The Quarterly Catch

E-Newsletter

Issue: 24 | April 2025

BHSFU Attends SPRFMO's 13th Commission Meeting

The 13th Commission Meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) was hosted by the Government of Chile in their capital city, Santiago, from February 17 to 21, 2025. This meeting was preceded by the 12th Meeting of the Compliance and Technical Committee and the 12th Meeting of the Finance and Administration Committee one week earlier in the same venue. During the two weeks of meetings, the Commission made some important decisions about the management and administration of the organization, reviewed the findings of the second Performance Review Panel, and took some important decisions for the advancement of the scientific work of the organization to inform the management framework for those fisheries under its purview.

This year, the Commission supported a proposal for an exceptional 25% increase in the total allowable catch (TAC) for jack mackerel.

Figure 1: Robert Robinson (Deputy Director) & Ian Constantino (FMC Officer) at SPRFMO's 13th Commission Meeting in Santiago, Chile.

This increase, which is 10% above the standing management decision, reflects a compromised solution to the original proposal for a 44% increase made by Chile. While Belize supported this compromise for the adoption of the proposal, it continued to request the reinstatement of its historical fishing rights which were redistributed to some Members of the Commission during Belize's absence from the Commission.

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Notably, Belize had a thriving jack mackerel fishery in the years preceding the establishment of the Commission and was also very active in that process. However, its participation in the Commission was circumvented by external political pressures at the same time the fishery was in decline and required a robust rebuilding program. Today the state of the fishery as well as Belize's regulatory and institutional control of its fisheries are performing optimally and is certainly sufficient reason to revisit the status quo for the management and distribution of the jack mackerel TAC.

Other important developments in the Commission included the recruitment of a new Executive Secretary, Mr. James Brown who has worked in fisheries management at the local level for the past two decades; the adoption of a workplan for the Scientific Committee to guide its work moving into the future; the analysis and of the report of the Second Performance Review and the development of an action plan to implement its recommendations which includes improving governance, data and fisheries management, and the building of a high-performing Secretariat.

The next annual meeting of the Commission will be hosted by the Government of Panama from February 24 to March 6, 2026, while the Scientific Committee will meet in New Zealand from September 6 to 13, 2025. The 13th Commission Meeting of SPRFMO showcased significant strides in promoting transparency, data-driven decision-making, and stakeholder engagement. Belize's delegation was led by Robert Robinson, Deputy Director of High Seas Fisheries and accompanied by Ian Constantino, High Seas Fisheries Monitoring Officer, and members of industry. While challenges persist, the outcomes of this meeting reflect a concerted effort to advance sustainable fisheries management in the South Pacific, setting a precedent for future initiatives within the organization and beyond.

Navigating Climate Change: The Role of RFMO's

By Delice Pinkard – Compliance & Enforcement Manager

Climate change presents one of the most pressing challenges facing Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) as they strive for sustainable resource development. Despite numerous hurdles, climate change remains inadequately addressed within these frameworks.[1] According to the United Nations, climate change encompasses long-term alterations in temperature and weather patterns. While some shifts are natural many are driven by human activities such as fossil fuel combustion, pollution and deforestation. This cascade of impacts has led to the accelerated warming of the Earth's oceans, profoundly affecting marine environments.[2]

Figure 2: Effects of climate change (Image by NOAA)

Furthermore, the increasing occurrence of extreme weather events, particularly those associated with the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO), further complicates the sustainability of fish stocks.

In response to these challenges, RFMOs have begun to rigorously assess the impacts of climate change on tropical tuna stocks and their associated species. A notable initiative is the formation of dedicated working groups aimed at exploring and addressing these critical issues. For instance, the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), which oversees tuna and tuna-like species in the Eastern Pacific Ocean (EPO), is making significant strides in developing a climate-resilient fisheries work plan. This plan, set to be presented for adoption by the Commission, aims to enhance fisheries management by utilizing predictive tools that simulate potential environmental impacts on species and fisheries, thereby promoting climate readiness.

Similarly, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) is adopting a parallel approach to combat climate change. As a member of these RFMOs, Belize have actively participated in the discussions surrounding these working groups, advocating for the establishment of climate-resilient fisheries to safeguard both fish stocks and the marine environment. Belize looks forward to the adoptions of the work plan in the IATTC later this year and remains committed to collaborating with ICCAT to establish a climate-resilient fisheries strategy in the near future.

[1] Pentz, B., & Klenk, N. (2020). Understanding the limitations of current RFMO climate change adaptation strategies: the case of the IATTC and the Eastern Pacific Ocean. *International Environmental Agreements: Politics, Law and Economics, 20*(1), 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10784-019-09452-9

[2] United Nations. (2024). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/

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BHSFU E-Newsletter

Elevating Protection for the Oceanic Whitetip Shark: A Call for CITES Appendix I Status

By Ernie Howe – Fisheries Officer

The oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) is a crucial apex predator inhabiting the open waters of tropical oceans worldwide.[3] Its ecological significance lies in its ability to regulate prey population, which is vital for maintaining a balance marine ecosystem. Beyond its role in ecological heath, the oceanic whitetip shark is integral to scientific research and conservation initiatives aimed at safeguarding marine biodiversity.[4]

Figure 3: Oceanic Whitetip Shark (*C. longimanus*) (Photo by IUCN)

Currently listed as an Appendix II species and classified as "Critically Endangered" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the oceanic whitetip shark faces severe threats. Numerous regional fisheries management organizations (tRFMO) and international agreements including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), have enacted measures to prohibit shark finning, trading, and retention aboard fishing vessels.[5] Transferring the oceanic whitetip shark from Appendix II to Appendix I would provide the species with the highest level of international protection.

This change is vital for addressing conservation challenges it faces and would significantly contribute to the broader efforts to preserve marine biodiversity. Appendix I encompasses species deemed critically endangered and threatened with extinction, where international trade is generally prohibited except in exceptional circumstances, such as for scientific research. Any permitted trade requires both import and export permits. Currently, only sawfishes are listed under CITES Appendix I; thus, the inclusion of the oceanic whitetip shark would represent a significant victory for marine conservation. Recent unpublished data from Belize's high seas fisheries indicates that approximately 146 oceanic whitetip sharks were encountered as bycatch in 2024.

It is important to note that Belize has enacted legally binding fishing vessel circulars, such as FVC-009/2011, which prohibit any Belize-flagged fishing vessel operating in the high seas from retaining, transhipping, landing, storing, or selling any part of this species. In conclusion, the upcoming CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP20), scheduled for November 2025 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, presents a critical opportunity for the oceanic whitetip shark. Panama will propose the transfer of the species to Appendix I during this conference. If a consensus is reached or a majority vote is secured, this important measure could be adopted, marking a significant step toward ensuring the survival of the oceanic whitetip shark and enhancing marine biodiversity globally.

[3] Bonfil, R., Clarke, S., & Nakano, H. (2009). The Biology and Ecology of the Oceanic Whitetip Shark, *Carcharhinus longimanus*. Sharks of the Open Ocean: Biology, Fisheries and Conservation, December 2014, 128–139. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444302516.ch11

[4] CMS. (2020). Carcharhinus longimanus. Retrieved from: https://www.cms.int/en/species/carcharhinus-longimanus

[5] Massey, Y., Sabarros, P. S., & Bach, P. (2022). Drivers of at-vessel mortality of the blue shark (*Prionace glauca*) and oceanic whitetip shark (*Carcharhinus longimanus*) assessed from monitored pelagic longline experiments. *Canadian Journal of Fisheries and Aquatic Sciences, 79*(9), 1407–1419. https://doi.org/10.1139/cjfas-2021-0273

Advancing Sustainability: Belize's Electronic Monitoring Initiative in Commercial Fishing

By Ian Constantino – Monitoring Officer

Electronic Monitoring (EM) is becoming mandatory for many commercial fishing boats in various fisheries. Understanding the benefits of this innovative system is crucial for stakeholders across the industry. EM has been shown to be cost-effective compared to traditional observer methods, significantly enhancing efficiency in assessing fish populations. Furthermore, it improves fisheries management by supporting traceability, sustainability claims, and market access.

Belize has taken a proactive approach by initiating the development of an Electronic Monitoring program, with support from The Nature Conservancy (Costa Rica). We are excited to announce the launch of our pilot program in 2025, which is expected to run for six months, tentatively from February to July-August 2025. This initiative marks a significant milestone for our flag state, reflecting years of careful planning, including a rigorous bidding process to select the ideal EM service providers.

The installation of this technology onboard our Belizean Flagged fishing vessels will facilitate the recording and transmission of data related to fishing activities. Importantly, EM has also demonstrated its capability to help prevent illegal fishing and ensure compliance with regulations set by various RFMOs. Following the completion of the pilot project, we plan to implement EM across the rest of our fleet, starting with longliners, followed by trawlers, and finally purse seiners.

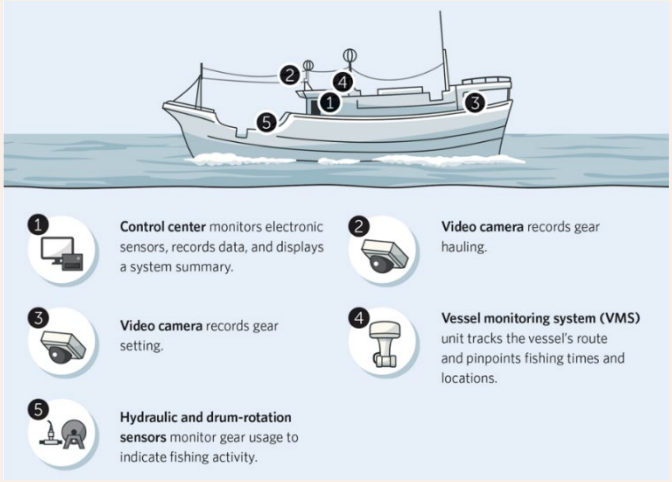


Figure 4: EM uses technology to collect timely and verifiable catch information (Image by pewtrusts.org)

Vessels already equipped with an existing EM system will undergo assessment to determine if their current providers can be accredited to supply EM data. We will also verify that existing equipment and configurations are compatible with the new EM portal while ensuring compliance with minimum standards established by our administration.

This pilot project is crucial for gathering data that will help refine and finalize our EM program design, paving the way for the integration of the remaining vessels in our fleet. We are aware of the resistance that often accompanies the implementation of new monitoring systems, and we call for the support and cooperation of our stakeholders. The fishing industry is dynamic, and it is vital for us to adapt to necessary changes. By promoting sustainable fishing practices through good governance, we can maintain high compliance standards while ensuring economic viability for all involved.

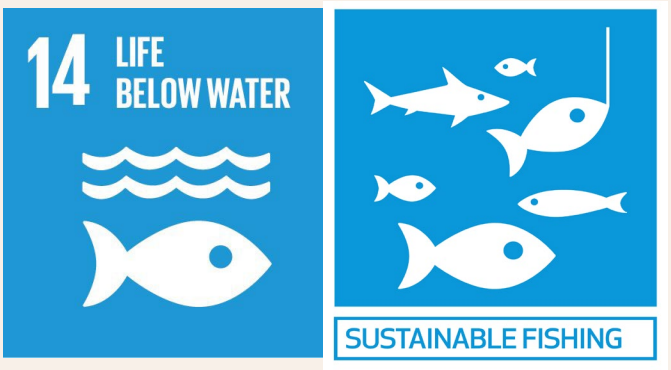
To conclude, the introduction of EM represents a significant step forward in Belize's commitment to sustainable fisheries management on the high seas.

SCIENCE CORNER

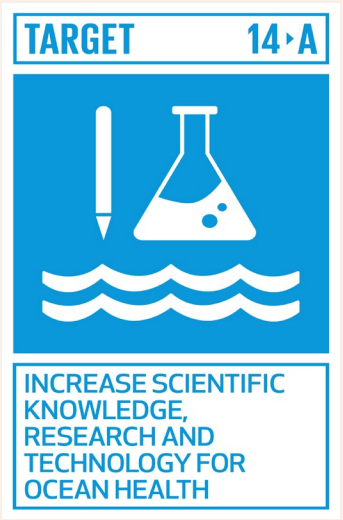
The High Seas and Sustainable Development Goal #14

By Charles Coc – Fisheries Scientist & Data Officer

The sustainable management of high seas fisheries is essential for global food security, economic stability, and environmental health, closely aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG #14: Life Below Water. The 2024 FAO report, "The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture – Blue Transformation in Action," offers a detailed overview of aquatic systems, revealing trends, patterns, and significant data gaps in high seas fisheries.



The report notes a substantial increase in global fisheries and aquaculture production, which reached 223.2 million tonnes in 2022, valued at USD 472 billion. For the first time, aquaculture production surpassed capture fisheries, yielding 94.4 million tonnes and accounting for 51% of total aquatic animal output. This shift highlights a growing dependency on aquaculture to satisfy rising demand, driven by a global population projected to hit 8.5 billion by 2030, linking directly to SDG #2: Zero Hunger.[6, 7]



In the high seas, tuna and similar species are crucial, with a record catch of 8.3 million tonnes in 2022, generating USD 17 billion in global exports. Notably, 86% of major tuna stocks are reported to be within biologically sustainable levels, reflecting positive fisheries management outcomes. However, the report reveals that only 62.3% of marine fishery stocks are sustainable, a worrying decline. This highlights the urgent need for stronger management strategies to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and to tackle overfishing, which threaten marine biodiversity.

Moreover, aquatic food systems provide 15% of animal protein and 6% of total proteins, with non-high-income countries particularly dependent on aquatic nutrition. This underscores the importance of sustainable high seas fisheries to combat hunger and malnutrition. Despite the insights from the FAO report, significant data gaps persist, hampering effective management and conservation efforts, especially in nations with limited resources where accurate fish stock data collection is challenging.

[6] FAO. (2024). *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture - Blue Transformation in Action*.
[7] United Nations. (2024). *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024*. https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/

LIFE BELOW WATER SDG #14

N	R	S	A	I	W	A	Y	S	N	U	Y	Y	C
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The Quarterly Catch

BHSFU E-Newsletter

From the Editor

Dear Readers,

As we dive into this issue of *The Quarterly Catch*, I am excited to share insights from our recent participation in the 13th Commission Meeting of the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO) held in Santiago, Chile. This significant gathering was not just another meeting; it marked a pivotal movement in our ongoing commitment to sustainable fisheries management. The decisions made during this meeting, particularly regarding the total allowable catch (TAC) for jack mackerel, underscore the delicate balance we must strike between economic viability and ecological responsibility.

Belize has a rich history in jack mackerel fisheries, and as we navigate the complexities of international fisheries management, it is vital that we advocate for our historical fishing rights. This newsletter aims to highlight the outcomes of the SPRFMO meeting, the broader implications of climate change on marine resources, the implementation of EMS, and the urgent need for enhanced protection for vulnerable species like the oceanic whitetip shark. Our articles explore the challenges posed by climate change to fisheries management organizations and the critical steps being taken to address these issues, emphasizing Belize's commitment to marine conservation.

As we look ahead, let us remain steadfast in our efforts to advocate for sustainable practices that protect our oceans for future generations. Your engagement and support are crucial as we navigate these waters together. Thank you for being a valued part of our community.

Warm regards,

Editor, *The Quarterly Catch*

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