

DRAFT Minutes

Joint NWWAC/NSAC Focus Group Skates & Rays

Virtual meeting via Teams

Thursday 10 December 2020

Participants

Paddy Walker (PW)	Dutch Elasmobranch Society (Chair)	NSAC
Irene Kingma (IK)	North Sea Foundation	NSAC
Sander Meyns (SM)	Rederscentrale	NWWAC/NSAC
John Lynch (JL)	ISEFPO	NWWAG
Loeiza Lancelot (LL)	FROM Nord	NWWAC/NSAC
Franck Le Barzic (FLB)	COBRENORD (as substitute for C. Gamblin)	NWWAC
Pascal Lorange (PL)	ICES/IFREMER	
Jonathan Shrives (JS)	DG MARE	
Kerstin Heck (KH)	DG MARE (Skates & Rays)	
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat	
Tamara Talevska	NSAC Secretariat	

Apologies

Caroline Gamblin	CNPMEM	NWWAC
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1 Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed all participants who briefly introduced themselves. The agenda was adopted. The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

2 Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference were discussed at the last meeting and updates need to be agreed. These will be discussed following the ICES and DG MARE presentations.

3 Overview ICES advice (Pascal Lorange, IFREMER/ICES)

The ICES WGEF overview presentation is available on the website [here](#).

The PA buffer should be applied every four years unless there is an increase in the stock abundance and a decrease in fishing effort. If those two conditions are met the PA buffer may not be applied for a higher number of years.

The advice for undulate ray is not based on landings, only on previous catch advice. The discard rate is applied to the advice based on catches. The TAC set for 2019-2020 was twice as much as the ICES advice.

JS: The Commission received advice yesterday on undulate ray in the Channel from the NSAC and NWWAC ([link](#)), and there seems to be a misunderstanding regarding how the advice is calculated. Regarding the total fishing mortality, when looking at the advice catches of 2127 tonnes, does this take into account the potential mortality from discarding? There is an exemption on this stock which allows an unlimited amount of discarding. If landings are increased, then catches could potentially go over the 2127 tonnes, or now 2552 tonnes. Is that correct?

PL: There have been a lot of discussions on this and there is no consensus estimate of the survival for this stock, at least not at the time of the ICES WG. The catch is the addition of what has been landed and the estimate of discards from on onboard observations from including at least UK, France and Belgium. The catch is landings plus discards without accounting for survival rate. The uncertainty cap is applied to the discards. The survey ratio increased a lot. But the advice does not include survival rate.

JS: Imagine that the advice catches are a cake, and the landings are a slice of cake, the AC advice seems to indicate that the landings could be a bigger slice of the cake, i.e. a bigger slice of the 2500 tonnes? If the slice is increased though, the size of the cake overall is increased – is that not against the ICES advice? So, if the landings are increased, there is a risk of overshooting the catch advice?

PL: If you increase the landing for the same catch advice, you necessarily increase the fishing mortality, because the fraction that is discarded survive to a high proportion. There is high survival in this fishery. Some fish which would survive if they were discarded are of course dead when they are landed.

JS: So the total fishing mortality can be 2500 tonnes?

PL: No, this number does not include the survival rate, the 2500 tonnes is solely the addition of landings and discards. When advising that the total catch should not be more than this, if it is more we come to areas where we do not know what the stock will do. The problem is that we have a model where we know there is survival but this is not accounted for in the process. In the same way this is a formal procedure where we follow the evolution at the time of advice and we are stating what has been actually caught but we do not consider either the TAC or the actual landings. In the Celtic Sea the actual landings are well higher than the advice in the Cat 5 stocks for example. But the advice is not scaled to recent catch or landings.

JS: If landings are higher than 183 tonnes, would we be overshooting catch advice?

PL: No. For any species where there is catch advice of a number of tonnes, when this total allowable catch is filled the fishery gets closed.

JS: there is an exemption on this stock, and discards are possible to any extent, so the only thing that limits the fishing mortality is the landings. If landings are increased for example to 300 tonnes, the overall catches would increase beyond 2500 tonnes.

PW: Having listened to the discussion, I agree with Jonathan, but the unknown factor is by how much. Survival is not quantified. It seems we are working backwards from the catches and understanding the amount of discards which is where the landings come from. It is essential to find out what the survival rate is and deciding how to include discards in the advice.

