

FAO expert consultation on marking fishing gear

Unless it is properly marked and can be located by day and at night, fishing gear can be a serious hazard for other inhabitants and users of the ocean, especially for the safe navigation of vessels. Proper marking of gear can help to differentiate between legitimate fishers and those engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities. The adverse impacts of fishing gear on non-target species of marine wildlife are also well known, and abandoned, lost or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG) presents a major hazard to marine wildlife and is becoming increasingly well recognised. For example, in the United Nations Environment Programme's Global Marine Litter Campaign and the Global Ghost Gear Initiative, a cross-sectoral alliance that is developing sustainable solutions to the global problem of ghost fishing gear (www.ghostgear.org).

An important factor in reducing the hazards of fishing gear and dealing with ALDFG is identifying the owners of the gear and/or the vessel that deployed it. In early April 2016, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations convened an 18-member Expert Consultation on the marking of fishing gear at their headquarters in Rome. Lindsay Chapman, from the Pacific Community (SPC), and Mike Donoghue from the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) were invited to attend in order to bring a Pacific perspective.

This is not a new issue for FAO – the conclusions of a 1991 Expert Consultation on marking fishing gear were presented to FAO's Committee on Fisheries in 1993, but a consensus could not be obtained at that time. During the intervening years, while fishing technologies have evolved, the basic problem has remained the same al-

though a number of new international agreements and legal frameworks have been introduced.

Perhaps the most significant of these is Annex V of MARPOL¹, which prohibits the disposal at sea of fishing gear made of synthetic material. Guidelines for the application of Annex V call for fisheries managers to utilise fishing gear identification systems, and encourages governments to consider the development of technology for more effective fishing gear identification. Both SPC and SPREP have serious concerns about the amount of synthetic material that continues to be carelessly discarded in our region, with consequent potential impacts on navigation and marine wildlife. Many maritime users are probably unaware of their obligations under international law to retain plastics and other non-degradable items on board their vessels for safe disposal on shore.



Tracks over six months for FADs deployed by three purse-seine vessels
(source: Maurice Brownjohn, Parties to the Nauru Agreement Office)

¹ MARPOL: International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships

Both Lindsay and Mike were vocal during the Expert Group discussions on FADs. The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) estimate that there may be as many as 80,000 FADs drifting in our region annually, and although they are a means of attracting, rather than capturing fish, they are potentially a significant source of marine debris, resulting in unintentional entanglement of marine wildlife and fouling of reefs.

Existing technologies enable FADs to be uniquely identified and tracked remotely by satellites. Although the great majority of FADs that are deployed are tracked, as they drift hundreds or thousands of kilometres from where they were deployed, they are still available for vessels to set their gear around. Although most FADs are not picked up by the vessel that releases them, the question of whether they constitute ALDFG is a moot point. In reality, the cost of fuel sees most FADs disowned once they are beyond the economic range to retrieve them.

The draft guidelines will be presented to FAO's Committee on Fisheries at its annual meeting in July 2016, and it is hoped that after a 23-year hiatus, they will be successfully adopted this time around, making our oceans a little safer for us all.

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A drifting FAD equipped with a radio beacon (image: Marc Taquet, FADIO/IRD-Ifremer).