

9th Meeting of the Compliance Committee (CC9) and 12th Meeting of the Parties (MoP12)

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Making Progress on VME and Seamount Protection

Deep Sea Conservation Coalition

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Abstract	
<p>DSCC welcomes the substantive discussions that took place at the recent SIOFA-SC10 around the revision of the VME taxa and the VME taxa guide, protected areas, development of harvest strategies and approaches to protect deepwater sharks, and look forward to these being adopted by the MoP. However, we welcome the start of progress toward the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) themselves, including seamounts.</p> <p>To progress this urgent issue, the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) urges the MOP to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Protect VMEs including seamounts; 	

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² Documents available only to members invited to closed sessions.

- Adopt the revised marine protected areas proposal and the designation of the 12 new protected areas as a first step to protecting vulnerable, representative and scientifically important marine ecosystems
- Support proposals to ensure that SIOFA is ready for the coming into force of the BBNJ agreement;
- Ensure that climate change is considered in all management decisions and agree to fund a project on the potential implications of climate change on SIOFA ecosystems and species.

Making Progress on VME and Seamount Protection

1. Introduction

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) welcomes the opportunity to participate as an observer at the 12th Meeting of the SIOFA Meeting of the Parties. The DSCC also welcomes the substantive discussions that took place at the recent SIOFA-SC10 around protected areas and protected areas, development of harvest strategies, approaches to protect deepwater sharks, revision of the VME taxa and the VME taxa guide.

DSCC is concerned, however, that more effort is made to progress the protection of all identified vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs), including seamounts. DSCC welcomes the recommended protection of 12 sites which have characteristics of VMEs as a first step.

The DSCC notes with appreciation the efforts made by SIOFA Parties to address the many challenges it faces in implementing sustainable fisheries measures while ensuring the protection of vulnerable and important ecosystems and habitats, and would like to draw your attention to the following issues requiring the MoP's urgent attention and action.

2. Recognition of Seamounts as VMEs

Protecting biodiversity in the marine environment is recognised in the SIOFA Convention which specifically requires the safeguarding of the marine ecosystems in which fishery resources occur through the application of the precautionary approach and an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

Significant knowledge gaps remain in the SIOFA area regarding both VME indicator taxa and the non-VME indicator species that are associated with or dependent on VMEs. These gaps include seamount vulnerability and identification of the full range of species associated with VMEs (including cryptic and undescribed species) and biological information about these species and ecosystems, such as population structure, connectivity, endemism – all of which is essential to assessing the impacts of bottom trawling.

The DSCC welcomes the SC revision of the SIOFA VME Taxa Classification Guide.

The DSCC presented to SC10 a review of seamounts against the VME criteria in the FAO Deep Sea Guidelines (2008). This review found that seamounts met at least four of the five VME criteria without exception (SC10 – INFO 20). SC10 noted that “SIOFA has not identified any VMEs or VME areas” (para 428). DSCC endorses the proposal by the Scientific Committee 11 to protect 12 VME sites.

DSCC had welcomed the SC09 agreement “to hold a focused session at SC10 to discuss encounter thresholds and other VME-related issues.” (SC09, para 296), and “to discuss potential revision to the list of VME taxa, including the potential inclusion of seagrass and rhodoliths, as part of a focused session on VME at SC10.” (SC09, para 307). That focused session with engagement from members has yet to take place. We urge prioritised scheduling of this session, and no later than the next SC.

DSCC looks forward to greater input by members in proposals to identify and protect all VMEs, including seamounts.

The DSCC noted that the SC had agreed to hold further discussions on VMEs at SC11.

DSCC welcomes a SC 10 Workplan proposal for:

“Development of management options for preventing SAIs on VMEs with a focus on the precautionary approach, spatial management measures, move-on rules, and identifying risks for determining appropriate measures”.

DSCC urges members to ensure this proposal is funded to advance protection of VMEs, including seamounts.

DSCC proposes that MoP 12:

- **Adopts spatial closures as the primary mechanism to manage impacts on benthic habitats;**
- **Recognises seamounts as VMEs (in accordance with the FAO Guidelines) and close them to bottom trawling;**
- **Implement the proposals set out in the DSCC paper on Implementing Area Protection.**

DSCC believes that the proposals recommended in our paper on Implementing Area Protection will strengthen SIOFA’s conservation framework, align its strategies with global commitments to protect deep-sea biodiversity, and assist in SIOFA becoming ‘BBNJ ready’.

3. Progress on the marine protected areas protocol and benthic protection

The DSCC welcomes the SC10 recommendations on the updated protocol on marine protected areas and the recommendation to the MOP to protect 12 features ((namely the Atlantis Bank, Banana, Bridle, Coral, East Broken Ridge, Fools Flat, Glden Draak, Mid-Indian Ridge, Middle of What, Rusky Knoll, South Indian Ridge and Walter’s Shoal features).

As a first step in implementing the Protocol, DSCC urges MoP 12 to:

- **Agree to the revised marine protected protocol and agree to the designation of 12 new protected areas (namely the Atlantis Bank, Banana, Bridle, Coral, East Broken Ridge, Fools Flat, Glden Draak, Mid-Indian Ridge, Middle of What, Rusky Knoll, South Indian Ridge and Walter’s Shoal features).**

4. SIOFA becoming ready for the BBNJ Agreement

DSCC has a separate paper with recommendations on making SIOFA ready for the coming into force of the Agreement on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (‘BBNJ Agreement’). The Agreement has now reached 50 ratifications, 10 less than requirements for ratification.

DSCC proposes that MOP11:

- **Consider processes of constructively working with the BBNJ Parties and signatories in preparation for the Agreement coming into force.**
- **Establish a working group to consider mechanisms necessary to align with future BBNJ needs.**

5. Action to prepare for the impacts of Climate Change

DSCC welcomed the agreement at MOP 11 of “climate change as a standing item on its agenda and identifies what advice it would like from the SC on the potential implications of climate change.”

DSCC welcomes the recognition of the need to consider climate change in the recommendations of the Scientific Committee. SC10 (para 180 and 181) recommended climate change impact on stock productivity and distribution as part of the development of biological reference points and harvest control rules.

DSCC urged the Commission to consider climate refugia as part of the proposed designation of protected areas under the revised protocol.

DSCC welcomes the SC projects on an assessment on the assessment of SIOFA Species and Ecosystems for vulnerability to climate change impacts (SC10, para 546) and notes the need for funding this proposal.

The DSCC urges MoP 13 to:

- **Incorporate climate change impacts into its decisions and conservation measures;**
- **Support funding on research by the SIOFA SC to assess SIOFA species and ecosystems for vulnerability to climate change impacts; and**
- **Consider what advice it would like from the SC on the potential implications of climate change on SIOFA ecosystems and species.**