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Eleventh 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

Panama City, Panama  
30 June – 3 July 2025

## **REPORT OF THE SPA W STAC SPECIES WORKING GROUP ON THE LISTING OF SPECIES UNDER THE ANNEXES TO THE SPA W PROTOCOL**

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

## SPECIES WORKING GROUP



### Mandate

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

#### Mandatory tasks

**Task 1:** Review, evaluate, and provide recommendations on proposals from Contracting Parties to add new species to the SPAW Protocol Annexes or change the listing status of species currently on the Annexes

#### Specific tasks, as mandated by STAC10

- The Species Working Group to assist the Secretariat and SPAW-RAC with the implementation of the recommendations for the conservation of Sawfishes (Pristidae), as appropriate ("Task 2" for the purposes of this report).
- With the Protected Areas Working Group, undertake the joint task in UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG.43/INF.26, paragraph 15: make recommendations to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*), and report progress and, as appropriate, to STAC 11 ("Task 3" for the purposes of this report).
- Develop a set of prioritized recommendations for the conservation and management of parrotfish in the Caribbean, using UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.15 as the basis for such recommendations, as appropriate ("Task 4" for the purposes of this report).

#### Invited task

- SPAW COP12 invited the STAC, through the Species Working Group, to develop conservation and management recommendations for the Whale Shark, Giant Manta Ray and Hammerhead Sharks to be presented to STAC11 ("Task 5" for the purposes of this report)

3.

### Key figures

**Number of experts in the working group:** 16 experts nominated from 9 countries, 11 nominated from 11 observers

**Number of meetings of the working group:** 17 (including 6 joint meetings with the Protected areas working group to work on task 4)

**Average number of experts per meeting:** 3

### Main outcomes

- **Task 2:** The Species Working Group developed a survey to collect information about SPAW Contracting Parties' implementation of the SPAW Protocol with regard to sawfish, analyzed the results, and reported the results to the STAC. The group also recommended a sawfish expert provide a presentation at the STAC on the biology/ecology of the species and the importance of domestic implementation..
- **Task 3:** Recommendations for Nassau grouper conservation, in the document "Opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)".
- **Task 4:** *Due to a lack of expert participation this task was not dealt with.*
- **Task 5:** Three sets of prioritized action-oriented recommendations for the conservation and management of the Whale Shark, Giant Manta Ray and Hammerhead Sharks.

### Role of SPAW-RAC

Chair of the working group.

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## ACRONYMS

FMP	Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan
COP	Conference of the Parties
CEP	Caribbean Environment Programme
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora
CRFM	Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism
GCFI	Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute
ICCAT	International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
MMA P	Marine mammal Action Plan
MPA	Marine Protected Area
RAC	Regional Activity Center of the SPAW protocol
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
WECA FC	Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission
WIDE CAST	Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network

## REPORT OF THE SPAW STAC SPECIES WORKING GROUP

### 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 now exist dedicated respectively to Protected Areas, Species, Exemptions, and Sargassum. Working Groups were established by the STAC and recently consolidated with terms of reference and specific tasks specially designed following the STAC8 (Panama, 2018). They are composed of experts designated for their acknowledged scientific and technical competence, their availability and readiness to be responsive in the group, and to cover as much as possible the geographical and thematic scope of the working group. Experts may be nominated by Contracting parties, observers (*e.g.*, non-member States, civil society organisations), or independent experts added for their specific field of expertise. Once designated, they participate in *intuitu personae*. The working groups are currently all chaired by the SPAW RAC. In case consensus cannot be reached for a specific task, the chair guarantees that the diversity of opinions are dutifully reflected in the feedback and reports to the contracting parties and observers and ultimately to the STAC.

### MANDATE AND COMPOSITION

Formally commencing work in January 2024, the SPAW STAC ad hoc Working group on Species had the following tasks assigned by the STAC and listed in the “2024-2025 Task and chairs of the SPAW STAC ad hoc Working Groups” document:

#### **Mandatory task:**

**Task 1:** Review, evaluate, and provide recommendations on proposals from Contracting Parties to add new species to the SPAW Protocol Annexes or change the listing status of species currently on the Annexes.

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

**Task 2:** Assist the Secretariat and SPAW-RAC with implementation of the recommendations for the conservation of Sawfishes (Pristidae) in UNEP (DEPI) CAR WG.43/INF.25, paragraphs 6-11, as appropriate.

