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Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement
Accord relatif aux Pêches dans le Sud de l'Océan Indien

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National Report – Cook Islands

Delegation of the Cook Islands

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the trawl fishing activities in the Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement area undertaken by Cook Island flagged vessels. It highlights activities during 2024 and takes the form of the Cook Islands National Report.

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[2] Documents available only to members invited to closed sessions.

Recommendations
The meeting is invited to consider the Cook Islands National Report

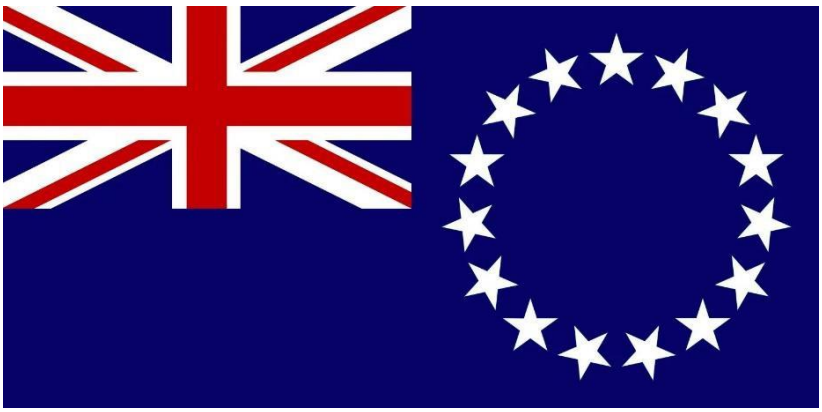
Ministry *of* Marine Resources

GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

SOUTHERN INDIAN OCEAN FISHERIES AGREEMENT (SIOFA)

Cook Islands National Report

2025



Prepared by the Ministry of Marine Resources, Offshore Fisheries Division

This report details the fishing activities of a Cook Islands vessel in the Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA) region during the 2024 fishing year. The Ministry of Marine Resources (MMR) issued a high seas fishing license to one Cook Islands trawl vessel, authorizing operations in the SIOFA area. The primary target species were deep-water finfish, specifically alfonsino (*Beryx splendens*) and orange roughy (*Hoplostethus atlanticus*), using both bottom and mid-water trawling techniques. A comprehensive species list can be found in Appendix 1.

In support of conservation efforts, the vessel is prohibited from fishing within Benthic Protected Areas (BPA), as outlined in Appendix 2 of the National Report. The catch from these operations was offloaded in Mauritius. Alfonsino exports primarily went to Japan, while orange roughy was largely sent to China. Additionally, part of the catch was sold in local Mauritian markets. The distribution network extended to Thailand, New Zealand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Australia, achieving a global reach.

1. DESCRIPTION OF FISHERIES

In 2024, the Cook Islands authorized a single trawl vessel to operate in the SIOFA area. Economic factors led to the sale of another vessel, thereby removing it from the SIOFA fishery. In the years before 2012, three vessels were historically authorized to operate in the Agreement area, the Cook Islands has no non-trawl vessels operating.

2. CATCH DATA

Due to the presence of only one vessel operating under the Cook Islands flag in the SIOFA area, fine scale catch data remain confidential to protect commercial interests. Consequently, this National Report provides only species proportion data.

In 2024, two main species dominated the catch by weight: alfonsino, comprising 70% of the catch, and orange roughy, accounting for 16% (Table 1). Together, these species made up over 86% of the total catch. The remainder included various species like cardinal fish, black butterfish and boarfish (Appendix 1).

Alfonsino has consistently been the leading species in this fishery since 2006, except for the 2018 fishing season. Orange roughy has traditionally been the second most predominant catch until 2023, when it faced a significant 88% decrease from 2022 levels. However, in 2024, orange roughy showed a slight recovery with a 1% increase.

Fishing effort peaked in 2009, with three Cook Islands vessels spending a total of 900 days in the Agreement area (Figure 2). Recently, fishing effort stabilised after a noticeable decline from 2018 to 2022. This decline was attributed to economic challenges, such as the poor market value for orange roughy, and mechanical issues with the vessel. These challenges were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic impacts, leading to sporadic fishing activities.