PL: Discards are included in the calculations, but what is not included is survival. Despite the ongoing cooperation by the industry with the scientists over the last number of years, there is still much less data available for this stock and less understanding of the stock dynamics when compared to other commercial stocks, for example cod or sole in the North Sea.

FLB: It is true for every stock with survivability that when the landings are increased, the fishing mortality also increases. The question is when is this sustainable, and we do not know this for undulate ray. What rates of landings are acceptable to keep the stock sustainable in future? Two years ago, the fishing opportunities were increased, and the biomass of the stock is still increasing a lot despite increased landings. Can the sustainability of this stock be calculated using historic landings data?

PL: Does historic landings refer to the landings before the closure of fishery? (Yes) This has been discussed several times as far back as 2014. The landings from before 2009 are estimates because there was no species by species reporting at the time and all rays were reported together as *rajidae*. This is a problem because in the western Channel there is a clear decline in landings for small vessels fishing near the Normand/Breton gulf in 2008-09. Looking at the whole Channel area, in the same period 2008-09 there was an increase in landings of all rays in the eastern Channel. But this blurs the signal. The data that ICES has on landings before 2009 are uncertain and based on hypothesis as there is no record of which species were landed at the time. The baseline is missing.

JL: On the catch advice and the landing advice, it may be possible if the landing advice was increased or decreased that the actual catch would not change. The size distributions for the catches would be needed. We need to know why the fish are discarded, for example for a lack of quota or are they being discarded because they are too small?

PL: Size is not considered in the advice. Until this year ICES has struggled to have reliable landing and discard data. This has now almost stabilised, and the WG has compiled suitable data. The next step is to consider the length distribution. The work this year has been disturbed by the pandemic situation as well. However, I do not think that the discards are made up of juveniles. Of course, all the juveniles are discarded as the higher value larger individuals are landed due to the constraints of the TAC.

SM: There is uncertainty of the survival rate, but within the SUMARIS project between 2017 and 2020 31 commercial sea trips, ten of which by Belgian vessels, were carried out to increase insight into survival rates and catch composition. Within the project it was concluded that in areas 7d and 4c for undulate ray the survival rate was more than 50%. Can these results be taken into account in future ICES advice?

PL: Yes, this can be taken into consideration in future. The survival rate has been discussed in the Bay of Biscay stock but I am unsure if this has been included in the advice. As soon as data is available where a study was peer reviewed and published, it can be used. ICES is now very strict regarding that a change in the method for assessing stocks and delivering advice cannot be done without going through a benchmark. The expert group is requesting benchmarks for quite a number of ray stocks in the North Sea and the Channel and the Bay of Biscay.

SM: The SUMARIS project only covered areas 7d and 4c. In 2021 the new project Raywatch for the Western Waters is being started by ILVO next year. For the Belgian fisheries the most important species for investigation right now is the small-eyed ray in the Bristol Channel.

PW: It seems there is now a better understanding of how the advice is divided.

4 Overview of Commission dossier on Skates & Rays

Brexit is overshadowing all other topics and there is still no clarity about the future relationship with the UK, however, this should not prevent the AC to produce advice on how they want the stocks to be managed next year. In previous years TACs would already have been published, unfortunately this year this cannot yet be done.

5 Discussion on the way forward

PW: An ICES workshop was held last year on discards and how to evolve information on discards in the advice. This report is on its way. Have results of this been taken up in the advice this year?

PL: This is a complicated issues for elasmobranchs because of the high survival rate. It is easier to deal with when survival is low. The SUMARIS results may not have been available at the last meeting of the ICES WG in June. The amount of available data is increasing. The inclusion of discards in the advice should be made, but in 2019 it was very difficult to have landings properly documented, and there as till a lot of uncertainty around this. This year, the data on landings was fine and data on discards for undulate rays is available, but ICES is only at the beginning of including discards in the advice.

PW: How can we move forward following the advice?

