

Theme: Harmonizing and standardising observer programmes

International collaboration to standardise high seas monitoring

Tiffany Vidal¹, Craig Loveridge, Randy Jenkins

South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation
Wellington, New Zealand

Introduction

The South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (SPRFMO) was established in 2012 to manage the non-highly migratory fisheries resources of the South Pacific Ocean. SPRFMO is currently comprised of 17 Members and 2 Cooperating Non-Contracting Parties (CNCs), representing membership from Asia, Oceania, North and South America, the European Union, and Africa. One of the critical challenges that the SPRFMO, and other similar RFMOs, face is the collection of standardised high-quality data on fishing activities to effectively monitor, assess, and manage these fishery resources. Although the SPRFMO Convention called for the establishment of an observer programme to monitor fishing activities and collect data for scientific and compliance purposes, there were challenges to the implementation given the diversity in targeted fisheries as well as the Organisation's membership.

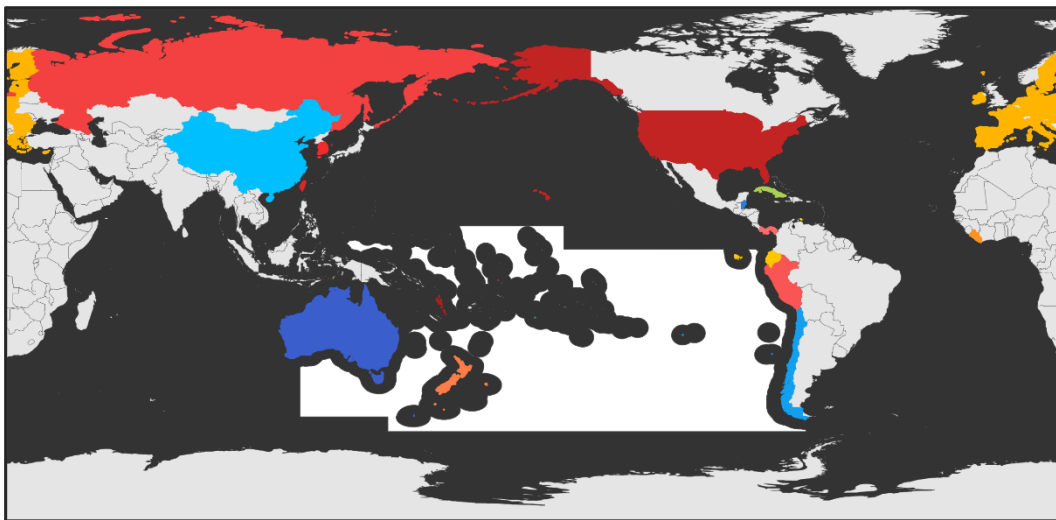


Figure 1. Illustrative map highlighting the parties of the SPRFMO Convention. The white region in the centre of the map represents the SPRFMO Convention Area.

Fisheries of SPRFMO

There are three main fisheries in the SPRFMO Convention Area: bottom fishing for orange roughy and other deepwater water species, mid-water trawling for jack mackerel, and squid jigging for jumbo flying squid. In addition, there are several exploratory fisheries targeting toothfish with longline gear and lobster and crab with potting gears. Each of the different fisheries has a mandated minimum observer coverage level, ranging from 100% in the bottom trawl fisheries to 5% (or 5 full-time observers) in the squid fishery. Exploratory fisheries require 100% observer coverage in line with the precautionary approach.