There was a reduction of the total catch of more than 15% in 2024 compared to 2023. Contributing factors included evolving fishing trends and mechanical problems with the sole operating vessel in 2024.

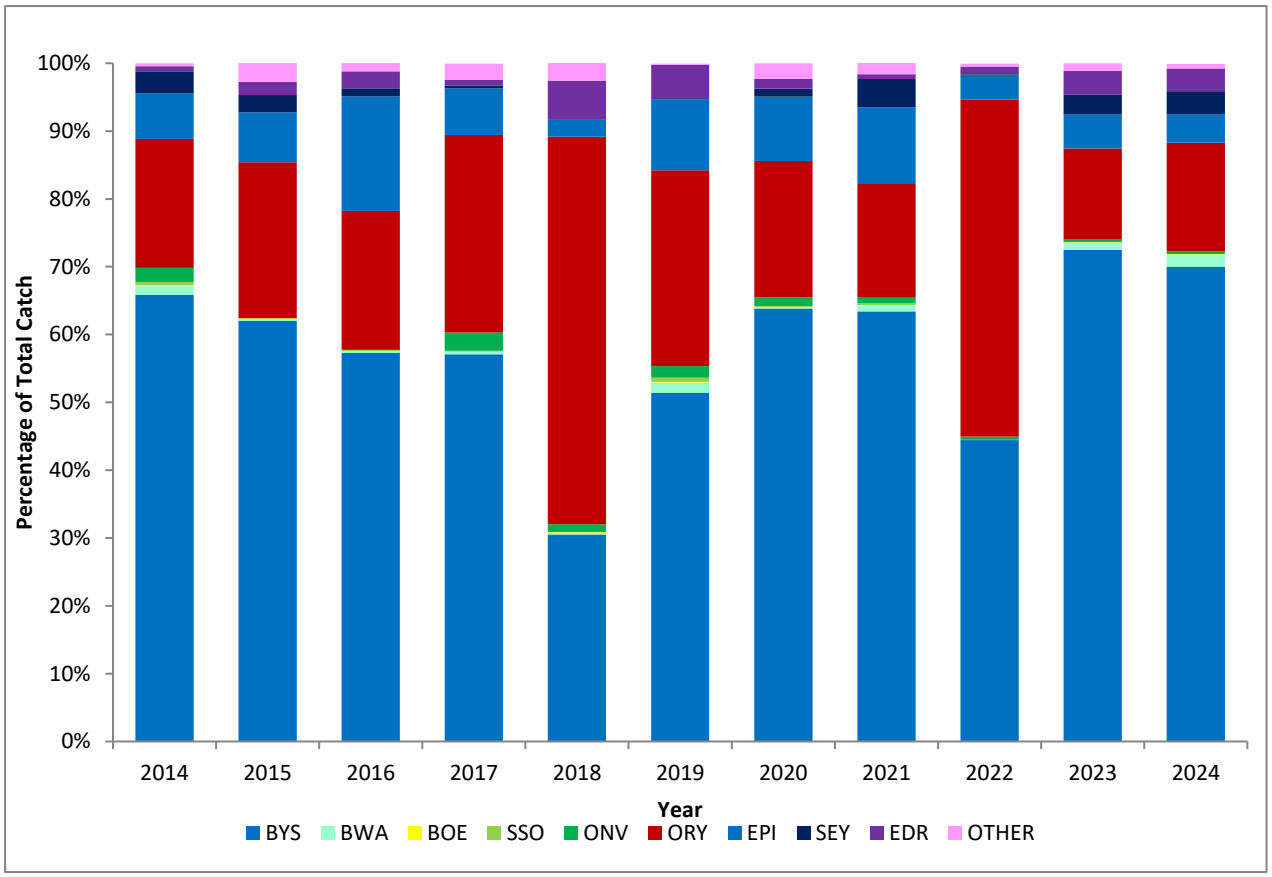


Figure 1: Proportion of species caught by Cook Islands vessels in the SIOFA Area from 2014-2024

Table 1: Summary table of catch composition and fishing effort (days) from 2014 – 2024 and catch composition of main species caught by Cook Islands trawlers. See Appendix 1 for species code definitions. Note that the last years data are provisional.