**Task 3:** With the Protected Areas 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:** Develop a set of prioritized recommendations for the conservation and management of parrotfish in the Caribbean, using UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.15 as the basis for such

recommendations, as appropriate. In the development of recommendations, the Species Working Group could consider, inter alia:

- The possible development of a regional management plan for parrotfish in the Caribbean.
- Developing recommendations to protect and enhance existing populations by reducing the negative effects of overexploitation and unsustainable fishing methods.
- Developing recommendations to improve the status of the marine habitats on which parrotfish depend and prevent further degradation of these habitats.
- Opportunities to improve the understanding of the status of parrotfish by supporting fisheries-independent research into the physiology, life history and ecology of parrotfish.
- The possible creation of a fishery-dependent data collection programme to better record fisheries and landings data to determine the effects of fishing on parrotfish populations.
- Conducting socio-economic assessments to understand the role of parrotfish in local economies.
- Opportunities to strengthen outreach, communication and public awareness.
- Opportunities to support programmes to facilitate the transition of fishers to alternative livelihoods.

**Invited tasks :**

**Task 5:** SPAW COP12 invited the STAC, through the Species Working Group, to develop conservation and management recommendations for the Whale Shark, Giant Manta Ray and Hammerhead Sharks to be presented to STAC11.

The current species working group is composed of 16 experts nominated from 9 countries, 11 nominated from 11 observers (Appendix 1).

This report summarises the work carried out by the experts in response to these requests.

#### GENERAL FUNCTIONING OF THE WORKING GROUP

One introductory meeting with all the working groups (Species, Protected Areas, and Sargassum) was organised 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 species working group work was then divided into online meetings and online collaborative review and drafting of documents and recommendations. Meetings were dedicated to discussing the tasks to be performed, the method to address them, identify and discuss potential points of disagreements, and validate the working group outputs. Most of the working group 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 2024-2025 and the major outputs are presented in the following paragraphs.

Mandatory TASK 1: REVIEW, EVALUATE, AND PROVIDE RECOMMENDATIONS ON PROPOSALS FROM CONTRACTING PARTIES TO ADD NEW SPECIES TO THE SPAW PROTOCOL ANNEXES OR CHANGE THE LISTING STATUS OF SPECIES.

No proposals to add or uplist species in Annex I, II or III have been made by the contracting parties. This task did not therefore require a working meeting of the species working group.

Specific TASKs and Invited Task :

Respectively, the working group met for the first time:

Task 2, recommendation for **Sawfishes: April 12, 2024, 10 am (UTC-4)**

Task 3, recommendation for **Nassau grouper: March 20, 2024, 10 am (UTC-4)**

Task 4, recommendation for **Parrotfish: April 8, 2024, 10 am (UTC-4)**

Task 5, recommendation for **Whale shark, Giant Manta Ray, Hammerhead shark: March 25, 2024, 10 am (UTC-4)**

Task 2: Sawfishes, *Pristidae* (UNEP(DEPI) CAR WG.45/INF.16)

The working group undertakes the joint task in UNEP(DEPI) CAR WG.43/INF.25, paragraphs 6-11 and assists the Secretariat and SPAW RAC with the implementation of the recommendations, as requested by the COP12.

## Methodology

One introductory meeting with all the working group members was organized on April 12, 2024. At the meeting, the members were reminded of the Terms of Reference of the SPAW STAC Ad Hoc Working Groups (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.12) and were presented the SPAW COP12 tasks for the Species working group as well as the recommendation from UNEP (DEPI) CAR WG.43/INF.25 document indicated what should be led or supported by the SPAW experts.

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

For this purpose, they had at their disposal a series of documents available on Google Drive including the “STAC10-WG.43-INF.25-Recommendations for sawfish conservation in the Wider Caribbean Region - EN”

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

The Species Working Group reviewed the recommendations and decided that further information about the SPAW Contracting Parties’ implementation of the SPAW Protocol with regard to sawfish was necessary before it could advise on the next steps for implementation of the recommendations.

All experts agreed that the first step was to share a survey with the Contracting Parties in order to obtain information on existing regulation and enforcement programs and on their needs and the main obstacles for sawfish conservation.

The working group met online four (4) times with the participation of 4 experts.

The experts collaborated on the survey's development, taking into account the recommendation document UNEP (DEPI) CAR WG.43/INF.25.

The responses have been analysed and summarized in the final document for this working group.

