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

Virtual, 30 January – 1 February 2023

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSERVING THE NASSAU GROUPER IN THE WIDER CARIBBEAN REGION

A REPORT OF THE SPA W SPECIES WORKING GROUP

This meeting is being convened virtually. Delegates are kindly requested to access all meeting documents electronically for download as necessary.



Context

For this biennial, the SPAW STAC Working group on Species has been assigned three tasks by the STAC via the document “2021-2022 Tasks and Chairs of the SPAW STAC ad hoc Working Groups”.

The present document was prepared by the species working group in response to Task 2, Subtask Nassau Grouper: “Strengthen work on the conservation and management of species listed in the Annexes of the Protocol, taking into account the recommendations in: paragraphs 8-10 of UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.38, recommendations of the species WG for conserving the Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*, Annex III).

CFMC	Caribbean Fisheries Management Council
FMP	Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan
GCFI	Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute
MPA	Marine Protected Areas
RAC	Regional Activity Center of the SPAW protocol
SAWG	Spawning Aggregations Working Group
SPAW	Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife protocol
STAC	Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee of the SPAW protocol
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WCR	Wider Caribbean Region
WECAFC	Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission

ACRONYMS

Priority: Protection and conservation of the Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) in the Wider Caribbean Region

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Background

1. The Nassau Grouper was added to the SPAW Protocol's Annex III in 2017 (Class Chondrichthyes, Order Perciformes, Species *Epinephelus striatus*).
2. The Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) was once a species of considerable commercial significance to the Caribbean region. By the year 2000, the Nassau Grouper was already considered to be significantly overfished. Both the number and size of spawning aggregations had been significantly reduced, with remaining stocks overexploited and, in some cases, commercially extinct throughout much of its geographical range. Since the 1980's, spawning aggregations have declined by more than 60% due to overfishing. In 2018, the IUCN assessed Nassau Grouper as critically endangered.
3. As a high trophic level predator, the Nassau Grouper is ecologically important to reef ecosystems. It also plays a crucial role in food security and has sustained livelihoods in many countries of the Wider Caribbean Region. Species that aggregate to spawn such as the Nassau Grouper are particularly vulnerable to overexploitation due to the spatial and temporal predictability of their spawning behavior, as well as their dispersal and migratory nature beyond national borders.
4. An initial call for regional protection of the Nassau Grouper was made in October 2008 during the 13th Session of the Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission (WECAFC). The subsequent Caribbean Fisheries Management Council (CFMC)/WECAFC Regional Workshop on the Nassau Grouper (Cartagena, Colombia, October 2008), recommended a regional closed season as a best approach for conservation along with the establishment of regional collaboration on grouper research and management.

5. Following the SPAW Annex III listing in 2017, the WECAFC Spawning Aggregations Working Group (SAWG) held workshops in 2017 and 2019. SAWG prepared for submission to the WECAFC Commission, a draft Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan (FMP): Focus on Nassau Grouper and Mutton Snapper (*Lutjanus analis*).
6. The purpose of the FMP is to provide a template for conservation of fish that aggregate to spawn in the Wider Caribbean region. Harmonized planning between or among countries is necessary because of the transboundary nature of the species. To improve cross-sector collaboration needed to address declining trends due to widespread fishing and impacts of climate change, the FMP identifies six objectives to improve regional management and conservation.
7. One of the most important and urgent measures in the FMP is the recommendation to implement region-wide seasonal closures for four months (December 1-March 31). The length of the seasonal closure may vary somewhat over time or by location depending on variations observed from regular monitoring.
8. In 2020, the Chair of the WECAFC Executive Committee wrote to members of the Commission, urging members to support the development of a regional FMP and adopt this seasonal closure, noting a harmonized seasonal closure for all commercial and recreational fishing of Nassau Grouper is essential to protect spawning Nassau grouper. The harmonized regional closed season has been identified as a critical need at several successive Spawning Aggregation Working Group meetings.
9. The 18th WECAFC meeting took place 26-29 July 2022. The Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation FMP was endorsed by the Commission. It calls upon Parties to implement the harmonized seasonal closure.
10. An accompanying recommendation was also adopted, calling for adoption and implementation of the Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Management Plan, and actions to improve regional data collection, assessment, communication, and outreach for the conservation of fish spawning aggregations and mobilization of resources for priority research and monitoring.
11. In addition to the harmonized seasonal closures, another important objective of the FMP is to significantly increase awareness and engagement among stakeholders to enhance support for the protection and conservation of Nassau Grouper.

Recommendations

12. SPAW Contracting Parties assist WECAFC in the implementation of the Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation FMP by supporting and ensuring their fisheries or other appropriate departments or ministries implement and enforce harmonized seasonal closures for all commercial and recreational fishing of Nassau Grouper, at least for the period 1 December-31 March. A harmonized regional closed season is essential to protect spawning Nassau grouper and is vital for the species survival and securing sustainable fishing outside the closed seasons.
13. SPAW Contracting Parties implement additional measures to seasonal closure deemed appropriate at the national level. Contracting parties should be mindful to apply the precautionary principle to national management strategies in order to account for information gaps, especially given the critically endangered status of this species and ongoing population decline. National management plans complement actions at the regional level and are needed to guide resource management among countries with different regulatory frameworks. Those plans should include increased monitoring and evaluation of the adequacy of fishery management measures and enforcement.
14. The SPAW Secretariat and SPAW-RAC can assist in the implementation of the FMP by seeking opportunities to collaborate and cooperate with the WECAFC Secretariat and other regional fisheries organisations, such as the GCFI (Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute) and the CRFM (Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism), as appropriate, to support capacity building and communication and outreach efforts, including the development of communication and outreach tools.
15. The STAC should request the SPAW Species Working Group and Protected Areas Working Group to undertake a joint task for submission to the next STAC meeting to consider opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper, including in SPAW-listed MPAs, which are known to protect important spawning aggregation sites, taking into account proposed action #16 in the Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation FMP.¹

¹ Action 16: Increase Nassau Grouper and Mutton Snapper Fish Spawning Aggregation (FSA) protection by improving management of current MPAs or establishment of new MPA where the conservation of FSAs is included in the objectives.

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