

## MINUTES

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

#### Virtual meeting via Teams

Monday 16 November 2020 | 14:00 – 15:30 CET

#### Participants

Paddy Walker (PW)	Dutch Elasmobranch Society – incoming Chair	NSAC
Irene Kingma (IK)	North Sea Foundation -outgoing Chair	NSAC
Geert Meun (GM)	VisNed	NSAC
Caroline Gamblin (CG)	CNPMEME	NWWAC
Jasmine Vlietinck (JV)	Rederscentrale	NWWAC
Sander Meyns (SM)	Rederscentrale	NWWAC
Loeiza Lancelot (LL)	FROM Nord	NWWAC
Mo Mathies	NWWAC Secretariat	

#### Apologies

Tamara Talevska	NSAC Secretariat	
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#### 1 Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed all participants. Apologies were received from the NSAC Secretariat. The agenda was adopted. There were no action points from the previous meeting.

Following submission of the previous advice it was hoped to have a face-to-face meeting, but due to COVID this has unfortunately not been possible.

#### 2 Proposal for change of Chair and Vice-Chair positions

IK will be leaving the North Sea Foundation by December 2020 and will not take part in any ACs on behalf of this organisation.

Proposal: Paddy Walker to take over Chairmanship. This was approved by all participants.

The new Chair proceeded with the meeting.

The previous Vice-Chair has left FROM Nord and LL has taken over her brief.

Proposal: LL to take over as Vice-Chair, however second proposal for Rederscentrale to take up the position.

Proposal from Rederscentrale to see if FROM Nord can take over position, if not, then Rederscentrale will.

**ACTION:** LL to follow up internally and advise FG members of decision.

### 3 Terms of Reference

The Chair suggested to add a third objective to the TOR stating “to deal with issues that arise”, and also proposed to extend the duration of the Focus Group until 2022.

All participants agreed with extending the FG until 2022.

**ACTION:** Chair and Secretariat to update terms of Reference and circulate to the group.

### 4 Discussion points

- SUMARIS Management options for skate and ray stocks (Sander Meyns, Rederscentrale)

The SUMARIS project developed management recommendations for the top two ranked options standard minimum sizes and allocation of quota.

#### 1) Agreeing minimum sizes

In an effort to simplify management, rather than have different sizes for each species, it is suggested that two size class groups could be created. The first group would contain stocks that are considered healthy and growing, and the second groups stocks that are considered more vulnerable or data limited having a larger minimum size.

Healthy stocks category		Vulnerable/Recovering stocks category	
Thornback Ray	59cm	Spotted Ray Blonde Ray Cuckoo Ray Small-eyed Ray	63cm

*Table 2 Proposed minimum lengths for the 5 species in the global TAC group.*

The lengths suggested in Table 2 would establish a minimum size for skates and rays for the first time for some fishermen and would represent a very significant increase on the current PO sizes of 45cm (French PO - FROM NORD) and 50cm (Belgium PO – Rederscentrale). Agreeing the same minimum sizes would standardise sizes at international level and mean that all fishermen would work to the same sizes in the North Sea and Eastern Channel.

#### 2) SUMARIS TAC based management recommendation

As Thornback ray account for 73–77% of the landings reported at species level in the last three years in areas, it is proposed by the SUMARIS partners that a large proportion (potentially 75%) of the global TAC for areas IVc and VIId could be allocated to thornback ray stocks in these areas, with a much smaller proportion (25%) allocated to the other 4 species in the global TAC (spotted, blonde, cuckoo and small-eyed ray).

## Next Steps

As agreed in the joint strategy meeting on 15 September, an ICES request has been sent by the SUMARiS consortium to Jurgen Batsleer (IMARES). Jurgen Batsleer is a member of the ICES working group on elasmobranch fishes (WGEF), which is why the recommendations are submitted via him. Due to other priorities withing ICES (e.g. December minister council on TAC & Quota) it is unfortunately not possible anymore to discuss the request this year. Is there an opportunity to apply some pressure with the help of the ACs?

CG: Could the text of the ICES request be shared with the group?

SM: Yes, but this will need to be double checked.

PW: What do people think about the two different minimum sizes? Is this a possible way forward especially considering that countries currently have different landing sizes?

GM: In the NL the medium landing size is currently 55cm, and there should be no problem with increasing the minimum landing size to 59cm. However, fishermen prefer minimum landing sizes ending on 0 or 5, wo why not increase from 59cm to 60cm? It seems more convenient for fishers.

