

## 27 Other issues

### 27.1 Code of conduct and conflict of interest

As knowledge provider ICES gives a high priority to credibility, legitimacy, transparency and accountability of their work. In this context, it is essential that experts contributing to ICES science and advice maintain scientific independence, integrity and impartiality. In addition, behaviours and actions of members should minimise any risk of actual, potential or perceived conflicts of interest. A conflict of interest arises when there is an actual, potential or perceived possibility that a member of the group makes a contribution to ICES work that is not based on a systematic scientific review of the available information and evidence or when decisions or outcomes may be influenced, or are perceived to be influenced, by self-interest or external pressures and other factors.

The Code of Conduct drawn up by ICES is to ensure transparency and responsibility in ICES work and to preserve the role of ICES as knowledge provider. The code of conduct applies to scientists participating in ICES Expert Groups, Review and Advice Drafting Groups as well as ACOM and SCICOM meetings.

ICES has requested the chairs of the working group to address the Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest at the start of the meeting. All participants at the meeting, including the chairs and ICCAT scientists, are required to declare any Conflicts of Interest and their commitment to agree with the Code of Conduct before their work commences. In 2022, all participants, including the chairs, declared no Conflict of Interest and agreed to abide with the Code of Conduct.

### 27.2 Joint ICES-ICCAT meeting

One of the ToRs for WGEF 2020 was to further develop proposed ToRs for a potential joint ICES-ICCAT meeting in 2020 to (i) assess porbeagle shark and (ii) collate available biological and fishery data on thresher sharks in the Atlantic.

In 2009, ICES and ICCAT held a joint meeting to coordinate their respective work on elasmobranchs. Issues considered at this meeting included fisheries, species-specific landings data and biological parameters being collected on the NEACS. Assessments for the NE Atlantic stocks of spurdog *Squalus acanthias* and porbeagle *Lamna nasus* were undertaken and the results were published in an ICES report (ICES, 2009).

Another joint meeting, focussing on porbeagle had been proposed for 2020, however, due to COVID-19, it was postponed to 2022. This coincides with the year in which porbeagle went through a benchmark and the joint meeting would be part of the WGEF schedule. The aim of the joint meeting was to review the updated advice, and discuss the process and timeline of ICES and ICCAT advice.

In terms of the advice, ICCAT scientists as well as members of WGEF voiced their concerns about the use of a generic Harvest Control Rule (HCR) which has not been tested for long-lived species such as porbeagle. The group agreed to deviate from the regular ICES advice and to accommodate ICCAT scientist of running long-term projections using constant catch and constant F scenarios which is in line with the ICCAT approach and takes the longevity of this species into account. Outcomes were presented in a subgroup (13 July) hosting both ICES and ICCAT scientists. If the additional runs would be agreed, the draft advice would be updated to include several

catch options. This advice would be presented to the group and submitted for their approval via correspondence.

Unfortunately, during the meeting on the 13<sup>th</sup> of July, an error was discovered in the model outcomes using constant catch in the short-term projections for 2023 and 2024, making the group hesitant to proceed with the advice as it was not clear how these errors may affect the long-term projections. The group initially decided to postpone advice and work inter-sessionally with ICCAT to solve the issue. However, as long-term projections using constant  $F$  performed well and the ICES advice process does not require these long-term projections ACOM decided to proceed with the draft advice, putting it forward to the WGEF members for feedback/agreement by correspondence.

The different approach of both organisations have the potential to lead to inconsistent perceptions of the stock status and any associated catch advice. Consistency between the advice from each organisation is important and future alignment of process and outcomes may be facilitated by an MoU between ICES and ICCAT.

## 27.3 WSKATE Scheduling

In 2019, it was agreed that a dedicated workshop was needed to examine the use of surveys in the assessment of elasmobranchs. New surveys and time series and a lack of standardization amongst stocks meant that current assessment inputs and combination methods may no longer be the best sources of information on stock status. A Workshop on the use of surveys for stock assessment and Reference Points for Rays and Skates (WSKATE) was proposed and accepted by ACOM.

WSKATE was successfully held online in November 2020 (ICES, 2021a). Primarily due to constraints caused by COVID-19, it was decided prior to the meeting to concentrate on stocks that were due to be assessed by WGEF in 2021, namely skates and ray stocks in the North Sea. It was also decided to examine skate and ray stocks in Biscay and Iberia that were affected by the cessation of Portuguese surveys. It was therefore planned to hold a second WSKATE workshop in late 2021/early 2022 that would examine stocks due for assessment by WGEF in 2022, particularly skate and ray stocks in the Celtic Seas Ecoregion. A third and final workshop (WSKATE3) would examine the surveys used to assess the remaining stocks, primarily sharks, including catsharks, in 2023 or 2024.

It became clear during WGEF 2021 that there were very large time demands being made on ICES elasmobranch experts in 2021 up to 2023. In addition to the proposed WSKATE2 meeting, ICES has scheduled a second SPICT workshop that members would be expected to attend, as SPICT is proposed for use in Category 3 assessments in 2022. Training will be required prior to this workshop for some experts; a two-day training is set for early September 2022. Furthermore, a benchmark assessment for three elasmobranch stocks is planned in March 2023 and the required Data Evaluation Workshop prior to this, expected in November 2022.

Because of the competing time pressures, and the fact that the outputs of the SPICT workshop may affect how Celtic Seas stocks are assessed in 2022, it was decided to defer the WSKATE2 workshop until after WGEF 2023, likely November 2023.