Year	Effort (days)	Catch of major species proportionate to total catch									
		BYS	BWA	BOE	SSO	ONV	ORY	EPI	SEY	EDR	OTHER
2014	523	0.66	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.19	0.07	0.03	0.01	0.00
2015	501	0.62	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.23	0.07	0.03	0.02	0.03
2016	455	0.57	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.20	0.17	0.01	0.03	0.01
2017	495	0.57	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.29	0.07	0.00	0.01	0.02
2018	301	0.31	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.57	0.02	0.00	0.06	0.03
2019	343	0.46	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.33	0.11	0.00	0.06	0.00
2020	317	0.66	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.19	0.09	0.01	0.02	0.02
2021	282	0.61	0.08	0.01	0.02	0.08	0.16	0.11	0.04	0.07	0.01
2022	182	0.44	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.50	0.04	0.00	0.01	0.00
2023	218	0.72	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.13	0.05	0.03	0.03	0.01
2024	247	0.70	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.16	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.01

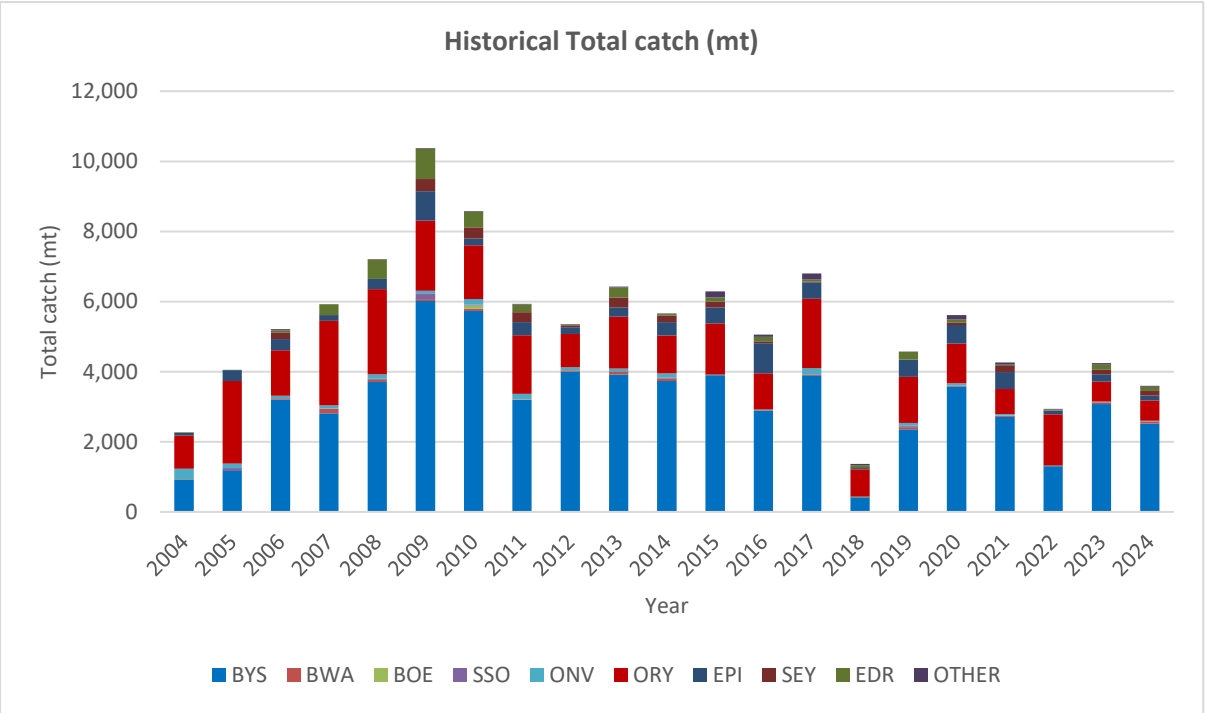


Figure 2: Historical catch of the Cook Island trawl vessels from 2004-2024.