SM: The number is likely based on scientific research, but 60cm would not be an issue for Belgian fishers either, so it is possible to follow this up.

CG: This was discussed in the French national Working Group on skates and rays. Those members would like to have the answer to the ICES request before deciding on this proposal. Looking only at the Eastern Channel and the North Sea this proposal could be acceptable, but it might not be in other parts of the ACs' remit area, for example introducing a minimum size of 60cm for cuckoo ray in the Celtic Sea could be very problematic.

IK: The North Sea and the Eastern Channel were the target areas for the SUMARiS project. Were maximum landing sizes also discussed, for example to protect the large females of blonde ray which lay the most eggs?

PW: Last year in May a suite of measures were identified, including spatial management, maximum and minimum landing sizes etc. The top two topics were voted on which were minimum landing size and TAC based management. However, SUMARiS picked up on additional suitable management opportunities which should also be investigated.

PW: In 2017 an STECF expert meeting was held which resulted in a lot of recommendations being made on how to progress. SUMARiS has added to some of these which could be used.

PW: How do members feel about supporting the SUMARiS ICES request?

Secretariat: As it is difficult to make any decisions on supporting this document now in the meeting, it might be better to circulate the document and ask for comments from members so this could be taken forward as a request to the Commission from this joint Focus Group.

PW: That is a very good idea. The ICES Working Group works on a very specific annual pattern. If a request is sent now it will not be dealt with until next year in June if it is being taken up by the Working Group. The AC itself cannot put in the request directly.

Secretariat: Non-recurrent requests to ICES from the ACs are made via the Commission who has a contract with ICES regarding work being carried out.

PW: In that case, as there are additional relevant items on this agenda, we could add those to the request and ask the Commission to do something about those as well.

**ACTION:** SM to send SUMARIS ICES request to Secretariat, who will then circulate it among the members of this group for comments.

- **Permitted species list** (Irene Kingma)

This is an ongoing issue that the NSAC has been following via the Ecosystem Working Group. There is no foundation behind the list in the TAC and Quota Regulation. It is only mentioned in the annexes of the Technical Measures Regulation. There are no conditions attached as to what can and cannot go on the list, and there is no way to take a species off the list. In addition, there are certain stocks on the list and not simply species. Work has been going on over the past years regarding which conditions to apply to species being placed on or taken off the list. The Commission has been disengaged citing for example flexibility issues when dealing with the LO.

The NSAC prepared a draft request to the Commission for ICES to work on this and establish the criteria for inclusion on this list.

The NWWAC has also had discussions on certain species on this list, on blue skate specifically, as the stock seems to be in a good state and ICES data showing there was improving. However, the species remains on prohibited species list.

Could this FG look at this letter and endorse same by both ACs?

PW: This topic also came up at STECF meeting in 2017. What do members think on this?

CG: France supports the Spanish comments regarding the blue skate. Could species be added into the letter as examples where members feel it is incorrect to keep the species on the list?

PW: Adding examples would be good, there are a couple of examples that can be added.

IK: This should not be a request to the Elasmobranch Working Group. Even though there are mainly elasmobranchs on there, it is a wider list, and there may be other ICES Working Groups that could deal with this. It could also go to the bycatch group, the ecology group or any other relevant group in ICES.

Secretariat: The ACs could ask the Commission for a non-recurrent research request to ICES which would include some background on the topic in which the various relevant ICES Working Groups could be identified.

PW: This is not a new issue and has been discussed at ICES level previously. The Commission may decide though to deal with this in a different way.

**ACTION:** FG members to send comments on the draft NSAC letter to the NWWAC Secretariat, deadline Friday 20 November.

## Issues identified by CNPMEM (Caroline Gamblin)

Concerning the NWWAC advice on fishing opportunities for 2021, would it be possible to produce a complementary advice on Skate and Rays, as the ICES advice on Elasmobranch was published only beginning of October.

On the French side, there are two main concerns:

- First, the application of the ICES advice for category 3 stocks, when they are facing successive important increases of biomass. Because of the capping of 20% of the increase, and the application every 3 years of the precautionary reduction, the increase of fishing possibilities is limited which over time creates discrepancies between real abundance of the stock and fishing opportunities. We think that we should ask ICES if they could look at their methodology, consequences and possible adaptation for category 3 stocks when the biomass index shows an exponential increase. This was the case for Thornback ray in the Eastern Channel, but we see that it applies to some other species in the Celtic Seas area (and Bay of Biscay) also. The table below summarizes the advice:

Espèce	Zones	Révision avis	Catégorie	Variation d'abondance Avis 2018	Variation d'abondance	Marge de précaution	Avis	Avis débarquement (t)
R.bouclée	7e	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Oui	-20%	170
R.bouclée	7 a,f,g	2020	3	X2	81%	Oui	-4%	1596
R.bouclée	6	2020	3	+23%	-1%	Oui	-21%	137
R. lisse	4a,6	2019	6	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	9
R. lisse	7e	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	266
R. lisse	7 a,f,g	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	716
R.douce	7a,e-h	2020	3	+8%	0%	Oui	-20%	1041
R.douce	6, 7b,j	2020	3	+84%	-27%	Oui	-20%	51
R.fleurie	6, 7, 8abd	2020	3	+31%	+35%	Oui	-4%	3150
R.mêlée	7 d,e	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	40
R.mêlée	7 f,g	2020	3	X2	-26%	Oui	-36%	123
R. circulaire	6,7	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	34
R. chardon	6,7	2020	5	Inconnu	Inconnu	Non	0%	168

- Secondly, on undulate ray in the Channel, the advice indicated a biomass index increase by 270%. Nevertheless, the ICES advice is completely non-sensical: 183t considering a current TAC of 234t and catches of 2552t. We consider that the TAC should be adjusted according to the biomass index meaning around 631t. It would be helpful if at the AC level it could be agreed that the ICES advice is “questionable” and that, taking into account the efforts of fishers to collect data, the current level of catches, and the clear increase of the stock biomass, a substantial increase of the TAC could be granted for 2021.

Could a request be made to ICES regarding the evaluation of the Cat 3 stock, abundance evaluate methodology, inconsistencies? Should this be adapted to some specific cases?

PW: Thornback ray will be benchmarked next year. Next week there is a workshop by the ICES WK Skate looking at surveys used as basis for advice. This is not a new issue, the advice is based on the landings and survey data which work out as a partial proxy for biomass, and with the application of the uncertainty buffer amongst others there is never more than a 20% increase or decrease. Next week there will be a workshop on the surveys used applicable to the stocks that will be assessed next year, for example the North Sea stocks. The workshop is open for anyone to join, and PW can forward details.

SM: These remarks were made last Friday during a meeting with ILVO. Within the current data collection, a lot of rays are defined as data limited species, so there seems to be a lot of research needed to evaluate the stocks, for example from the Belgian point of view for the small-eyed ray in the Channel where fishers see a lot of these, but scientists keep stating that it is a limited-data species. And this means there is a decrease in quota for next year.

PW: The issue regarding undulate ray is also related to discards. When looking at the Terms of Reference for next year's ICES WG skates meeting which will be looking at the use of survey data to assess elasmobranch stocks in Cat 3, including the methods for different surveys and to account for the uncertainty in different survey data.

CG: It is not only a question of data. There is also a need to look at the methodology which was put in place in 2012 so there is a need to evaluate this and how it impacts on fishing opportunities. This was discussed previously in the ICES demersal group with Colm Lordan regarding other species.

PW: Is it a question of also entering into a discussion with the scientists from ICES on how this is done as there are constraints of data? For example, one thing that was discussed at SUMARIS was moving Thornback ray up to a Category 1 stock because so much data is available meaning there is also a more robust assessment. Knowing that there will be a benchmark next year, what would be the most fruitful approach?

Secretariat: Would it be useful to invite an ICES representative to the next meeting of this Focus Group?

CG: Looking at the advice for cuckoo ray there was an increase of 30% in the abundance in 2018, and a 35% increase in abundance this year, but the advice is minus 4% for landings. It is impossible to explain this to the fishers on the ground. There is an urgent need to address this.

The reduction in landing advice does not line up with the increase in biomass.

PW: The ICES advice is constrained by the methodology which also cannot be changed immediately. Luckily, a lot of the stocks are increasing. But there is not a proper stock assessment and advice is always based on the previous year's advice.

**ACTION:** Chair to invite ICES representative for next FG meeting.

**ACTION:** If members wish to join the ICES workshop next week, please contact the Chair.

### Undulate ray

CG: Previous advice was produced by the NWWAC on the fishing opportunities 2021, but this species was not included as the ICES advice was not available yet. NWWAC Working Group 3 (English Channel) identified the need to evaluate the ICES advice to establish if advice from the NWWAC to the Commissions was needed. This species was on the prohibited species list by mistake 12 years ago. The ICES advice this year ([link](#)) shows a big increase in biomass of 270%. However, the fishing opportunities advice does not match up with this. The TAC should be adjusted according to the biomass index to around 600 t. Could an advice on the fishing opportunities 2021 for this species be prepared by the ACs? This is important to fishers who are involved in self sampling and provide accurate catch data.

