



SPRFMO
South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation

14TH MEETING OF THE SPRFMO COMMISSION

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COMM 14 – Obs 03

Briefing to the 14th SPRFMO Commission Meeting

DSCC

Deep Sea Conservation Coalition

Protecting vulnerable marine ecosystems in the South Pacific

Observer briefing to the 14th SPRFMO Commission Meeting, 2026

30 January 2026

Recommendations for the Commission

Noting:

That 2026 represents the 20 year anniversary of the UNGA resolution calling for the protection of vulnerable marine ecosystems, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and deep water corals (UNGA 61/105 (2006));/

The entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement on January 17 of this year, underlining that the protection of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction is a responsibility and a shared task of all States and regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), and

The Adoption of a seamount resolution by 95% of IUCN State members and 99% of civil society members at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in October 2025, and

In light of the upcoming 2026 United Nations Bottom Fisheries Review, including consideration of a DOALOS commissioned report on the impacts of bottom fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks,

the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) recommends to the Commission that it:

1. Initiates a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts by 2026, in line with the recently adopted IUCN [Resolution 8.032](#) on protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems, and actively supports this transition during the UN General Assembly bottom fishing review at the end of 2026.
2. Participates in the 2026 United Nations Bottom Fisheries Review, including consideration of a DOALOS commissioned report on the impacts of bottom fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks.
3. Rejects New Zealand's request to increase bottom fishing encounter thresholds in COMM14-Prop07 (Proposal to amend CMM 03 Bottom Fishing).
4. Implements a monthly reporting regime for any bycatch of VME indicator taxa, regardless of whether the encounter threshold is exceeded.
5. Lists all identified VMEs on Annex 9, and task the Scientific Committee to advise the Commission accordingly.
6. Applies the precautionary approach to the Westpac Bank (South-West Challenger) and issue a zero TAC for the fishery, and issue one year TACs for all areas with no carryovers.
7. Welcomes the ongoing Task Team investigating Chile's proposal to close the Sala y Gómez - Nazca Ridges areas to fishing.
8. Progresses actions on climate change.
9. Ensures that SPRFMO is ready for implementation of the BBNJ Agreement.

DSCC welcomes the submission to be filed by Greenpeace on the recent encounter.

1. Initiate a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts by 2026, in line with the recently adopted IUCN Resolution 8.032, and actively support this transition during the UN General Assembly bottom fishing review at the end of 2026.

During the World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi in 2025, IUCN Resolution 8.032 'Protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive practices' (attached) was passed. The resolution calls on all State Members, individually and through relevant RFMO/As and IFBs, to:

- a. **fully implement United Nations General Assembly resolutions** (including 61/105 (2006), 64/72 (2009), 66/68 (2011), 71/123 (2016) and 77/118 (2022) that call for the protection of VMEs, including seamounts, cold-water corals and hydrothermal vents in areas beyond national jurisdiction from significant adverse impacts caused by destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling, recognising the immense importance and value of deep-sea ecosystems and the biodiversity and geodiversity they contain;
- b. **support and advocate for the protection of seamounts**, based on the best available science, and interconnected seamounts (networks) for species associated with seamounts, such as marine mammals, elasmobranchs, as well as associated VMEs and pelagic fish stocks, at RFMO/As and other relevant IFBs;
- c. **support and activate a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts** at the United Nations General Assembly bottom fishing review at the end of 2026; and
- d. **support, generate, share and collate scientific, technical and cultural knowledge on the functions and importance of VMEs** to facilitate regionally appropriate conservation and to understand their heritage and to make inventories of seamounts that can support their effective protection.

This is a significant and impactful resolution, supported by multiple SRPFMO members. The DSCC calls on the Commission to direct implementation of the IUCN Resolution within the agreed timeframe.

2. Participation in the 2026 United Nations Bottom Fisheries Review, including consideration of a DOALOS commissioned report on the impacts of bottom fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks

Since the adoption of resolution 61/105 in 2006, the General Assembly has been monitoring how States and regional fisheries management organizations and arrangements (RFMO/As) address the impact of bottom fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks. Since then, it has conducted reviews of actions taken by States and RFMO/As in response to its resolutions on sustainable fisheries of 2009, 2011, 2016 and 2022. Following its 2022 review, the General Assembly decided to conduct, in 2026, a further review of the actions taken by States and regional fisheries management organizations and arrangements, with a view to ensuring the effective implementation of the measures therein and to make further recommendations.

The General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to prepare a report similar in scope, length and detail to his report to the General Assembly at its seventy-fifth session, in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and with the assistance of an expert consultant to provide an overview of the impacts of bottom fisheries on vulnerable marine ecosystems and the long-term sustainability of deep-sea fish stocks for the updated report of the Secretary-General on the actions taken by States and regional fisheries management organizations.

The DSCC urges SRPFMO parties to actively engage in the UN bottom fisheries review including active participation in the scheduled UN Bottom Fisheries Workshop on 13-14 July 2026.

