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FAO Deep-Sea Fisheries (DSF) Project
Overview of activities 2022-2026

FAO

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to inform SPRFMO members of the key achievements of the Common Oceans Deep-sea Fisheries (DSF) Project from 2022 to present. The document aims to highlight both the relevance of the work to SPRFMO and how SPRFMO has contributed to these initiatives.

We describe:

- The publications and tools that have been developed by the project, which are freely available online and may benefit SPRFMO members,
- Workshops/symposia that have been held by the project, on important topics such as the ecosystem approach to fisheries management, precautionary approach, deepwater sharks, cross-sectoral interactions with deep-sea fisheries, and climate change, which have all been attended by, and contributed to, by SPRFMO members,
- Support provided by the project to SPRFMO on capacity development initiatives,
- Other initiatives such as supporting and improving data-limited stock assessments, and mapping of deep-sea fisheries in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ)

About the Common Oceans Deep-Sea Fisheries Project

The "Deep-sea Fisheries under the Ecosystem Approach" (DSF) project is one of five child projects of the Global Environmental Facility funded Common Oceans Program Phase II (2022-2027). The DSF project is implemented by FAO and executed by the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), in collaboration with co-financing partners, which include the seven regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) responsible for the management of deep-sea fisheries stocks in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ)[1], as well as other international and national organizations[2]. The objective of the project is to ensure that DSF in the ABNJ are managed under an ecosystem approach that

[1] General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean (GFCM), North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC), Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO), North Pacific Fisheries Commission (NPFC), South East Atlantic Fisheries Organization (SEAFO), Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA) and South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization (SPRFMO)

[2] International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), Southern Indian Ocean Deepsea Fishers Association (SIODFA), International Coalition of Fisheries Association (ICFA), and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) of the United States of America

maintains demersal fish stocks at levels capable of maximizing their sustainable yields and minimizing impacts on biodiversity, with a focus on data-limited stocks, deepwater sharks and vulnerable marine ecosystems.

The technical work of the DSF project is organized around three main components representing three broad areas of work:

- Component 1 concerns the uptake of international instruments
- Component 2 concerns the scientific aspects of DSF management
- Component 3 concerns cross-sectoral interactions with DSF

The DSF Project is guided by a Steering Committee, which is composed of representatives from each partner organization. SPRFMO is represented on the Steering Committee by the Executive Secretary. The Steering Committtee meets once a year. The next Steering Committee meeting will take place from 17-19 March in Tokyo, Japan, which the SPRFMO Executive Secretary will attend in person with the financial support of the project.

Key activities relevant for SPRFMO – 2022-2026

1. PUBLICATIONS AND ONLINE TOOLS

Review of the implementation of the DSF Guidelines

The DSF Project, in collaboration with a panel of experts, has reviewed the implementation of the International Guidelines for the Management of Deep-sea Fisheries in the High Seas (DSF Guidelines) 15 years after its adoption. The review found that the DSF Guidelines has been primarily directed towards the protection of VMEs, resulting in a complete change in the way bottom fisheries are managed. RFMOs have adopted closures to protect areas known or likely to have VMEs, designated bottom fishing areas where bottom fishing has occurred and can continue to take place, required strict protocols to be followed if bottom fishing is planned outside of this area, and introduced “encounter protocols” to protect any newly identified VMEs. Less progress has been made on the sustainable management of many DSF stocks, however, with a generally low uptake of the recommended actions of the DSF Guidelines to adopt measures necessary to ensure their sustainability. In particular, the recommended adoption of fishery-specific, long-term management plans have not been implemented.

The document can be downloaded at: https://openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd0243en

E-learning Course "Strengthening deep-sea fisheries management in areas beyond national jurisdiction"

The DSF Project has produced an introductory e-learning course on the management of DSF in the ABNJ to provide a free, easily accessible tool to support learning on this topic.

The e-learning course encompasses five comprehensive modules, including:

- An introduction to deep sea fisheries, their biological characteristics, current status of stocks, and challenges in their management in the ABNJ.
- An overview of the international policy and legal framework for the management of DSF.
- The role of RFMOs in the management of DSF, explaining the process of their creation, structure, functions, and mandates in the management of DSF in the ABNJ.
- National-level policy and legal considerations, describing key measures included in national policy and legal framework for the sustainable management of DSF and enumerating the steps necessary to establish effective policy and legal framework at a national level.
- The role of monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) and enforcement mechanisms to achieve conservation and sustainable use of deep-sea fisheries.

The course takes approximately 2.5 hours to complete, and upon the subsequent completion of a short, knowledge-based exam, participants receive a certificate of competency.

The free, online course can be accessed at: https://elearning.fao.org/course/view.php?id=1117

Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum (DGroups community)

The DSF Project has established an online community, the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum, hosted on the DGroups knowledge-sharing platform, as a mechanism to facilitate ongoing collaboration, information exchange and discussion among project partners and the wider deep-sea fisheries community. The platform provides a simple, non-commercial and privacy-respecting environment for sharing DSF-related resources and engaging in technical and governance discussions relevant to the Project.