3. FISHING EFFORT DATA

The fishing effort from the Cook Islands from 2014 to 2024, provides insights into the trends and distribution of trawl types, specifically bottom trawls versus mid-water trawls, the number of days fished and days spent at sea. The number of trawls peaked in 2015, with 2,729 recorded trawls. Throughout this period, both bottom and mid-water trawl percentages varied annually. It is noted that typically mid-water trawling constituted a larger percentage of the total trawl effort when compared to bottom trawling, highlighting a preference of this method.

In 2014 there were 1,971 trawls, with a majority (1,406) being mid-water trawls, while bottom trawling comprised 565 trawls. The year 2015 marked the highest total trawls at 2,729, driven by a significant increase in mid-water trawls, numbering 2,050. However, a downtrend was observed from 2017 to 2023, with a notable dip to a low of 927 total trawls by 2022. Nevertheless, a resurgence was seen in 2024, with 1,416 trawls, signalling a renewed intensity in fishing activities after the previous decline.

When comparing bottom versus mid-water trawl activities, it is evident that bottom trawling consistently remained less common than mid-water trawling through the years. Mid-water trawling often accounted for a larger portion of total effort. This consistent preference is a result of higher targeting of alfonsino.

The trends in days fished and days at sea reveal important operational insights. Days fished ranged from a high of 523 in 2014 to a significant drop to 182 by 2023 with a slight increase in 2024 of 247 days. Similarly, days at sea showcased a decline from 645 in 2014 to 281 in 2023 when technical issues with the vessel resulted in fewer days at sea, and effort increased to 311 in 2024. The 2024 increase is a result of the vessel being fully operational in that year.

In conclusion, the data underscores a strong inclination towards mid-water trawling in the Cook Islands fishing activities. The observed fluctuations in total trawls and days spent fishing reflects the number of vessels active and their ability to put to sea.

