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FAO Deep-Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project – Overview of activities 2024-2025

Common Oceans Deep-sea Fisheries Project, FAO

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Abstract

The FAO Deep-Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project (2022-2027), entitled "Deep-sea Fisheries Under the Ecosystem Approach", follows on from the ABNJ Deep-Sea Project (2014-2019). Information papers on this project have been submitted to several past SIOFA meetings.

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

FAO Deep-Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project

Overview of activities 2024-2025

Background

The FAO Deep-Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project (2022-2027), entitled "Deep-sea Fisheries Under the Ecosystem Approach", follows on from the ABNJ Deep-Sea Project (2014-2019). Information papers on this project have been submitted to several past SIOFA meetings.

Aims

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the key achievements of the DSF Project from 2022 to present and highlight key upcoming activities for 2025 relevant to SIOFA.

FAO Common Oceans programme and DSF Project

The "Deep-sea Fisheries under the Ecosystem Approach" (DSF) project is one of five child projects of the Global Environmental Facility funded Common Oceans Program Phase II (2022-2027). The DSF project is implemented by FAO and executed by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), in collaboration with co-financing partners, which include the seven regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) responsible for the management of deep-sea fisheries stocks in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ)[1], as well as other international and national organizations[2]. The objective of the project is to ensure that DSF in the ABNJ are managed under an ecosystem approach that maintains demersal fish stocks at levels capable of maximizing their sustainable yields and minimizing impacts on biodiversity, with a focus on data-limited stocks, deepwater sharks and vulnerable marine ecosystems.

[1] General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), North Pacific Fisheries Commission (NPFC), South East Atlantic Fisheries Organization (SEAFO), Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA) and South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO)

[2] International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), Southern Indian Ocean Deepsea Fishers Association (SIODFA), International Coalition of Fisheries Association (ICFA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States of America

The technical work of the DSF project is organized around three main components representing three broad areas of work:

- Component 1 concerns the uptake of international instruments
- Component 2 concerns the scientific aspects of DSF management
- Component 3 concerns cross-sectoral interactions with DSF

Key Achievements 2022-2024

Review of the implementation of the DSF Guidelines

The DSF Project, in collaboration with a panel of experts, has reviewed the implementation of the International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas (DSF Guidelines) 15 years after its adoption. The review found that the DSF Guidelines has been primarily directed towards the protection of VMEs, resulting in a complete change in the way bottom fisheries are managed. RFMOs have adopted closures to protect areas known or likely to have VMEs, designated bottom fishing areas where bottom fishing has occurred and can continue to take place, required strict protocols to be followed if bottom fishing is planned outside of this area, and introduced "encounter protocols" to protect any newly identified VMEs. Less progress has been made on the sustainable management of many DSF stocks, with a generally low uptake of the recommended actions of the DSF Guidelines to adopt measures necessary to ensure their sustainability. In particular, the recommended adoption of fishery-specific, long-term management plans have generally not been implemented.

The document can be downloaded at: https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd0243en

E-learning Course "Strengthening deep-sea fisheries management in areas beyond national jurisdiction"

The DSF Project has produced an introductory e-learning course on the management of DSF in the ABNJ to provide a free, easily accessible tool to support learning on this topic.

The e-learning course encompasses five comprehensive modules, including:

- An introduction to deep sea fisheries, their biological characteristics, current status of stocks, and challenges in their management in the ABNJ.
- An overview of the international policy and legal framework for the management of DSF.
- The role of RFMOs in the management of DSF, explaining the process of their creation, structure, functions, and mandates in the management of DSF in the ABNJ.
- National-level policy and legal considerations, describing key measures included in national policy and legal framework for the sustainable management of DSF and enumerating the steps necessary to establish effective policy and legal framework at a national level.

- The role of monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) and enforcement mechanisms to achieve conservation and sustainable use of deep-sea fisheries.

The course takes approximately 2.5 hours to complete, and upon the subsequent completion of a short, knowledge-based exam, participants receive a certificate of competency.

The free, online course can be accessed at: https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=1117

Workshop on the Application of the Precautionary Approach to the Management of DSF stocks

The DSF Project convened a virtual workshop to take stock of the application of the precautionary approach (PA) to the management of DSF stocks, and to explore the steps necessary to advance on the development of PA frameworks and/or long-term management plans/harvest strategies for these stocks.

