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

Panama City, Panama  
30 June – 3 July 2025

## STAC PROTECTED AREA WORKING GROUP

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

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## ACRONYMS

COP	Conference of the Parties
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MMA	Marine Managed Area
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PA	Protected Area
RAC	Regional Activity Center
RAN	Regional Activity Network
SPAW	Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife
SPAW-RAC	Regional Activity Centre for the Protocol Concerning Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife for the Wider Caribbean Region
STAC	Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WCR	Wider Caribbean Region
WG	Working Group

## PROTECTED AREA WORKING GROUP

### Mandate

The SPAW STAC working group on Protected Areas had the following tasks assigned by the STAC 10:

#### ▪ **Mandatory tasks**

- Review and provide the basis for recommendations on proposals from Contracting Parties to add new protected areas to the SPAW Protocol annexes (“Task 1” for the purposes of this report);
- Review as needed the procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites (“Task 2” for the purposes of this report).

#### ▪ **Specific tasks**

- The Protected Areas Working Group review the “Guidelines and Criteria for the Evaluation of Protected Areas to be Listed Under the SPAW Protocol” (2010 Guidelines), building on earlier discussions and preliminary recommendations, and prepare suggestions to simplify and streamline the process, including possible modifications to the 2010 Guidelines, for consideration at SPAW STAC11 and COP13 (“Task 3” for the purposes of this report).;
- With the Species Working Group, undertake the joint task in UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG.43/INF.26, paragraph 15, for the conservation of Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*), and report progress and make recommendations, as appropriate, to STAC 11 (“Task 4” for the purposes of this report).

### Key figures

**Number of experts in the working group:** 18 (8 countries + 2 observers)

**Number of meetings of the working group:** 23 (including 6 joint meetings with the Species working group to work on task 4)

**Average number of experts per meeting:** 6

### Main outcomes

- **Task 1:** Review the proposal of the Government of Aruba as part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to include Parke Marino Aruba in the SPAW list of Protected Area
- **Task 2:** Proposed changes and clarifications to the procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites (see “Guidelines and Criteria” section D and “Annotated format” section C)
- **Task 3:** Proposed revisions to the “Guidelines and Criteria for the Evaluation of Protected Areas to be Listed Under the SPAW Protocol” and “Annotated format”
- **Task 4:** Recommendations for Nassau grouper conservation, in the document “Opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)”
- **6 proposals** that the STAC may wish to recommend

## **Chair of the working group: SPAW-RAC**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The first Meeting of the Contracting Parties (COP) of the SPAW Protocol, Havana (24-25 September 2001), in its Decision I.7, awarded “specific mandates to the STAC for the creation of *ad hoc* Working Groups to deal with those themes that, owing to their complexity or level of specialisation, thereby require [special attention].”

Four (4) such *ad hoc* working groups have been created to be dedicated respectively to Protected Areas, to Species, to Exemptions and the most recent to Sargassum, by the STAC and operate according to Terms of Reference.<sup>1</sup> The outcomes of each Working Group depend on the tasks assigned by the STAC.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Mandate and composition**

Formally established in January 2024, the SPAW STAC *ad hoc* Working group on Species had tasks assigned by the STAC and listed in the “2024-2025 Task and chairs of the SPAW STAC *ad hoc* Working Groups”.

The SPAW STAC Working group on Protected Areas had the following tasks assigned by the STAC:

#### **Mandatory tasks:**

- *Review and provide the basis for recommendations on proposals from Contracting Parties to add new protected areas to the SPAW Protocol annexes (“Task 1” for the purposes of this report);*
- *Review as needed the procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites (“Task 2” for the purposes of this report).*

#### **Specific tasks, as mandated by STAC10:**

- *The Protected Areas Working Group review the “Guidelines and Criteria for the Evaluation of Protected Areas to be Listed Under the SPAW Protocol” (2010 Guidelines), building on earlier discussions and preliminary recommendations, and prepare suggestions to simplify and streamline the process, including possible modifications to the 2010 Guidelines, for consideration at SPAW STAC11 and COP13 (“Task 3” for the purposes of this report).*
- *With the Species Working Group, undertake the joint task in UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG.43/INF.26, paragraph 15, for the conservation of Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*), and report progress and make recommendations, as appropriate, to STAC 11 (“Task 4” for the purposes of this report).*

The current PA working group is composed of 18 experts, 16 nominated by 8 countries, and 2 nominated by observers or independently (see Appendix I).

