

Self-assessment of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations – are they on track?

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Though Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) and their members face conflicting pressures, if they do not take steps now to better manage fish stocks, these resources will continue to decline to the detriment of the ocean's wellbeing, food security and human health. IUCN believes that all RFMOs should conduct self-assessments this year or next, and include a review of how each RFMO accepts scientific advice and incorporates that advice into its conservation and management measures.

Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) serve as fora through which states meet and cooperate to manage fisheries for the conservation and sustainable use of marine living resources. Most RFMOs were established before the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (1995) and the FAO Compliance Agreement (1993) were adopted. Several predate the adoption in 1982 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. They do not necessarily reflect obligations to manage stocks on the basis of the precautionary and ecosystems approaches. Thus, their members should consider changes now in the way that they operate. First, however, it is necessary to understand how well each RFMO is currently managing fish stocks, including dependent and related stocks, and the ecosystems for which it is responsible. For this reason, it has been agreed that RFMOs should conduct self-assessments, something that IUCN strongly supports. Though RFMOs, their members and Secretariats face conflicting pressures, if they do not take steps now to better manage fish stocks, these resources will continue to decline to the detriment of the ocean's wellbeing, food security and human health. Should this trend not be reversed, we may have to consider new ways to manage these resources.

The idea that RFMOs undertake self-assessments has been considered for some time and was discussed at the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) meeting in 2005. In 2006, the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) undertook such a review. At a joint meeting of the five tuna commissions held in Kobe in January 2007, work was undertaken to accept common criteria for self-assessment by the five tuna RFMOs. In discussions at the COFI meeting in 2007, some delegations (including that of the IUCN) supported the view that a common minimum set of criteria for self-assessment of all RFMOs be agreed. Further discussions were held on the margins of informal consultations on the UN Fish Stocks Agreement in April. Though states were not able to adopt by consensus criteria for self-assessment by all RFMOs, a document was made available with respect of self-assessments for the five tuna RFMOs.

IUCN believes that all RFMOs should conduct self-assessments this year or next, using the draft criteria document as a minimum basis on which to conduct such self-assessments. We remain deeply concerned that the advice of scientists with respect to catch limits is sometimes ignored or unimplemented by some RFMOs, thus we believe that all self-assessments must include a review of how each RFMO accepts scientific advice and incorporates that advice into its conservation and management measures. We are of the view that those conducting self-assessments must report on all instances where scientific advice was not followed, including on the reasons and outcomes of those decisions.

With respect to the process of such self-assessments, we believe that panels must reflect a diversity of backgrounds. Thus, panels should include a suitable mix of external and internal assessors, from governments and from non-governmental bodies, the latter including those focusing on conservation, on fishing and on consumer interests. Panelists should be drawn from governments that are members of the RFMO and those that are not, and from developing and developed countries. It is important that each panel be seen to include members from a variety of backgrounds and interests to ensure a full range of experiences and to promote an outcome that will be received as fair and balanced. We note the importance of transparency in the work of the panels. The panels should receive information internally from within the RFMO and externally from the interested public. Their proceedings should be open to all interested observers and their reports should be posted electronically. To assist the public, RFMOs should adopt practices and rules to make public on their web sites decisions and papers of their meetings as soon as they are sent to members and should also make publicly available all data with the exception of that which is proprietary.

We note that the most important metric that RFMOs should consider as they undertake self-assessments is the extent to which the fish stocks they manage, together with associated and dependent living resources, are conserved, healthy and sustainable managed, in conformity with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

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Notes to Editors

1. Contact information
2. Background information
3. About the World Conservation Union (IUCN)

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2. About The World Conservation (IUCN)

Created in 1948, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) brings together 81 States, 113 government agencies, 850 plus NGOs, and some 10,000 scientists and experts from 181 countries in a unique worldwide partnership. The Union's mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable.

The World Conservation Union is the world's largest environmental knowledge network and has helped over 75 countries to prepare and implement national conservation and biodiversity strategies. The Union is a multicultural, multilingual organization with 1000 staff located in 62 countries. Its headquarters are in Gland, Switzerland.
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