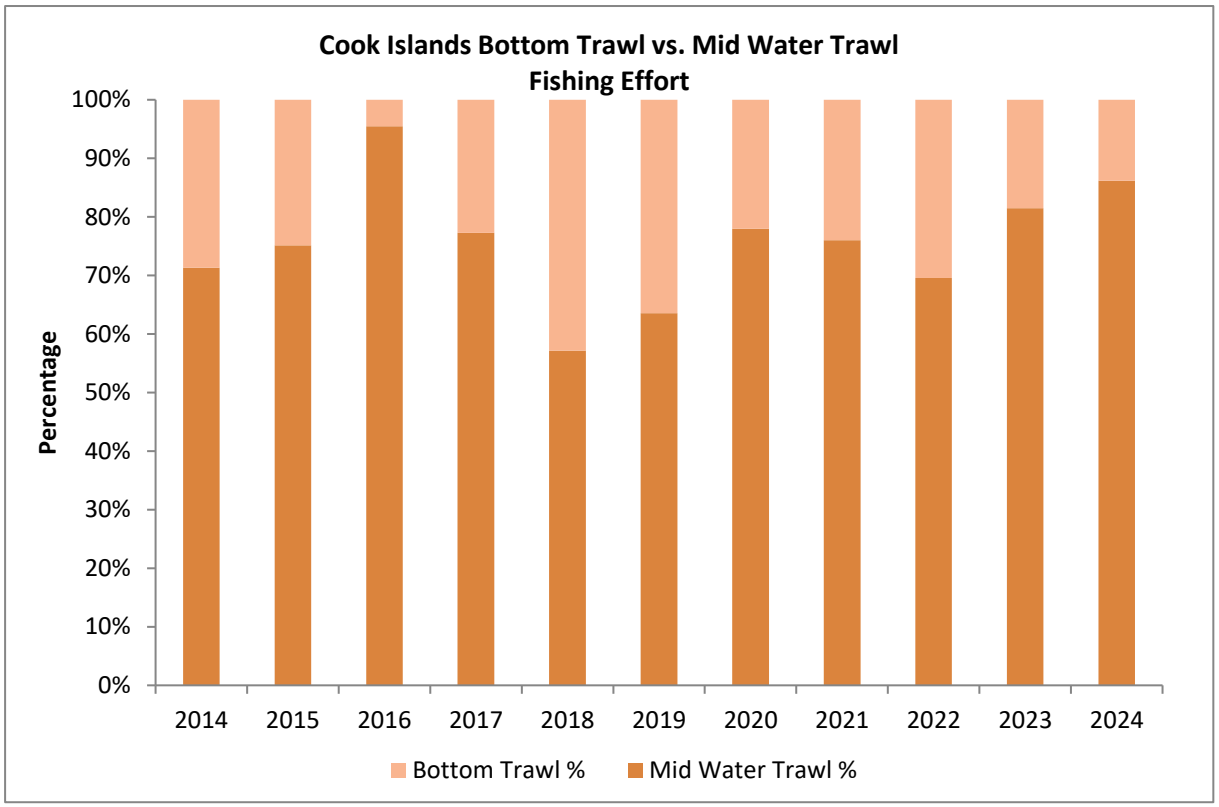
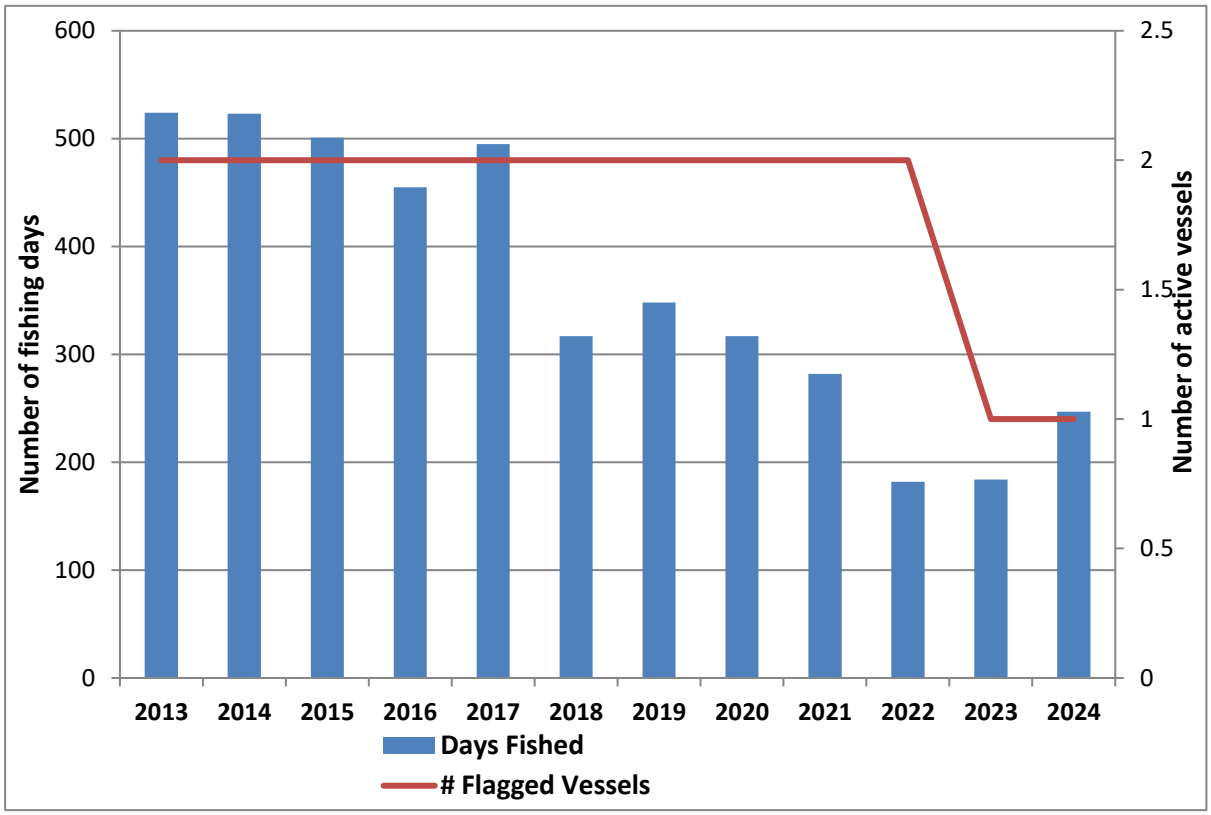