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<sup>1</sup> Terms of Reference of the SPAW STAC *ad hoc* Working Groups, as approved 11 January 2022.

<sup>2</sup> 2021-2022 Tasks and Chairs of the SPAW STAC *ad hoc* Working Groups, as approved 11 January 2022.

## **I. GENERAL FUNCTIONING OF THE WORKING GROUP**

One introductory meeting with all the working groups (Species, Protected Area, Exemptions and Sargassum) was organized on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The meeting was aimed at introducing the new nominated experts to SPAW Protocol's background, working groups' rules and objectives, and to create momentum among the veteran experts to launch a good work dynamic. Twenty-two (22) participants attended.

The protected area working group then met in online meetings (16 meetings) and worked collaboratively to produce online deliverables (documents) on the SPAW-RAC Google platform. Meetings were dedicated to discussing the tasks to be performed, the method to address them, identifying and discussing potential points of disagreement, and validating the working group outputs. Most of the working group's work was performed online, on shared documents that experts collaboratively drafted with SPAW-RAC support and reviewed.

As planned by the 2024 working groups' terms of reference, all working group emails were sent via the "teamwork" virtual platform and all documents were shared *via* a collective Google Drive folder. This allowed all members of the species working group to keep track of exchanges and productions, including newcomers. The work performed by the working group during this biennium 2023-2024 and the major outputs are presented in the following paragraphs.

## **II. WORK CONDUCTED DURING THE BIENNIUM 2023-2024**

### **TASK 1 - Review and provide the basis for recommendations on proposals from Contracting Parties to add new protected areas to the SPAW Protocol annexes**

The proposal of Aruba, Kingdom of Netherlands for the inclusion of the Parke Marino Aruba (PMA) in the SPAW listing sites was submitted to the Cartagena Convention Secretariat for review on the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.11). Acknowledgement of receipt was sent on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2021 by the Secretariat.

The review of the proposal by the experts of the last biennium protected area Working Group was mentioned on the 31<sup>st</sup> of May 2022. The proposal was subject to a series of reviews, carried out by the experts, including a core group meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 and an intermediate meeting on 25<sup>th</sup> of August. This evaluation was supported by the completion of an evaluation table. Comments and justifications from Aruba, Kingdom of Netherlands, were sent on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2022 and the 12<sup>th</sup> of August 2022.

Experts considered premature the 2021 application due to the missing elements and invited Aruba to strengthen the proposal for a resubmission once the gaps identified have been addressed.

The SPAW COP 12 decided that:

“SPAW STAC10 request the Protected Areas Working group to assess the response of Aruba, representing the Kingdom of the Netherlands, on three key points in their nomination of Parke Marino Aruba:

- i. The nomination document should include more references to publications, documents, and all relevant sources of information provided on ecological and cultural/ socio-economic aspects.
- ii. A Management Plan must be elaborated and validated in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders, then implemented prior to submitting the application.
- iii. An evaluation framework to monitor the success of the management must be established.”

On February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2025, the Kingdom of the Netherlands sent some additional documents to the Secretariat including:

- Protected Area Conservation Management Framework 2025-2034
- Marine Protected Area Conservation Management Plan 2025-2029
- 8 appendices, including a 5-year target and prioritized actions, a business plan, a list of prohibited, restricted and permitted activities, species lists, and stakeholder engagement.

The protected area working group reviewed this additional documentation, recognizes the interest and the quality of the submission and thanks the Kingdom of the Netherlands for taking into account the comments made by the protected area working group at the STAC 10.

The PMA brings together valuable marine and coastal ecosystems, such as coral reefs, mangroves, seagrass beds, rocky and sandy bottoms, and some coral islets, which are home to threatened species annexed to the SPAW Protocol, including marine plants, corals, sea turtles, marine mammals, fish and

migratory birds. In addition, this MPA provides crucial ecosystem services for this island, and contributes to regional ecological connectivity.