JS: It is still not very clear how the advice is written. There is a difference in how ICES presents its survival rates, for example *Nephrops*. There are two tables, one showing the effect of having survival taken into the calculation, and clearly demonstrating how this increases the landings. This makes it easier to demonstrate to stakeholders how this is affected. Traditional the Commission would have proposed only the landings part for the *Nephrops* as there is a survival exemption. So everyone can then see, although it is only a landings TAC, it is higher because of the survival being taken into account. If something similar could be put forward for skates and rays, then this may solve the communication issues where the Commission feels it is following scientific advice by proposing the landings because there is an exemption much like the *Nephrops*, but the stakeholders feeling that the total catch should be 2500 tonnes. A discussion may be needed on how the advice is presented, but this is between the Commission and ICES.

PW: Is this a good way forward in the medium term?

PL: ICES has stated for some years that taking into account the discards was not feasible as the relationship between discards and mortality was uncertain, survival was unknown. Survival is now quantified, and surely next time ICES will be able to include the survival estimated from the SUMARIS project, which covers only the eastern part of the Channel which is the same with the survey index which also only covers the eastern Channel and ICES applies to the full area. The process that is applied to *Nephrops* should be transferred as much as possible to skates and rays, there is no reason to reinvent how to enter discards and survival.

ACTION: FG to submit proposal on applying procedures currently used for *Nephrops* to advice development for skates and rays to the COM.

PL: Some survival estimates are available, but clearly in the next two years there will not be survival estimates available for all stocks. ICES is unlikely to use estimates for one stock and transfer them to another stock as environmental conditions are different for different stocks. Change on this will be incremental with a few stocks added every year.

Terms of Reference

Review of updated version (attached)
FG proposed to be extended until 2022.

ACTION: Secretariat to circulate updated ToR for written approval by FG members.

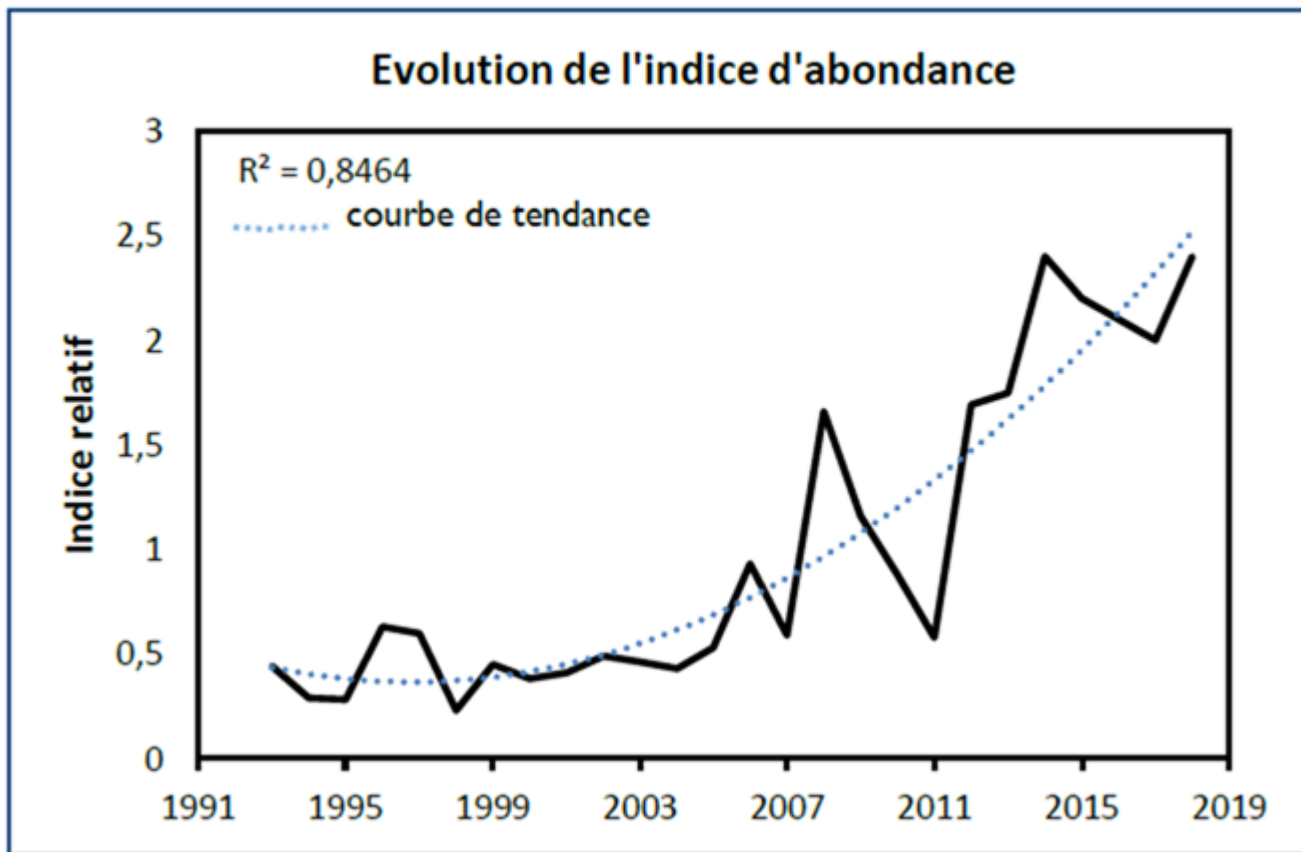
Fisheries Improvement Project Thornback Ray in the Eastern Channel