PW: This is one of the most complete assessments because the industry has provided so much data, and discard advice is also included. Looking at the increase in the biomass index, looking at the procedure, the uncertainty cap is applied. Because there are big movements in the numbers and because of the uncertainty in the surveys, ICES has decided it cannot increase or decrease more than 20% at any one time. In this case the precautionary buffer was not applied. There is a new rule in ICES that if it can be shown that the fishing effort has gone down, the precautionary buffer does not have to be applied. And for this species the fishing effort has reduced considerably. But this seems to be part and parcel of the previous discussion. This should be a more robust assessment because discard data is available. But because discard data is not included in the assessment, we could ask the Commission to enable ICES to include the discard data. This could possibly be part of a request to the Commission, to actually invest in collecting good discard data to improve the ICES assessments.

CG: The French are collecting all the discard data on undulate ray, but since this was an illegal species there is no historical data when the fishery was reopened. On this point it is more important to see can something be said on the fishing opportunities for 2021 to the Commission than to comment on the advice itself.

PW: From the ICES Working Group point of view, the issue here is that this is the only stock for which a lot of data is available. If there is just one stock with a different approach this is not enough to change the entire approach.

Secretariat: The request to evaluate the possibility of providing advice on the fishing opportunities 2021 specifically for undulate ray arose out of the last meeting of WG3 in the NWWAC. If this FG does not want to go ahead with developing an advice to the Commission, we will go back to the members of the NWWAC WG 3 to see if they want to develop a specific advice solely from the WG itself, outside of this FG. Would the advice be to raise the TAC?

CG: Possibly, but we can all agree that this advice is at least questionable. After that it may be the industry position that the TAC should be increased. Currently, the ICES advice is saying that the TAC should actually be reduced. This should also be questioned by ICES themselves with such a large increase in the abundance, which is contradictory to reducing the TAC.

PW: I still think this is a methodological issue though the industry viewpoint is completely understandable. Looking at the ICES advice it has gone up by 20% compared to the previous advice. And because information on the discards is available, the 183t landings advice is arrived at. While this does not seem to make sense when looking at the stock, that is the constraint of the methodology.

SM: ILVO mentioned last week that in some cases they also do not understand why such a buffer was applied for some ray species. This is not only a discussion about methodology, it is also a discussion on how ICES deals with the last advice, and this can be discussed internally. This group could first listen to an ICES expert and then have a new



discussion. The scientific process is not clear, and it is also not clear to other scientific experts. Not all the scientific experts are in all the working groups, so they do not have all the correct information. For example, ILVO is not always happy with certain buffers and caps.

PW: Can the group agree that we do not provide advice until an ICES expert has spoken to the members? Or would members like to provide advice now?

CG: The methodology has been discussed before, and this has been an issue for the past 12 years. Fishers have been waiting for 12 years to fish this species.

Secretariat: Would it be possible for CNPMM to provide a proposal on this which the group could review and comment on? This seems to always be the easiest way to take proposals forward, so that the members of the group understand exactly what the French industry is looking for. This could take the form of a simple letter to the Commission requesting something very specific regarding this one TAC. The Commission has been very clear that not all AC advice has to be consensus advice. The Commission wants to hear all voices, and if there is a very clear minority position then this can be identified in the advice accordingly.

PW: It is important to have this issue stated so this would be an excellent way forward. So, we will not wait for someone from ICES to come but will prepare a statement as this has been an ongoing issue for 12 years.

**ACTION:** CG to draft an advice proposal on undulate day for review and development by the FG members.

## 5 AOB and timeline

20 November members' comments on draft NSAC letter

20 November CG to provide draft advice proposal on undulate ray

**ACTION:** NWWAC Secretariat to create a Doodle for the next meeting in approx. three weeks' time.

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

1	LL to follow up internally and advise FG members of decision.
2	Chair and Secretariat to update Terms of Reference and circulate to the group.
3	SM to send SUMARiS ICES request to Secretariat, who will then circulate it among the members of this group for comments.
4	FG members to send comments on the draft NSAC letter to the NWWAC Secretariat, deadline Friday 20 November.
5	Chair to invite ICES representative for next FG meeting.
6	If members wish to join the ICES workshop next week, please contact the Chair.
7	CG to draft an advice proposal on undulate day for review and development by the FG members.
8	NWWAC Secretariat to create a Doodle for the next meeting in approx. three weeks' time.