Key functions of the platform include a shared library for documents and knowledge products, a calendar of upcoming meetings and events, and moderated, email-based exchanges to support information sharing and discussion. Once registered, participants can communicate directly with group members via email without needing to access the platform website.

The Technical Forum represents a valuable resource for SPRFMO Members and delegates, providing access to DSF Project outputs, announcements of relevant events and opportunities for cross-RFMO dialogue. SPRFMO delegates are encouraged to join the platform and contribute to ongoing knowledge-sharing activities: Dgroups - Login

2. WORKSHOPS AND SYMPOSIA

Workshop on the Application of the Precautionary Approach to the Management of DSF stocks

The DSF Project convened a virtual workshop to take stock of the application of the precautionary approach (PA) to the management of DSF stocks, and to explore the steps necessary to advance on the development of PA frameworks and/or long-term management plans/harvest strategies for these stocks.

The workshop took place virtually on 15 October 2024, and it was conducted through two identical sessions to accommodate different time zones. There was a total of 87 participants across the two sessions. All partner RFMOs and their Secretariats, as well as the academic, non-governmental and private sector community were represented at the workshop. NAFO contributed to the workshop by presenting its new PA framework, as an example.

Based on the outcomes of this workshop, the drafting of a publication is now underway, which will compile good practices in the application of the precautionary approach to the management of deep-sea stocks, as well as to reducing ecosystem impacts, and collate some recommendations for further guidance. RFMO partners were contacted to submit their good practice examples, and SPRFMO's examples have been received. Global experts in this field will be contacted to review the publication before it is finalized.

More information available on the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum.

Symposium on Applying the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management in ABNJ

The DSF Project, in collaboration with NAFO and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES), organized a Symposium on the Ecosystem Approach to Fisheries Management (EAFM), held from 11 - 13 March 2025 at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.

The Symposium focused on the implementation of the ecological components of EAFM, including retained species, non-retained (discarded) species, and ecosystem considerations. The Symposium was webcast, with interpretation provided in French and Spanish. The agenda, presentations, and recordings of the Symposium can be viewed at: https://eafm-symposium.nafo.int/.

The report will be available soon and a follow-up workshop to discuss future steps is planned for May 2026.

Workshops with the global DSF industry

In April 2024, the DSF Project held a workshop with DSF industry operators from across the globe to explore proactive contributions from industry to sustainable DSF. This was followed up with a second workshop (9-10 May 2025, Barcelona, Spain), which aimed to:

I. Allow an open exchange between the DSF Project and deep-sea fishing operators on the

following topics:

- Fostering collaboration between industry, scientists and managers for sustainable fisheries
- Deepwater sharks reporting and bycatch mitigation
- Vulnerable marine ecosystems
- Socioeconomic aspects of DSF
- Cross-sectoral interactions with DSF

II. Provide a platform for industry experts to exchange insights, address challenges, and propose proactive solutions for sustainable deep-sea fisheries management;

III. Advance discussions on the terms of reference for a potential industry network of sustainable deep-sea fisheries.

A third workshop is planned for April 2026, which will aim to support the establishment of a global network of sustainable DSF operators. Deep-sea fisheries operators active in the SPRFMO area are engaged.

Workshop on deepwater sharks

The DSF Project held a global workshop on deepwater sharks in July 2025 that considered the following four main themes:

Theme 1. Catch Reporting
Theme 2. Reporting formats
Theme 3. Ecological Risk Assessment for deepwater sharks
Theme 4. Fishing for data

The key outcomes of the workshop included the development of a workplan for:

* Reviewing FAO FishStat capture-production data on deepwater sharks

* Developing a global ecological risk assessment for deepwater sharks

* Developing guidance for the use of ASFIS codes for RFMOs

* Exploring of opportunities for industry engagement in data collection plan

* Developing identification materials for deepwater sharks

* Preparing an FAO Technical Report on the outcomes and the actions arising from the workshop

During the workshop there was a recognition that attempting to improve fisheries catch data collection for all species of deepwater sharks simultaneously presents a seemingly insurmountable task. Therefore, a candidate species list, based on broad selection criteria and expert review, was identified

that could be used to advance work on various aspects on deepwater shark catches in the ABNJ. Follow-up work in 2026 will involve the development of RFMO-specific recommendations for improved reporting on the selected 12 species of deepwater sharks, all of which have a global distribution.

More information available on our Common Oceans website, and in the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum.

Workshop on cross-sectoral interactions with deep-sea fisheries

The DSF Project organized a workshop on cross-sectoral cooperation in the ABNJ in September 2025 at FAO HQ, which explored the interactions between deep-sea fisheries and two other sectors in the ABNJ, the biodiversity conservation and deep-sea mining sectors. The Project supported the in-person attendance of the SPRFMO Executive Secretary.