¹ Contact author: tvidal@sprfmo.int

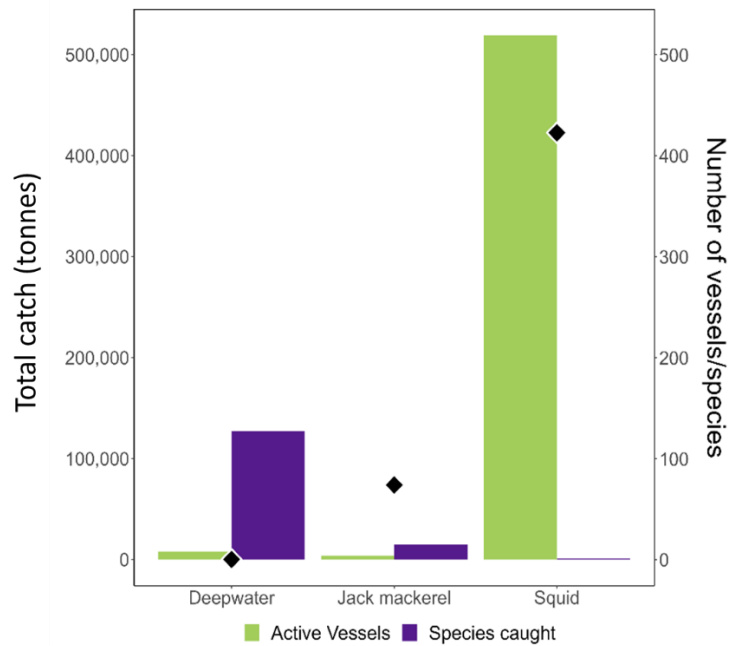


Figure 2. Summary statistics of catch volume (black diamonds, primary y-axis), number of active vessels and species encountered (secondary y-axis) for the three main SPRFMO fisheries in 2021.

At-sea transshipments are an important part of some of the fishing operations in SPRFMO, given the vast area across which fishing activities may occur. The frequency of transshipment events has increased rapidly over the past few years with the expansion of the jumbo flying squid fishery. In 2021, over 400,000 tonnes of jumbo flying squid were transhipped in the Convention Area.

Background to the Observer Programme

At the 6th annual meeting of the SPRFMO Commission (2018), following 2 years of intersessional working group activities, a Conservation and Management Measure (CMM) for the SPRFMO Observer Programme was adopted (CMM 16-2018). This measure, agreed upon by Members, set out the framework for a regional observer programme, complete with minimum requirements for accreditation. The CMM maintained the flexibility and autonomy for Members to utilise observers sourced from national observer programmes and service providers, so long as those programmes are fully accredited by the Commission, as of 1 January 2025. Up until that deadline, Members are permitted to deploy observers from non-accredited national observer programmes.

The Commission established the criteria by which programmes would be evaluated and selected an independent accreditation evaluator to assess Member observer programmes and interested service providers. The evaluation criteria are comprehensive and range from impartiality and integrity to safety standards, training and debriefing requirements, data quality and validation processes, to insurance and liability. Once approved, a programme is accredited for five years.

Since 2018, the programmes of 6 Members and one service provider have been accredited, 2 Members are currently in the process of accreditation, and 2 additional Members have expressed interest in pursuing accreditation in the coming year with the specific aim of deploying observers on carrier vessels to monitor transshipment activities. Furthermore, one Member has an approved alternative observer programme for their artisanal fleet, given the unique challenges associated with observing small vessels.

Challenges and Opportunities

The development of an accredited regional fisheries observer programme is not without its challenges. Progressing conservation measures in RFMOs is often a slow process, as such decisions often reflect complexities that span ecological, socio-economic, and political realms. Decisions are often by consensus and may require extensive international collaboration, including bi-lateral and multi-lateral engagement and compromise. SPRFMO is a relatively young organisation, and the progress made thus far to advance a regionally accredited observer programme speaks to the commitment of Members to implement effective and appropriate monitoring of these high seas fisheries to ensure continued sustainable management and utilisation of the resources.

Although much attention has been focused on the initial accreditation process, accreditation of observer programmes is only one step towards an effective monitoring scheme. Considerations such as implementation of mandatory observer coverage rates, evaluation of data quality and accuracy, and mitigation of programmatic drift due to variability in national programmes, must be at the forefront of the conversations moving forward, especially with respect to accreditation renewal. In addition, continual improvements in the mechanisms for data collection, submission, debriefing/processing, and dissemination must be sought to ensure that the data collected continue to be appropriate and available for scientific and management purposes.

In an RFMO with such diverse membership, collaboration among Members is a valuable resource. For example, the European Union and United States (NOAA) have supported the establishment of the SPRFMO Observer Programme accreditation process, thereby reducing the financial burden on individual Members. Additionally, Members have many forums throughout the year to share their expertise and experience; such opportunities are helping to develop an observer programme that meets the needs of all Members while working towards reducing reporting burdens. For instance, electronic monitoring (EM) and reporting (ER) are gaining traction across the different fisheries. For some Members, EM and ER are already an integral part of their monitoring programmes, whereas for others, learning from the collective experience is expected to aid in the adoption of such technologies.

Conclusion

The development of an accredited fisheries observer programme is an important step towards effectively monitoring and managing the fishery resources in the SPRFMO Convention Area, in a standardized and harmonised manner. Developing a programme that meets the needs of all Members and fisheries and is effective in collecting the necessary data to support science and management will remain a significant and evolving challenge. Collectively, within the SPRFMO and among similar RFMOs and national programmes, the benefits of enhanced collaboration, information sharing, and general willingness to engage in open communication to find appropriate solutions to these challenges will remain invaluable.

Acknowledgements

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