Figure 2: Composition of Cook Islands bottom trawl effort 2014-2024.

Table 2: Cook Islands vessel effort 2014-2024

Year	Total trawls	Mid-water	Bottom	Days Fished	Days at sea
2014	1971	1406	565	523	645
2015	2729	2050	679	501	604
2016	1999	1409	590	455	544
2017	1985	1534	451	495	627
2018	1569	897	672	317	387
2019	1615	1026	589	348	515
2020	1922	1549	381	355	559
2021	1420	1084	336	282	399
2022	927	645	282	182	273
2023	1177	959	218	218	281
2024	1416	1220	196	274	311

Figure 3: Trend in effort (fishing days) and number of Cook Islands flagged vessels from 2014-2024.



4. FISHERIES DATA COLLECTION

In 2024, the Cook Islands continues to comply with all SIOFA Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs) and advice, maintaining operations aligned with the Marine Resources Act 2005. Vessels are issued high seas fishing authorisations according to Section 21 and Section 35 of the Act, requiring the recording of daily catch and effort information, along with positional data.

Since the initiation in April 2019, the electronic logsheets (eLogs) trial has significantly enhanced the efficiency of data reporting for Cook Islands trawl vessels. This electronic format, aligned with CMM 23-02, facilitates the streamlined submission of comprehensive catch and effort data from vessels to MMR's Offshore Division. The transition to eLogs reduced administrative overhead and improved data accuracy due to the timely transmissions and automated processes that replaced the former paper log sheet system.

The Cook Islands vessel conducts their unloading in Mauritius, where these activities are intermittently supervised by authorised Cook Islands fisheries inspectors. These inspections coincide with the annual Sanitary and Compliance examination by the Competent Authority. During unloading, product temperature is consistently monitored to ensure quality. Moreover, samples from each species are collected by SGS Internationally accredited laboratory technicians for hazard testing, ensuring compliance with international health and safety standards for human consumption.

5. DATA VERIFICATION

Trawl data verification involves several key components to ensure accuracy and reliability. One essential element is the use of Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) technology. VMS provides real-time, precise positional data of vessels operating in the SIOFA area, allowing for accurate tracking and ensuring that fishing occurs within authorized zones.

Logbooks submitted to MMR are another critical component. These logbooks contain detailed records of daily fishing activities, including catch data, effort statistics, and coordinates. They serve as a primary source of reported data that can be cross-referenced with VMS information to check the consistency and accuracy of the vessel’s reported operations.

Scientific observer programs play a vital role by placing observers on board trawl vessels. These observers collect firsthand data on catch composition, including target and bycatch species, discards,

and other essential aspects of fishing activities.

Comprehensive vessel trip records are also gathered, alongside landing and transshipment documents and port sampling activities to provide evidence of reported catches and activities. These records enable further cross-verification with logbooks and observer data. Port sampling facilitates physical checks of landed species and quantities.

In combination, these methods ensure a robust verification system that addresses data completeness, consistency, and accuracy, supporting sustainable fisheries management.

6. RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

Other than ongoing biological sampling reported below, no specific research activities have been undertaken in 2024 on the Cook Islands fishery, or fish stocks.

7. VME THRESHOLDS FOR BOTTOM FISHING ACTIVITY

Cook Islands supports the protection of biodiversity, considering UNGA Resolution 61/105 and subsequent resolutions, which calls on states to implement measures for the high seas in accordance with the precautionary principle and ecosystem approaches to fisheries management.