The document has been validated by the experts and its recommendation submitted to the STAC.

### Outcomes and group conclusion

The following revised documents are submitted to the STAC for validation (UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG 45/INF16): **Recommendations for the conservation of sawfish (pristidae) in the wider caribbean region.**

The species experts discussed the survey responses and noted that the number of Contracting Parties responding was not as expected and some sawfish range states were not represented in the survey responses.

Of the responses received, common themes were the lack of basic scientific information available on sawfish occurrence and species biology, as well as the lack of resources for sawfish conservation and management, followed by the need to build implementation capacity and support public awareness.

The species experts concluded that enhanced engagement from SPAW Contracting Parties, especially from key sawfish range states, is essential to the successful implementation of the recommendations on sawfish adopted at COP12.

### Recommendation

In order to raise awareness, to assist Contracting Parties in their commitment, and to address the need for information on sawfish biology, conservation, and management identified in the survey, the Species Working Group recommends that:

“The Cartagena Convention Secretariat invite a sawfish expert to present on sawfish in the Wider Caribbean Region at the next STAC meeting.”

### Task 3: Nassau Grouper, *Epinephelus striatus* (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.42/INF.38)

With the Protected Area 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, the “STAC9-WG.42-INF.38-Recommendations for Nassau Grouper-EN”, the “STAC10-WG.43\_INF.26\_Recommendations for Nassau Grouper management”, “WECAFC SWAG meeting report 2018, 2019, 2020”, and “Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan”

SPAW-RAC proposed a working method consisting in 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.

The working group met online three (3) times with the participation of six (6) experts at the last two meetings, compared with 13 at the first.

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.

### Outcomes and highlights

The following revised documents are submitted to the STAC for validation (UNEP(DEPI)CAR WG 42/INF.38):

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 key habitats including confirmed and unconfirmed FSAs, migration routes and areas of ontogenetic significance, 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. Data streams for these indicators should include fishery dependent, fishery independent and socioeconomic datasets to characterise and evaluate the fishery, landings, abundance, life history, ecology, ontogenetic/annual/seasonal movement patterns, effectiveness of enforcement and outreach.
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. These national working groups should include representatives of government,

NGO and resource user groups, as appropriate, and operate based on annual work plans which prompt monitoring, evaluation and reporting on known Nassau grouper FSAs and management effectiveness. National working groups should also establish benchmarks against which to measure success over 5- and 10-year periods.

6. Effectiveness Reporting: Include FSA management indicators in SPAW reports and share findings for regional planning.

Task 4: Parrotfishes (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG. /INF)

## Methodology

On April 8, 2024 a virtual kick-off meeting with 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 “Set of prioritized recommendations for the conservation and management of parrotfish in the Caribbean” proposed by SPAW RAC.

For this purpose, they had at their disposal a series of documents available on Google Drive among which, the “SPAW\_STAC10\_WG.43 INF.17 FR Parrotfish Inclusion”, the “WG.42-INF.15 Addendum 1-EN”, “WG.42-INF.15-en”, and “WG.43\_INF.17\_Proposal for Parrotfishes listing in SPAW Annex III-EN” and Harms-Tuohy, C.A. 2021. Parrotfishes in the Caribbean: a regional review with recommendations for management.

SPAW-RAC proposed a working method consisting in 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.

Unfortunately, despite a large number of reminders, at the beginning only two experts worked on this task and no participation at the last meetings and no response to the reminders to organize new meetings.

In order to carry out this task, SPAW RAC needs the participation of experts. The Secretariat and SPAW RAC kindly ask experts to respond, gently reminding them of the existence of the Species Working Group and giving them a chance to provide us with their recommendations before December 31, 2024.

## Review of the recommendation document by the experts

Considering the lack of response, the Secretariat advises Focal Points that the working group is therefore unable to complete this task.

Invited Task 5: Sharks and rays (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.45 /INF.18)

### 7.4.1 Methodology

One introductory meeting with all the working group members was organized on March 24, all experts agreed on the idea of having one document for the 3 groups of species.

On May 7<sup>th</sup>, two experts volunteered to take the lead on the manta ray part and on the hammerhead sharks. No leader was found for the Whale shark, and the experts agreed to work collaboratively on this part.

The experts also agreed, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, on the need to create a more actionable document with the aim of identifying gaps and suggesting concrete actions for Contracting Parties. They emphasized the importance of making the document usable and realistic, so as to encourage Contracting Parties to take up its recommendations.

Before every meeting, experts worked on the draft and checked the provisional timeline.

On October 23<sup>th</sup>, they met to review the work done and put the effort on prioritizing the recommendation.

All the task contributors (10 experts) met on November 28<sup>th</sup> to focus on the most important actions for each species and agreed to present these at the top of the document. They also discussed the idea to separate tables for Annex II and Annex III species.

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, The Working group discussed the need for better reporting and implementation of conservation measures for species to the SPAW. If progress was not made, they suggested STAC consider asking the Species Working Group to review and propose additional recommendations. The working group could develop a survey for the Contracting Parties, such as in the Sawfish task, to gather information on implementation.

The final document has been validated on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2025.

The group sent a first draft to the whole species working group on January 9<sup>th</sup> 2025. Experts had two weeks to review the draft. 4 experts reviewed the draft.

The working group met online seven (7) times.

#### Review of the recommendation document by the experts

The 10 experts that contributed to the drafting and/or review of the document (UNEP(DEPI)/CAR WG.45 /INF.18) consider it meets the request made during STAC 10 and agree it should be submitted to STAC 11.

#### Group conclusion

Building upon the recommendations for conserving Whale shark, Giant Manta Ray, and 3 species of hammerhead sharks made during STAC 10, and following the discussion that took place during the validation meeting, the experts proposed the following general and prioritized recommendations:

Building capacity, awareness and improving information on sharks and rays listed on Annexes II and III by training fishers on safe release methods; hosting capacity building workshops to share knowledge of low-cost, effective data collection; collecting catch, reporting data from relevant fishing organizations such as ICCAT and WECAFC; collaborating regionally to share data and harmonize data collection protocols; promoting stakeholder engagement in gathering historical data

conducting field surveys; and growing communication tools to raise awareness on those species conservation (social media campaigns; video tools for effective storytelling).

Meeting Annex II obligations to protect Whale Shark (*Rhincodon typus*) and Giant Manta Ray (*Manta birostris*) by ensuring that legislation, regulations, and/or policies are in place to prohibit retention, sale, trade, and minimize incidental catch, training relevant personnel in species identification and enforcement of associated restrictions; developing/adopting the Protocol's best practice guidelines on disentanglement from fishing nets; preventing disruptive interactions through promotion of best practices for sustainable tourism and associated, targeted educational tools that impact the community on different levels; and submitting exemption reports to the Secretariat as requested by Art. 19 and Article 11(2) of the SPAW Protocol.

Meeting obligations for Annex III listed Hammerhead sharks species by regulating fishing through catch limits, closed seasons and/or closed areas based on scientific advice and the precautionary approach; publishing CITES Non-detriment findings; minimizing waste and enhance species-specific data collection by requiring all sharks be landed with fins naturally attached; and prohibiting international trade/or retention (for ICCAT Parties);

Considering that the recommended measures for the Whale shark, the Giant Manta Ray and the Hammerhead sharks are based on the obligations for Annex II and Annex III species under the SPAW Protocol, it would be appropriate to apply them correspondingly to other shark species listed in Annex II and Annex III, such as the silky shark and the Oceanic whitetip.

Appendix 1: List of SPAW species working group experts

Name of expert	Affiliation
Julia Horrocks	Barbados
Andrea Polanco	Colombia
Milena Benavides	Colombia
Dannerys Beatriz Baez Taveras	Dominican Republic
Bienvenido Marchena	Dominican Republic
Marcos Casilla Mariñez	Dominican Republic
Mr. Iván Figueroa Reyes	Cuba
Mrs. Indra Contrera Caballero	Cuba
Océane Beaufort	France
Sietske van der Wal	Netherlands
Anna Venema	Netherlands
Marino Eugenio Abrego	Panama
Dra Lissette Trejos	Panama
Kristen Koyama	USA
Angela Somma	USA
Betzabey Motta	Venezuela
Susan Millward	AWI
Monica Borobia-Hill	Monitor Caribbean
Courtney Vail	Lighthousekeepers Foundation
Jeffrey Bernus	CCS
Jaime Bolaños- Jiménez	Caribbean-Wide Orca Project (CWOP)
Lindsay Porter	IWC
Roxanne Francisca	DCNA

Olga Koubrak	SeaLife Law
Sonja Fordham	Shark Advocates International
Myles Philipps	WECAFC
Nuno Barros	Manta Trust