The workshop explored:

- the nature of cross-sectoral interactions from the perspective of deep-sea fisheries,
- the science/methodology required to assess the potential impacts resulting from these interactions,
- the institutional actors, interactions and processes involved and needed to address these impacts effectively and efficiently, and
3. the types and levels of ***cross***-sectoral cooperation mechanisms required to prevent, manage and mitigate these impacts

The workshop outcomes will inform a publication on effective cooperation between dsRFMOs and other key sectors active in the ABNJ to support biodiversity conservation and resource sustainability.

More information available on our Common Oceans website, and in the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum.

Online workshop on climate change

The DSF Project has supported consultancies for NAFO, NEACF, NPFC, and SPRFMO to examine the uptake of climate change considerations by the scientific committees (SC). The reports of these consultancies have now all been completed and submitted to the relevant SC. In the case of SPRFMO, the project's work on climate change was presented at the 13th SC meeting by Dr Ignacio Pita Vaca (SC13-Obs08). The presentation was welcomed by SC who invited the FAO's collaboration with the SPRFMO Climate Change Task Team (CCTT).

The Project then held an online workshop in October 2025, to take stock of the results of the consultancies with the aim to present the common conclusions and recommendations, as well as to identify any next steps required.

All four consultancies agreed that there will be physical and chemical changes in the oceans, and that the consequence of this for RFMOs is that scientific committees may need to receive increased human and

financial resources to be able to address these changes. Actions will include predicting the likely changes in fish distributions and the impacts of these on the wider food web and ecosystem, identifying species of high risk to climate change and ultimately, producing "climate-informed" management advice.

Meanwhile, management committees will need to demonstrate their clear commitment to climate change adaptation and response. This will mean considering the adoption of a climate-change response roadmap, which outlines tactical immediate actions and more strategic, longer-term actions.

Looking forward, workshop participants highlighted the need for capacity building for RFMO decision makers, improved communication among scientists and managers, and guidance for the development of RFMO climate change roadmaps in order to progress with the implementation of their climate change resolutions. They reiterated the incredible value of cross-RFMO dialogue to share challenges and brainstorm solutions.

More information available on our Common Oceans website, and in the Deep-sea Fisheries Technical Forum.

3. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

International Ocean Governance training

FAO, in collaboration with a number of partners, organized an in-person, global ocean governance workshop from 16-18 June 2025 in Rome, Italy. The workshop brought together 50 ocean governance practitioners from around the world to exchange knowledge and experience. Key thematic areas of the three-day workshop included fisheries, blue economy, environment and biodiversity, marine pollution and climate change. The DSF Project supported the participation of ten government officials from countries member to one or more RFMOs partner to the project, including one participant from SPRFMO. See news report of the event here.

Support towards implementation of the SPRFMO Data Working Group Strategy and Workplan (2025–2028)

The DSF Project will provide support to training and capacity building activities under SPRFMO's Data Working Group Strategy and Workplan, which will enable SPRFMO Members to manage and use fisheries data more effectively, enhancing scientific assessments, compliance monitoring, and evidence-based decision-making across the SPRFMO Convention Area. Details of this support are being discussed with the SPRFMO Executive Secretary and will be confirmed in Q2 2026.

4. OTHER INITIATIVES

Data-limited stock assessments

The FAO DSF Project has been engaging with ICES on supporting and improving data-limited stock assessments - bringing assessment scientists together to discuss their assessments with like-minded experts from other areas, and to learn and to develop or revise methods together. The work plan involves four workshops: WKLIFE XIV which took place in the Azores on 1-5 September 2025; a workshop in Tokyo (20-24 April 2026); a workshop in Europe (31 August – 4 September 2026), and the WKLIFE XV meeting (Q4 2026 – exact dates and location TBD). Presentations at WKLIFE XIV included alfonsino & pelagic armourhead assessments in SEAFO and SIOFA by Takehiro Okuda; toothfish assessments in SEAFO, SIOFA, SPRFMO and CCAMLR by Takehiro Okuda & Roberto Sarralde; and red crab in SEAFO by Erich Maletzky. The outputs of this collective work will be collated on an online, open-access digital platform hosted by ICES, which will provide accessible, transparent, and up-to-date tools and information that describe assessment methods with a focus on data-limited stocks. Assessment methods developers working with SPRFMO data-limited stocks can contact the DSF Project for further details.

Mapping of deep-sea fisheries in the ABNJ

Although there are a range of data products that provide global overviews of fishing effort, there is no global overview in a way that provides a consistent view of the spatial extent (distribution) and intensity (effort) of the use of fishing gears that is likely to come into contact with the seafloor in the ABNJ. Individual RFMOs provide spatial data on 'fishery footprints' that reflect areas in which bottom fishing has taken place, however, these do not show the actual gears or levels of fishing effort taking place in those areas. Producing a contemporary and definitive reference for the extent and intensity of deep-sea fishing in the ABNJ would be a useful resource at a time when there is a great deal of interest in this topic. Within this context, the DSF Project has been approaching all its RFMO partners to request for fishing effort data by position and gear for fisheries using bottom contact gears to develop a global map of spatial bottom fishing effort. The DSF Project is grateful for the approval from relevant SPRFMO Members and the support of the SPRFMO Secretariat for providing a mechanism for the release of fishing effort data to the FAO.