bespoke plans to replace the group TAC in early 2018. However, this is not covered in the current policy and management legislation, so it is very difficult to move forward. All this will not be discussed until the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) has been set up.

Should this group develop a specific action plan or should there be a meeting with the Commission or a workshop?

Mo Mathies: while it is always worthwhile inviting the Commission. However, we need to be very specific in what we are asking to ensure Commission attendance. We need to identify what we would like to achieve with a workshop for example, and would we like to involve STECF and the Member States?

Chair: The STECF set up an expert working group and solely inviting them would possibly not work. This is also the role of the Commission.

John Lynch: I think we need to stay in touch with the Commission on this and stick with the three topics we have raised so far. It is unlikely that the Commission will do anything until after the SCF has been set up. We should collect all the information available on these topics also from previous meetings with STECF so that we are prepared.

Chair: We could develop Terms of Reference for a meeting. The Commission seems to have the perception that the MS and the ACs would develop these bespoke plans, however, this was never the perception of the people involved. We could develop clear terms of reference regarding what we wish to discuss, specifically this request and response from the Commission with the three issues identified.

Mo Mathies: We can enquire what the state of play regarding skates and rays is with the NWW MSG.

Chair: It would be interesting to see the Commission's reaction if we requested a joint workshop with ICES on future skates and rays management options. We need to flag all the things that have happened over the past few years. We have much more information now. So maybe Spring 2023 makes the most sense to hold this when the projects come to fruition.

Mo Mathies: I think this is very far down the road and it might be better to have a brief workshop now to identify all the issues and what we can bring forward, and then have another larger workshop in 2023. We could also liaise with UK counterparts of FG members would like to bypass the SCF issue as the Commission will push everything that way. As a first point of action I can get in touch with our MSG with our request and the Commission's response and ask them what they think about this. Depending on their response we can organise another meeting to identify the best way forward.

ACTION: Mo to contact NWW MSG regarding Commission response, ask for Scheveningen Group to be involved as well

6. Next steps

Chair: Would it be possible to contact someone in the Commission informally regarding the skates & rays work?

Mo Mathies: It is not clear who has taken over this dossier as Jonathan Shrives was moved to a new position.

Chair: So as a first step we will get in touch with the MSG and then follow this up at some stage with STECF. But we need to be careful not to repeat the previous meeting with STECF, which was very good, but after which nothing was implemented.

Sander Meyns: Just on a side note, on 24 August ray was made fish of the year for the second time in Belgium. It was difficult to convince scientists to accept rays for promotional campaigns. This is good news overall, and we managed to convince them because since 01 January, Belgian fishermen only land three ray species, Thornback ray, blonde ray and spotted ray. All three are doing well in terms of stock status. The promotional campaign started last month and has already had a great effect on ray prices in the fish auctions. This is carried out together with ILVO and also restaurants, markets etc via a ray working group within the Flemish government promotional body.

Chair: Just a quick note on the upcoming conference the Dutch Elasmobranch Society is organising, you find all the information here: <https://www.elasmobranch.nl/eea2021/>

The members of the Focus Group agreed to keep Dutch Elasmobranch Society involved as an expert observer.

ACTION: Dutch Elasmobranch Society to remain as an active expert observer on this group.

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

1	Geert Meun to supply contact information on the Pandora project to the Secretariat to invite for a potential presentation at the next meeting of this group This project has already ended and it did not fully align with the work of this FG.
2	Engagement Letter to be put forward for approval to the respective working groups Currently in both ExCom's approval procedures (01/11/2021), will be submitted to FIP organisers once approved.
3	Mo to contact NWW MSG regarding Commission response, ask for Scheveningen Group to be involved as well We spoke about this with the NWW MSG and they agreed to join at the next meeting to further discuss this topic.
4	Mo to update the ToR Fully updated and available on the NWWAC website (link)

Participants:

Name	Organisation
Rosalie Crespin	CNPMEM
Irene Kingma	Dutch Elasmobranch Society
John Lynch	IS&EFPO
Geert Meun	VisNed
Sander Meyns	Rederscentrale
Solène Prévalet	FROM Nord
Amerik Schuitemaker	Nederlandse Vissersbond
Sofie Smedegaard Mathiesen	Danish Fishermen PO
Jasmine Vlietinck	Rederscentrale
Paddy Walker (Chair)	Dutch Elasmobranch Society
Johnny Woodlock	Irish Seal Sanctuary
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat