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Ninth Meeting of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) to the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPA) in the Wider Caribbean Region

Virtual meeting, 17–19 March 2021

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PREVENTING SAWFISH EXTINCTION

For reasons of public health and safety associated with COVID-19, this meeting is being convened virtually. Delegates are kindly requested to access all meeting documents electronically for download as necessary.

Recommendations for preventing sawfish extinction

A REPORT OF THE SPAW SPECIES WORKING GROUP



Task 4 : “Develop priorities and strategies for regional collaboration on and implementation of management measures to improve protection of species listed under the Annexes of the Protocol.”

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Priority: Protection and recovery of small-tooth sawfish (*Pristis pectinata*) and large-tooth sawfish (*Pristis pristis*) in the Wider Caribbean region

- 1. Background:** SPAW Annex II-listed small-tooth sawfish and large-tooth sawfish are two of the Caribbean’s most threatened animals. Once widespread throughout the region, both species are now classified by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as Critically Endangered. Fishing is the main threat; degradation of key habitats also jeopardizes sawfish survival (Yan et al., 2021).
- 2.** The 2017 update to the IUCN Shark Specialist Group (SSG) Global Sawfish Strategy highlighted the Wider Caribbean as a key region for preventing sawfish extinction. The countries considered by the SSG as priorities for sawfish research and/or improved policy include five SPAW Parties: Bahamas, Colombia, Cuba, Honduras, and Panama. Colombia, Cuba and Panama were also identified by Yan et al. (2021) for priority sawfish research and policy action.
- 3. Legal status:** Review shows that three priority countries do not have laws protecting sawfish. In the two countries that do have sawfish-related laws, there is ambiguity whether incidental or intentional killing of the animal is prohibited. None of the countries have laws supporting an obligation to release sawfish with minimal harm if incidentally caught.

SPAW Party	Legal Protections for Sawfishes
Bahamas	<i>The Wildlife Conservation and Trade Act states "no person shall possess, import, export, re-export, or have under his control offer, expose for sale, display to the public or introduce from the sea ... without a valid permit." This law only applies to authorizations for import/export purposes.</i>
Cuba	Under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment of the Republic of Cuba Resolution 160/2011, it is "prohibited to target, capture, collect, transport, or sell without an environmental license." Environmental licenses are to be authorized only for research and conservation purposes.
Colombia	No sawfish-specific legal protections found
Panama	No sawfish-specific legal protections found
Honduras	No sawfish-specific legal protections found

- 4. Recommendations:** Based on our analyses and those of the IUCN SSG, we propose the following actions, in order of priority, to prevent extinction of Caribbean sawfishes:
- i. National regulations to explicitly and specifically prohibit sawfish fishing, killing, retention, sale, and trade, particularly in Panama, Honduras, and Colombia;
 - ii. Bahamas national regulations to explicitly and specifically prohibit sawfish fishing, killing, retention, and domestic sale;
 - iii. Education and enforcement programs, particularly in the above five priority countries, to implement protections and promote safe sawfish release;
 - iv. Fishery management measures, particularly in priority countries, aimed at minimizing encounters with sawfish as well as resulting mortality;
 - v. Research and protections for critical sawfish habitats, particularly mangroves, throughout the region;
 - vi. A Regional Plan of Action for Sawfish Recovery to raise the species' profile and facilitate alignment, cooperation, information sharing, and capacity building among SPAW Parties.
- 5.** We also suggest the establishment of a specific sub-working group or specific task dedicated to sawfish under the SPAW Species Working Group to facilitate implementation of these recommendations and to enhance coordination with regional fisheries bodies such as WECAFC.

References:

Helen F. Yan, Peter M. Kyne, Rima W. Jabado, Ruth H. Leeney, Lindsay N.K. Davidson, Danielle H. Derrick, Brittany Finucci, Robert P. Freckleton, Sonja V. Fordham, Nicholas K. Dulvy, "Overfishing and habitat loss drive range contraction of iconic marine fishes to near extinction" (2021) *Science Advances* 7:eabb6026.