The Cook Islands notes that some other RFMOs have progressed to spatial management as a standardized CMM to minimize bottom fishing impacts. We support these actions, and the use of Benthic Protected Area (BPA) conservation closures helps us to meet the requirements of Resolution 61/105. To meet these conservation efforts, twelve areas in SIOFA have been identified and closed to Cook Islands vessels to minimise significant adverse impact on known VMEs by our bottom trawling activity or as a precautionary measure to maintain and protect biodiversity.

Observations by Cook Islands Fisheries Observers on board indicate that there have been low encounter rates with VMEs by Cook Islands vessels.

MMR has developed an advanced encounter protocol with input from industry over several years to include holistic management approaches, either by moving off encounter areas, or more significantly by voluntary BPA fishing closures. Five BPA closures were implemented by the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) in 2018. The Cook Islands has implemented an additional seven BPA areas and these areas

remain closed to Cook Islands vessels.

In 2024 a total of 196 bottom trawl shots were carried out by Cook Islands vessels, and based on data from observer reports, no trawl shots breached the VME threshold.

Table 3: Threshold levels for VME encounters and move-on protocols in areas other than BPAs for Cook Islands vessels.

Gear/fishery	Thresholds	Move-on protocols
Trawl (CMM 2024-01)	More than 60 kg of live corals and/or 300 Kg of sponges in any tow.	For bottom or mid-water trawling, or fishing with any other net – two miles either side of a trawl track extended by two (2) nautical miles at each end;

8. BIOLOGICAL SAMPLING AND LENGTH/AGE COMPOSITION OF CATCHES

Biological data has been collected from Cook Islands vessels since 2004. Data has been collected by vessel crews, Cook Islands Observers, or scientists on specific voyages. Length frequency distributions of orange roughy vary significantly within the SIOFA area, as reported in 2016 (SC-01-INFO-15). In total, 50,369 orange roughy were sampled for length, weight, sex, and maturity from 522 target trawl shots between 2004 and 2015. This database has now increased to an estimate of 67,100 samples following a major increase in sampling during 2017, which was to provide data for age composition for the planned stock assessment. These fish were aged and provide the first-ever age composition data for a high seas orange roughy stock anywhere in the world.

The Cook Islands have invested in an otolith lab for 2025, with hopes of analysing all biological material taken from fish in SIOFA, specifically alfonsino and orange roughy. This initiative will benefit Cook Islanders by enhancing their skills.

9. OBSERVER PROGRAMME

In 2024, the Cook Islands National Observer Program (CINOP) achieved 100% observer trip coverage throughout the year, reflecting its commitment to quality data collection. A persistent challenge was overcoming visa restrictions for MMR CINOP observers traveling to South Africa, which complicated the deployment of staff and observers lacking Seafarers Books.

In response to these logistical challenges, CINOP shifted its approach. Rather than relying on Capricorn Marine, the program now focuses on enhancing the skills of Cook Islands Observers, enabling them to

become cross-endorsed, qualifying them to work on vessels within the SIOFA area directly. This strategic decision fosters independent monitoring and contributes to skill development among Cook Islands observers, ensuring comprehensive and autonomous data collection efforts moving forward.

Table 4: Observer coverage summary table from 2019-2024.

Year	Trip coverage (%)	Total No. sets/hauls	No. sets/hauls observed	Within set/haul coverage	Incidental bycatch (bird, mammal) observation coverage
2019	100%	1468	1284	87%	87%
2020	50%	1922	996	52%	52%
2021	0%	-	-	-	-
2022	80%	927	646	69%	69%
2023	100%	1179	1179	100%	100%
2024	100%	1416	1416	100%	100%

10. PORT SAMPLING AND INSPECTION PROGRAMME

Cook Islands vessels continue to unload in Port Louis, governed by the relevant Port State authorities under their domestic legislation.

The Cook Islands does not have a port sampling program, as sampling is carried out onboard the vessel by designated observers.