The Ecological, Cultural and Socio-Economic criteria are mostly in line with the requirements of the guidelines and criteria for the evaluation of protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol.

Thanks to the additional documents, the experts also appreciated the great effort made by the Kingdom of the Netherlands for the proposal to meet the protection, planning and management measures criteria.

Nonetheless, experts would appreciate having more information in the future regarding specific threats and the way the Parke Marino Aruba would face them, such as oil spills pollution.

Due to the particular shape of the Parke Marine Aruba, composed of 4 zones of the island that are not connected and extend up to 2 km seaward, the Protected Area Working group recommends a future review of the implementation of the management plan as a basis for preparing guidance for other protected areas with a similar design based on non-contiguous zones.

The protected area working group also recommends that the management authority approach the SPAW-RAC for the Parke Marino Aruba to be included in the SPAW protected area manager network.

In conclusion, the experts recommended supporting the proposal from the Kingdom of the Netherlands to include the Parke Marino Aruba as a SPAW-listed site.

**TASK 2 - Review as needed the procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites. (UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG 45/ INF 13)**

**TASK 3 - Review the procedure through which Contracting Parties may nominate new protected areas to be listed as SPAW sites and prepare suggestions to simplify and streamline the process for consideration during the next biennium for future discussions at STAC11 and subsequent consideration at COP13.**

### **Methodology**

After the working group experts' first meeting on February 28, 2024, SPAW-RAC organised the first protected area Working Group meeting to launch Task 2 and Task 3 on March 26, 2024.

The experts were invited to think about ways to review the procedure through which Parties may nominate new protected areas.

For this purpose, they had at their disposal a series of documents available on a shared online folder among which, the “Guidelines and criteria for the evaluation of protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol”, the “Annotated format for the presentation reports for the areas proposed for inclusion in the SPAW list” and the evaluation table designed by SPAW-RAC, as well as previous recommendations of STAC.

SPAW-RAC proposed a working method consisting of reviewing the documents provided on the shared folder and modifying them in track changes mode to gather comments from the experts.

During the first meeting, all the experts agreed with the work conducted during the last biennium by the SPAW Protected area working group, which underlined that the current application format is too complicated, and the criteria should be reviewed to simplify the process.

The experts then worked during 11 meetings to review and simplify the document “Guidelines and criteria for the evaluation of protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol”. All the changes were made unanimously by the experts present. A final version was validated at the working group meeting on March 21, 2025.

The experts worked during five meetings to review the document “Annotated format for the presentation reports for the areas proposed for inclusion in the SPAW list” and to align this document with the revised document “Guidelines and criteria for the evaluation of protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol”. A final version was validated at the working group meeting on March 21, 2025.

The revised procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites was discussed during the meetings and is outlined in the “Guidelines and Criteria” (section D) and “Annotated format” (section C).

### **Outcomes and highlights**

The following revised documents are submitted to the STAC for consideration (UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG 45/ INF 13):

- Guidelines and criteria for the evaluation of protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol
- Annotated format for the presentation reports for the areas proposed for inclusion in the SPAW list, including the procedure through which Contracting Parties can propose new Protected Areas to be listed as SPAW sites

**TASK 4 - With the Species Working Group, undertake the joint task in UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG.43/INF.26, paragraph 15, for the conservation of Nassau Grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*), and report progress and make recommendations, as appropriate, to STAC 11.**

### **Methodology**

On March 20, 2024, a virtual kick-off meeting with the PA Working Group experts and the Species working group experts was organised by SPAW-RAC to launch Task 4.

After this meeting, the experts were invited to complete a shared document, “Recommendation for Nassau Grouper conservation”, proposed by SPAW-RAC.

For this purpose, they had at their disposal a series of documents available on Google Drive among which were the “STAC9-WG.42-INF.38-Recommendations for Nassau Grouper-EN”, the “STAC10-



WG.43\_INF.26\_Recommendations for Nassau Grouper management”, “WECAFC SAWG meeting report 2018, 2019, 2020”, and “Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan”

SPAW-RAC proposed a working method consisting of reviewing the documents provided on the Drive and modifying them in track changes mode to gather comments from the experts.