The workshop took place virtually on 15 October 2024, and it was conducted through two identical sessions, one from 07:00-09:30 and the other from 14:00-16:30 CEST, to accommodate different time zones. There was a total of 87 participants across the two sessions. All partner RFMOs and their Secretariats, as well as the academic, non-governmental and private sector community were represented at the workshop. The report of this workshop can be viewed in document COMM13-Obs09.

Upcoming Activities 2025

Supporting RFMOs to incorporate climate change effects and ecosystem impacts into the assessment and management of fish stocks

The DSF Project has supported consultants to review the existing and potential modalities for the incorporation of climate change effects into the work of three of its partner RFMOs – namely NAFO, NEAFC and NPFC. The reports of these reviews have been submitted to the Scientific Committees of each of the RFMOs involved. The outputs of this work, to be completed by early 2025, will then be discussed and shared at a workshop to be held with all partners in late 2025. The work will also contribute to the DSF Project work on climate change within the context of applying an ecosystem approach to fisheries management in the high seas.

Similar work is also planned for SPRFMO.

EAF Symposium

The DSF Project, in collaboration with NAFO and ICES, will be organizing an Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM) Symposium, to be held from 11 - 13 March 2025 at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy (see https://eafmsymposium.nafo.int/).

The symposium will focus on the implementation of the ecological components of EAFM, including retained species, non-retained species, and ecosystem considerations.

The three-day symposium will focus on:

- Day 1: Scientific aspects of EAFM
- Day 2: Management aspects of EAFM
- Day 3: Developing guidance for implementation of EAFM by dsRFMOs

For registration, please send your expression of interest to: anthony.thompson@fao.org.

The Symposium will be run in English and webcast, with interpretation provided in French and Spanish.

DSF Project activities on assessing data-limited stocks and monitoring rapid change – Work with the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)

The DSF Project would like to partner with ICES to examine data-collection requirements and assessment methods that will determine the status of the selected data-limited stocks and if their populations are “rapidly” increasing or declining.

A two-pronged approach will be taken to improve the assessment of data-limited and rapidly changing stocks, both being coordinated by ICES. The first activity will be to collaboratively identify appropriate assessment methodologies for selected fisheries, and the second will be to review data collection requirements needed to undertake these assessments. This will be compared with the type, quality and quantity of information currently collected.

Activities to be undertaken by ICES in collaboration with DSF Project partners:

Activity 1: Review and develop assessment methodologies,

Activity 2: Identify data collection needs to support the various assessment methodologies.

The plan is for assessment biologists from different regions to discuss and share their assessments and data-collection needs with each other to develop improved methods. This will be facilitated by an ICES consultant and in cooperation with various ICES working groups, as required. Note that this activity does not represent a partnership between any of the RFMOs and ICES, nor will ICES be providing any formal published advice. Also, please note that this activity is not intended to be a training course; participants should already be undertaking assessments for their RFMO scientific committee. It may be possible to offer training courses later, if desired.

Joint cruise with R/V Nansen in the SIOFA Area

See working paper SC-10-59

Effort data request

See information paper SC-10-INFO-13

Deepwater sharks

The DSF Project has a continued focus on reducing impacts on various incidentally caught species, including deepwater sharks (consistent with the definition of sharks in the IPOA-SHARKS).

Ongoing work in the DSF Project is focused on:

a) reviewing catch reporting requirements for shark catches by RFMOs
b) evaluating the data arising from the implementation of those catch reporting requirements
c) reviewing the potential factors that might generate differences in the reported shark catches between RFMOs

Preliminary analysis of the information gathered from partner RFMOs suggests that the level of reporting on deepwater shark catches is highly variable among RFMOs, both with respect to quantity and quality. Based on these results, the DSF Project is developing a proposal for a workshop on deepwater sharks, to be held in July 2025, which will address key issues related to data collection, reporting quantity and resolution, reporting formats and ecological risk assessments.

Cross-sectoral workshop

The DSF Project is working on improving the integration of cross-sectoral activities to maintain biodiversity and resource sustainability. Under this work, the Project will organize a workshop in late Q4 2025 that will gather key sectors and stakeholders active in the ABNJ to consider a number of theoretical case studies and explore how these could be addressed from a cross-sectoral cooperation perspective.

The workshop will address:

- the perceived interactions and cross-sectoral impacts
- the science/methodology that would be required to measure these impacts
- the institutional processes that would need to be put in place to address these impacts, and
- the cross-sectoral cooperation mechanism required