The Producer Organisations FROM Nord ((Fond Régional d'Organisation du Marché du poisson) and OPN (Organisation des pêcheurs Normands) are members either of the NWWAC and/or the NSAC. In 2019, in partnership with WWF and the Carrefour group, they undertook a pre-assessment of the Eastern Channel Thornback ray fishery fished by bottom trawls, trammel nets and Danish seine against the Sustainable Fishing MSC standard.

This fishery would have failed as it stands in the MSC certification process. The principles 1 and 3, relating to the management of the fishery and the exploitation of the stock are problematic, in particular, the performance criteria 1.2.1 about the "catch strategy". The pre-assessment underlines the fact that fishing opportunities may not be in line with the state of the Thornback ray stock, given an overall "ray" TAC allocated without distinction of ray species.

The members of both producer organizations (FROM Nord and OPN) catch around 60% of the rays TAC in the area 7d. FROM Nord and the OPN have for many years denounced this undifferentiated management of the ray. Various actions have already been taken to address this point. The FROM Nord has launched in 2017 the European SUMARiS project, with the aim to offer sustainable and cross-border management for ray stocks in the English Channel and the North Sea. The OPN has developed standards and trained crewmembers and the employees of auction markets to recognize different species in order to improve the quality of the data and get a better view of the abundance of the different species. The Thornback ray represents more than 80% of catches in the Eastern Channel. The management via an overall "all rays" TAC does not reflect the biological dynamics of the various ray stocks and does not meet the biological and economic challenges.

Indicateur d'évolution du stock en Manche-Est



Motivated by the results of the pre-assessment, both POs have committed to implement a FIP (Fishery Improvement Project) program, with the renewed partnership of WWF and Carrefour. Poseidon Aquatic Resource Management has been selected as the consultant to provide ongoing advice throughout the FIP process. FIP stakeholders currently develop the improvement action plan.

Measures will include among others:

- improving knowledge on the Thornback ray stock;
- defining reference points with the view to managing the fishery at MSY;
- setting specific quota on the basis of these reference points.

The action plan provides the appointment of a steering committee. We have identified various stakeholders among which the NWWAC and the NSA will have a preponderant mediating role with the EC to issue recommendations on this fishery.

Thus, both organisations invite the NSA and NWWAC to participate in the steering committee.

ICES has been approached to participate but scientists that are closer involved in the Channel area, for example from the SUMARIS project, they may be better placed. There may be a conflict of interest if the same person would provide IES advice, carried out assessments for MSC etc.

ACTION: NWWAC Secretariat to circulate information. Paddy Walker to join the steering committee, one NWWAC industry member to come forward.

6 Summary of actions agreed and decisions adopted by the Chair

Actions

1	FG to submit proposal on applying procedures currently used for <i>Nephrops</i> to advice development for skates and rays to the COM
2	NWWAC Secretariat to circulate information on the FIP. Paddy Walker to join the steering committee, one NWWAC industry member to come forward.
3	NWWAC Secretariat to circulate updated ToR for written approval by FG members.