SPAW-RAC proposed a draft structure for the recommendations document that was then re-structured and completed by the experts.

A first draft of the “Opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)” document was then submitted to the whole Protected area and the whole Species working groups, on September 27, 2024.

No change was made by the experts and the document was then validated and submitted to the STAC.

### **Outcomes and highlights**

The following revised documents are submitted to the STAC for validation (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG 43/ INF 15):

- Opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)

The following concise summary of recommendations is below:

1. **Habitat Mapping:** Map Nassau grouper habitats and FSAs, using local knowledge, to guide MPA creation or expansion.
2. **Regulations:** Evaluate and enhance fisheries and MPA regulations to protect Nassau grouper, focusing on spawning and migration periods.
3. **Indicators:** Integrate Nassau grouper-specific objectives and indicators into MPA management, using diverse datasets for evaluation.
4. **Working Groups:** Form national groups to share knowledge and assess management effectiveness with 5- and 10-year benchmarks.
5. **Monitoring Protocols:** Standardize monitoring and reporting processes for Nassau grouper and FSAs across regions.
6. **Effectiveness Reporting:** Include FSA management indicators in SPAW reports and share findings for regional planning.

### III. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND REMARKS

As a result of its work, and in consideration of the work conducted to review the procedure through which Contracting Parties may nominate new protected areas to be listed as SPAW sites, **the working group proposes that the STAC may wish to recommend:**

1. Encouraging Contracting Parties to give support to the proposal from the Kingdom of the Netherlands to include Parke Marino Aruba in the SPAW list of Protected Areas
2. Encouraging Contracting Parties to propose new protected areas to be listed under the SPAW Protocol within the first year of the biennium (first year after SPAW COP) in either English, Spanish or French;
3. Reminding Contracting Parties that they must complete the updated “*ANNOTATED FORMAT FOR PROTECTED AREAS TO BE LISTED UNDER THE SPAW PROTOCOL*”, following the updated “Guidelines and Criteria for the Evaluation of Protected Areas to be Listed Under the SPAW Protocol” (2025 Guidelines) when proposing a new protected area to be listed under the SPAW Protocol;
4. Encouraging Contracting Parties and inviting observers to designate experts with scientific and/or technical competence to the SPAW STAC Protected Area Working Group, in accordance with the Terms of Reference, to strengthen the working group’s ability to complete its tasks.
5. Updating the document “*Common guidelines and criteria for protected areas in the wider Caribbean region: identification, selection, establishment and management*”, 1996, according to Articles 4, 5 6, 8, and 13 of the SPAW Protocol;
6. Requesting the Secretariat and/or SPAW-RAC to create a concise checklist covering the mandatory criteria for a protected area to be listed as a SPAW site, which Contracting Parties may use before filling out the annotated format to determine whether their application will be eligible;
7. Mandating the Protected Area working group to work during next biennium on the following specific tasks:
  - create a glossary to accompany the two updated documents
  - review the concise checklist covering the mandatory criteria for a protected area to be listed as a SPAW site
  - to support the implementation of Articles 19 and 22 of the SPAW Protocol, define a procedure to evaluate and review the protected areas listed under the SPAW Protocol

**APPENDIX I: LIST OF SPAW PROTECTED AREAS WORKING GROUP EXPERTS**

<b>Name of experts</b>	<b>Affiliation</b>
Milema Marrugo	Colombia
Nacor Bolaños-Cubillos	Colombia
Aylem Hernández Ávila	Cuba
Juliett González Méndez	Cuba
Jonathan Delance	Dominican Republic
Laura Díaz	Dominican Republic
Florent Merle	France
Linossi Lucie	France
Laetitia Mathon	Netherlands
Nastasha Silva	Netherlands
Marino Eugenio Abrego	Panama
Lcda Digna Barsallo	Panama
Gonzalo Cid	USA
Samantha Ebersole	USA
Alexis Alberto Zambrano Zambrano	Venezuela
Rivera Jemimah	Venezuela
Milema Marrugo	Colombia
Nacor Bolaños-Cubillos	Colombia
Lloyd Gardner	Foundation for Development Planning, Inc.
Carlos Godoy	IUCN