3. Reject New Zealand's request to increase bottom fishing encounter thresholds in COMM14-Prop07 (Proposal to amend CMM 03 Bottom Fishing)

Agenda item 6a: Proposal to amend current CMMs (COMM14-Prop07)

New Zealand proposes to increase the weight thresholds in Table 6A in CMM-03 for Phylum Porifera (sponges) from 25 kg to 50 kg; Scleractinia (stony corals) from 60 kg to 80 kg; Gorgonian Alcyonacea (Seafan Octocorals) from 15 kg to 35 kg; Zoantharia (Hexacorals) from 10 kg to 12 kg.

Also proposed for increase are the multiple weight thresholds in Table 6B:

Phylum Porifera (sponges) from 5 kg to 15 kg; Scleractinia (stony corals) from 5 kg to 30 kg; Antipatharia (black coral) from 1 kg to 3 kg; Gorgonian Alcyonacea (Seafan octocorals) from to 1 kg to 5 kg and Actiniaria (anemones) from to 5 kg to 7 kg.

The intended purpose of thresholds is to trigger a response (the encounter protocol) when vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) are encountered, implementing UNGA resolution 61/105 (2006) para. 83 (d) calling on States and RFMOs to *“require vessels flying their flag to cease bottom fishing activities in areas where, in the course of fishing operations, vulnerable marine ecosystems are encountered, and to report the encounter so that appropriate measures can be adopted in respect of the relevant site.”* This is, as is stated by the preamble to CMM 03, “in order to sustainably manage fish stocks and protect VMEs”.

No recommendation has been made by the SC to revise the thresholds. As required by the Convention, thresholds must be derived applying the precautionary approach, and should take into account catchability: the fact that only a small fraction of VMEs destroyed by trawling are retained in the net and brought onboard the bottom trawler. SC7-DW21_rev1 Pitcher et al 2019 noted that “[A] trawl catch of 250 kg of corals could scale to a seabed contacts of more than 33-104 t of corals on the seabed”. Similarly, in 2021, New Zealand’s paper SC9-DW10 said that selection of a final VME [indicator] taxa threshold for bottom trawls is a somewhat arbitrary process. It should not be arbitrary: it should be based on a scientific process designed to signal when a VME has been encountered, taking into account catchability and the precautionary approach.

The proposal from New Zealand would reverse progress made by the Commission in 2020 and 2021 in adopting more precautionary thresholds. It would also increase the risk of SAIs on VMEs by failing to close and assess areas when significant quantities of

VME indicator taxa were trawled up, such as the VME encounter by a New Zealand trawler in 2020.

The DSCC calls on the SPRFMO Commission to reject New Zealand’s proposal to reduce encounter thresholds in Tables 6A and 6B of CMM 03-2025.

4. SPRFMO should implement reporting of any bycatch of VME indicator taxa, regardless of whether the encounter threshold is exceeded, on a monthly basis.

It is inadequate that only VME bycatch over the encounter threshold is reported to all Members. Implementation of reporting of **any** bycatch of VME indicator taxa, regardless of whether the encounter threshold is exceeded, should be implemented by SPRFMO and other RFMOs. RFMOs face challenges in accurately predicting VME indicator taxa occurrence due to the highly variable and patchy nature of VME indicator taxa (e.g., cold-water corals and sponges), compounded by limited data availability, and low catchability of taxa in fishing gear. Comprehensive reporting to members and observers of all VME indicator taxa bycatch records across SPRFMO deep-sea fisheries would improve understanding of VME indicator taxa distribution, impacts on VMEs, seamount connectivity and catchability of taxa.

Observer data and logbooks from bottom fisheries should be utilised to record all occurrences and quantities of VME indicator species catch and bycatch, regardless of bycatch weight. This approach aligns with recent recommendations from the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) to the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC) (ICES, 2024). Increased data availability would enhance the predictive accuracy of species distribution and habitat suitability models, which currently show limited reliability at seamount spatial scales in the high seas.

The FAO Deep Sea Guidelines state (para 34) that States should submit the data they collect on deep-sea fishing to that RFMO/A at the appropriate resolution for stock

assessment **and evaluation of impacts of fisheries on VMEs**, which States in turn should submit aggregated data to FAO. States and RFMO/As also should ensure regular and independent reviews of the data and impact assessments (Para 83 of the FAO Guidelines).

The FAO Guidelines also recommend that States and RFMOs should develop data collection and research programmes to assess the impact of fishing on target and non-target species and their environment. (Para 21(iii)).

Already, SPRFMO [CMM 02-2022](#) on data standards (para 2(d)) provides that the Secretariat of SPRFMO is to compile and disseminate accurate and complete observer data to ensure that the best scientific evidence is available, while maintaining confidentiality where appropriate.

SPRFMO should make these data publicly available to support the work of the Scientific Committee and other interested parties. Storing this information in a database accessible to researchers globally can help address key knowledge gaps and support more informed management decisions for seamounts and other VMEs globally.