## 27.4 Misreporting

The reliability of stock-by-stock landings data remains questionable for WGEF stocks, in particular for skates. Skates do not have major differences in species-specific market value, differences depend rather on size. As a consequence, blonde ray is on average sold at slightly higher price

than thornback ray or spotted ray but fish of these three species of the same size would have the similar price. As a consequence, fishers traditionally reported all species as "skates", making long-term trend by species poorly known. This economical aspect limited also the taxonomic knowledge of species by fishers and on land, and as a consequence, even recent landings data are uncertain though improving. WGEF considers landings data by species reliable mostly since 2009 only, with estimated landings back in time to 2005 in a few cases. These short time-series of data are problematic for assessment and estimation of reference points. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that a species for which fishing opportunities are more restrictive is misreported as another species. Several studies are on-going at national level to assess the level of species misreporting and/or to produce identification sheet and increase training of crew and employees in auction market.

## 27.5 Future benchmarks

In contrast to many other assessment Expert Groups, WGEF has few stocks that has gone through a benchmark process. So far, two deep-water shark species (i.e. *Centrophorus squamosus* and *Centroscyrmnus coelolepis*) were part of the benchmark assessment of deep-water stocks in 2010 (WKDEEP; ICES, 2010a) and a benchmark assessment for spurdog (*Squalus acanthias*) was carried out through correspondence in 2021 (ICES, 2021b). In recent years, more effort has been made into exploring new assessment models and acquiring relevant data for assessments. As a result, in 2020, WGEF proposed potential benchmarks for several stocks which will be held in 2022 and 2023, with the benchmark for four stocks (por.27.nea, rjc.27.8, rjn.27.678 and rju.27.7de) successfully completed in April 2022 (ICES, 2022)

### Rays assemblage in the North Sea

In 2020 WGEF, several research studies exploring and evaluating methods to estimate population size of rays were presented. The studies ranged from using genetic approaches (Close-kin Mark recapture) to using surplus production models and multispecies models (State-Space Bayesian Models). While most studies are ongoing, the presented results looked promising and capable of moving the assessments of several stocks to a next level (i.e. quantitative analyses and reference points). The methods presented are submitted as Working Documents and can be found on the 2020 WGEF SharePoint and WGEF 2020 report (ICES, 2020).

In 2021, it was decided to initiate the process towards a benchmark for several ray stocks and porbeagle shark. It was decided to have a benchmark for porbeagle (por.27.nea), thornback ray in the Bay of Biscay (rjc.27.8), cuckoo ray in the Celtic Seas and Bay of Biscay (rjn.27.678abd) and undulate ray in the English Channel (rju.27.7de) stocks in 2022 as these stocks are up for advice in 2022. These stocks successfully went through the 2022 Benchmark Workshop for selected elasmobranch stocks (WKELASMO 2022). During WGEF 2022 advice was provided using the agreed method of SPiCT (por.27.nea, rjn.27.678abd and rju.27.7de) or SSBM (rjc.27.8abd). As a follow up, three North Sea stocks (rjc.27.3a47d, rjm.27.3a47d and rjh.27.4c7d) will go through a benchmark in 2023 (WKELASMO 2023), being the year in which new advice is requested. As these stocks will go through a benchmark for the first time, ICES guidelines for the ICES benchmark process will need to be followed. This means, the quality of the available data as well as issues identified by the stock assessor should be evaluated. Working documents on the methods should be made available and presented to the Expert Group. A data compilation workshop will be held in November 2022, followed by the benchmark workshop in March 2023.

### WKMSYSPICT

ICES has expressed the wish to further explore the potential of providing MSY advice for category 3 stocks. A first effort to upgrade category 3 stocks was done in 2021 during the Benchmark

Workshop on the development of MSY advice for category 3 stocks using Surplus Production Model in Continuous Time; SPiCT (WKMSYSPiCT) (ICES, 2021c). This workshop, however, did not include elasmobranch stocks. During WGEF 2022, several presentations on trials using SPiCT were presented. The group expressed that there was not enough expertise to evaluate the outcomes of the SPiCT runs. Therefore, it was opted to include these stocks into the follow-up of WKMSYSPiCT. The following six stocks are proposed to participate in this workshop: rjc.27.9a, rjh.27.9a, rjm.27.9a, rjn.27.8c, rjn.27.9a, and rjc.27.1012 (not a confirmed stock yet).

## 27.6 References

- ICES. 2009. Report of the Joint Meeting between ICES Working Group on Elasmobranch Fishes (WGEF) and ICCAT Shark Subgroup, 22–29 June 2009, Copenhagen, Denmark. ICES CM 2009/ACOM:16. 424 pp.
- ICES. 2021a. Workshop on the use of surveys for stock assessment and reference points for rays and skates (WFSKATE; outputs from 2020 meeting). ICES Scientific Reports. 3:23. 177 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.7948>.
- ICES. 2021b. Benchmark Workshop on North Sea Stocks (WKNSEA). ICES Scientific Reports. 3:25. 756 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.7922>
- ICES, 2021c. Benchmark Workshop on the development of MSY advice for category 3 stocks using Sur-plus Production Model in Continuous Time; SPiCT (WKMSYSPiCT). ICES Scientific Reports. 3: 20. 317 pp. <https://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.7919>
- ICES. 2022. Benchmark Workshop for selected elasmobranch stocks (WKELASMO). ICES Scientific Reports. 4:47. 136 pp. <http://doi.org/10.17895/ices.pub.21025021>