In 2024, Competent Authority inspections by MMR Fisheries Officers, along with dockside boarding and inspections, remained unfeasible. No sanitary inspections were conducted onboard flagged vessels this year.

MMR is actively working to reestablish the Competent Authority component within the Offshore Fisheries division. Their efforts are ongoing to enhance this aspect of the program.

11. VESSEL MONITORING SYSTEM (VMS)

Cook Islands vessels are required by law to carry and operate approved ALC/MTU units. The systems poll once an hour via CLS Triton Advanced Systems to the service provider, with the vessels monitored at the MMR Oceans Monitoring Centre (OMC), in Rarotonga.

12. SHARKS

The Cook Islands vessel licensing conditions and current Cook Islands legislation states that vessels are prohibited from targeting sharks, but where sharks are caught incidentally in the normal operations of the vessel they are required to be released and handled in a manner that affords them the best chance of survival.

Appendix 1

List of common and scientific names for main species caught by Cook Islands vessels.

FAO Code	Common Name	Scientific Name
BYS	Alfonsino	*Beryx splendens*
BOE	Black Oreo	*Allocyttus niger*
SEY	Black Butter Fish	*Schedophilus velaini*
BWA	Blue nose	*Hyperoglyphe antarctica*
EDR	Boarfish	*Pentaceros richardsoni*
EPI	Cardinal Fish	Family Apogonidae
ORY	Orange Roughy	*Hoplostethus atlanticus*
SSO	Smooth Oreo Dory	*Pseudocyttus maculatus*
ONV	Spiky Oreo Dory	*Neocyttus rhomboidalis*

Appendix 2

Benthic Protected Areas.

	Area	Coordinates			
		Position	Position	Position	Position
1	*Gulden Draak*	28° 00S 98° 00E	29° 00'S 98°00'E	28° 00'S 99°00'E	29° 00'S 99°00'E
2	*Rusky*	31° 20'S 94° 55'E	31° 30'S 94° 55'E	31° 20'S 95° 00'E	31° 30'S 95° 00'E
3	*Fools-Flat*	31° 30'S 94° 40'E	31 ° 40'S 94° 40'E	31 ° 30'S 95° 00'E	31 ° 40'S 95° 00'E
4	*East Broken Ridge*	32° 50'S 100° 50'E	33° 25'S 100° 50'E	32° 50'S 101° 40'E	33° 25'S 101° 40'E
5	*Mid-Ind ian Ridge*	13° 00'S 64° 00'E	15° 50'S 64° 00'E	13° 00'S 68° 00'E	15° 50'S 68° 00'E
7	*Bridle*	38° 03'S 49° 00'E	38° 45'S 49° 00'E	38° 03'S 50° 00'E	38° 45'S 50° 00'E
8	*Walters Shoal*	33° 00'S 43° 10'E	33° 20'S 43° 10'E	33° 00'S 44° 10'E	33° 20'S 44° 10'E
9	*Coral*	41° 00'S 42° 00'E	41° 40'S 42° 00'E	41° 00'S 44° 00'E	41° 40'S 44° 00'E
10	*South Indian Ridge* (North/South) *this region abuts the CCAMLR-managed zone to the south and lies between the South EEZ around Prince Edward and Marion Islands to the west and the French EEZ surrounding Crozet Island to the east. The estimated points of contact with the EEZ areas are: 44 °S; 40.878 ° E; 44 °S; 46.544 ° E; 45 °S; 42.124 ° E; 45 °S, 45. 711 °* E.	44° 00'S 40°52'40.8E	45° 00'S 42°07'26.4E	44° 00'S 46°32'38.4E	45° 00'S 45°42'39.6E
11	*Banana*	30° 20'S 45° 40'E	30° 30'S 45° 40'E	30° 20'S 46° 00'E	30° 30'S 46° 00'E
12	*Middle of What (MoW)*	37° 54'S 50° 23'E	37° 56'5S 50° 23'E	37° 54'S 50° 27'E	37° 56'5S 50° 27'E

Appendix 3

Cook Islands historic fishing footprint and BPA location.