

Adopting a WCPO skipjack tuna harvest strategy: A big step forward at the 19th Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission meeting

Viet Nam's vibrant city of Da Nang was the venue for the 19th Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission annual meeting (WCPFC19) between 27 November and 3 December 2022. A major topic of discussion at the meeting was a harvest strategy for western and central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) skipjack tuna.

The beginning

Members of the WCPFC agreed to the development and implementation of harvest strategies back in 2014, when they adopted conservation and management measure (CMM) 2014-066,¹ which was an agreement to develop and implement a harvest strategy approach for key fisheries and stocks in the WCPO. A harvest strategy is a set of pre-agreed management actions regarding a fishery that will achieve agreed on management objectives such as stock sustainability, economic benefits, and social outcomes such as employment levels. The pre-agreed actions to be taken are dependent on the status of the stock and are defined through a management procedure. A harvest strategy should improve fisheries management by increasing the speed and transparency of decision-making, and ensuring that actions are robust to the uncertainties inherent in fisheries science and management.

Harvest strategies represent best practice in fisheries management and are critical to the ongoing certification of tuna fisheries to global standards for sustainable fishing. Their implementation would represent a notable change in the way WCPO fisheries are managed; moving to the new system is a significant step forward. At its heart, the harvest strategy approach is a stakeholder-driven process in which members identify their collective goals and objectives for the fishery, and select the preferred management procedure to achieve them.

The road to adoption

Over the last eight years, the Pacific Community's Oceanic Fisheries Programme (SPC-OFP) has supported the harvest strategy approach, undertaking the technical work to evaluate candidate management procedures and provide results to WCPFC members on potential outcomes. This work has been featured in over 50 papers to the WCPFC's Scientific Committee and other regional meetings. In turn,

we have undertaken a series of capacity building workshops in more than 14 countries, and provided broader regional capacity building through seminars, workshops and films to WCPFC members, with the aim of ensuring that the results of evaluations can be understood. It is essential that members feel comfortable in taking the decisions necessary to drive the process forward, ensuring that the outcomes meet their objectives and continue the responsible stewardship of the critically important fish resources of the region.

As part of the harvest strategy development, the WCPFC held its first Science Management Dialogue (SMD) meeting in August 2022, with a focus on the WCPO skipjack fishery. This forum enabled scientists and managers to interact, build capacity and provide key input into the harvest strategy process. Successful discussions at the SMD narrowed down the number of candidate management procedures under consideration and defined the final analyses to be performed to support discussions at WCPFC19.

The Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) and Pacific Island Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) carried the momentum from the SMD and continued to drive the process. The WCPFC19 meeting had a dedicated agenda item focused on the skipjack harvest strategy. Feeding into this agenda item, the FFA membership had put forward their preferred harvest strategy for skipjack based upon the outcomes of the SMD and FFA members' discussions. This was in the format of a candidate CMM², which formed the basis for WCPFC discussion and negotiation.

In our role as the independent scientific services provider to WCPFC, SPC-OFP presented the results of analyses requested by the SMD to WCPFC19's plenary. We were also deeply involved in the three small working group meetings held during the week, answering questions, providing new papers, responding to requests from members, and developing new presentations to clarify issues. We also provided information to the side-meeting negotiations that were necessary to finalise the draft harvest strategy. Throughout

¹ Conservation and management measures to develop and implement a harvest strategy approach for key fisheries and stocks in the WCPO. <https://www.wcpfc.int/doc/cmm-2014-06/conservation-and-management-measures-develop-and-implement-harvest-strategy-approach>. WCPFC's conservation and management measures (CMMs) describe binding decisions relating to conservation and management measures.

² <https://meetings.wcpfc.int/node/17862>



Catching skipjack during a tagging campaign. Image: ©Bruno Leroy, SPC

this process, the unfortunately named online PIMPLE app³, designed and developed by SPC-OFP, proved invaluable for presenting and explaining the results of scientific analyses that supported the negotiations.

A milestone

The good news is that on the last day of the meeting, the WCPFC19 plenary adopted the negotiated interim harvest strategy for WCPO skipjack tuna, containing an agreed-on management procedure that will define future levels for the key fisheries catching this stock. The interim nature of the harvest strategy allows WCPFC members to become comfortable with the approach and familiar with how it operates, while allowing the Commission process to adjust to this new way of working.

This adoption is a landmark for the Commission that reflects over eight years of collective effort. It paves the way for the adoption of harvest strategies for the other key tuna stocks – South Pacific albacore, WCPO bigeye and yellowfin – over the coming years.

What happens next?

There is still work to be done. Over the next seven years a schedule of analyses and monitoring has been agreed to as part of this harvest strategy, which will involve running the management procedure for the first time in 2023 to define future fishing levels. That will feed into discussions on the tropical tuna CMM, due to be re-developed by the end of

2023, as the mechanism through which the skipjack harvest strategy will be made operational. In turn, approaches to monitor the harvest strategy and check that it is performing as expected are to be agreed on in the next couple of years.

After this, work to support the harvest strategies for the other key tuna stocks will keep WCPFC members and ourselves busy for a few years to come!

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³ Performance Indicators and Management Procedures Explorer (PIMPLE) - https://ofp-sam.shinyapps.io/PIMPLE_WCPFC19/
See also Scott F. 2022. Hitting the spot! Behind the scenes of the PIMPLE training videos. SPC Fisheries Newsletter 168:17–18. <https://purl.org/spc/digilib/doc/he7t2>