DSCC recommends SPRFMO strengthen its encounter protocol by implementing reporting of any bycatch of VME indicator taxa on a monthly basis.

Providing this information is consistent with the BBNJ Part IV environmental impact assessment (EIA) requirements and in particular the transparency requirements in articles 29 and public notification requirements of article 31(1)(e) and the requirement in article 32(4) that public notification and consultation be inclusive and transparent.

The DSCC recommends that SPRFMO strengthens its encounter protocol by implementing reporting of any bycatch of VME indicator taxa, regardless of whether the encounter threshold is exceeded, on a monthly basis.

5. List all identified VMEs on Annex 9.

SPRFMO [CMM 03-2025](#) requires in para 49 that, “Where the Commission has identified areas as vulnerable marine ecosystems, the Commission shall: (a) Register the VME in Annex 9 of this CMM; and (b) Ensure the Management Area

boundaries established in paragraph 14 and Annex 4 of this CMM are updated to exclude the VME from areas open to fishing.”

Three years after its inclusion, this has yet to be implemented. Annex 9 remains empty, despite the known presence of seamount and features covering 25% of the SPRFMO area and strong evidence of VME habitats through bottom trawl bycatch: the 2020 and 2024 New Zealand encounters on the Lord Howe Rise are two examples.¹

Further, CMM 03-2025 defines VMEs in paragraph 3 as “a marine ecosystem that has the characteristics referred to in paragraph 42 of, and elaborated in the Annex to, the FAO Deep-sea Fisheries Guidelines.” DSCC recommends that a process is initiated to list known VMEs, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold water corals, on a regular basis i.e. through a standing Scientific Committee agenda item.

Victorero et al. (2024) in their paper for SC-12, *Integrating Science and Policy for recognising Seamounts as Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems*, [SC12-Obs03](#), demonstrated strong scientific support for classifying seamounts as VMEs, with surveyed seamounts meeting at least four of the five VME criteria without exception. In addition, at Commission 13, DSCC submitted a [paper](#) by Dr Victorero explaining why seamounts in the Louisville Seamount Chain and Tasman Rises, evaluated according to the VME criteria of the FAO Guidelines qualify as VMEs.

The DSCC also recommends that the addition of VMEs to Annex 9 be based on the application of a suite of complementary scientific methods, consistent with UNGA resolution 77/118, paragraph 214. This paragraph explicitly recognises that different types of marine scientific research, including seabed mapping, mapping of VMEs using information from the fishing fleet, on-site camera observations from remotely operated vehicles, benthic ecosystem modelling, comparative benthic studies, and

predictive modelling, have resulted in the identification of areas where VMEs are known or are likely to occur.

Accordingly, DSCC recommends that the identification of VMEs for inclusion in Annex 9 allow and encourage the use of multiple, fit-for-purpose scientific approaches, supported by transparent and peer-reviewed analytical frameworks. For example, the imagery-based expert framework developed by Baco et al. (2023) provides a peer-reviewed, standardised, and transparent approach for identifying and classifying VMEs from imagery data. The framework integrates both quantitative and qualitative assessment steps to operationalise the five VME criteria set out in the FAO Deep-sea Fisheries Guidelines (2008), and illustrates how robust imagery-based methods can support consistent and evidence-based VME identification. We note Australia's CMM 03 proposal [COMM14-PROP06](#) and reinforce the importance of SPRFMO implementing adopted CMMs while also noting that in the implementation of CMM03 Paragraph 19 the boundaries need updating in recognition of VME evidence identified since they were drafted in 2023.

The DSCC calls on the SPRFMO Commission to include a specific workplan item tasking the Scientific Committee to identify, using the best available scientific evidence, areas that meet the VME criteria per CMM 03-2025, and to recommend their inclusion in Annex 9, as required under paragraph 49.

6. Apply the precautionary approach to the Westpac Bank (South-West Challenger) and issue a zero TAC for the fishery, and issue one year TACs for all areas.

Proposal [COMM14-Prop08](#) seeks to amend CMM 03a Deepwater Species, proposing to set TACs for three years: 2026, 2027 and 2028. This goes further than the SC Advice for precautionary TACs and that of [SC-11](#) which found that “Accumulation of catch limits over two, three, or four years, may increase the overall fishing footprint and relative impact on VME indicator taxa depending on how future fishing activity takes place; however, the total impact of this on the predicted abundance of VME indicator

taxa has not been determined.” (para. 153). This advice does not justify three year TACs with 100% carryovers.

According to paragraph 20, the fishing vessels can carry forward up to “100% of their allocated catch limit from the year/prior” and under paragraph 22, “under caught orange roughy allocation will automatically be carried forward to the following year’s allocation for all areas”. That this now applies for three years, exacerbates the problem discussed in previous years: that more intense fishing may well mean more intense damage to VMEs. [SC-13](#) recommended that “The SC noted that if the above advice is adopted, then no changes to the TACs currently outlined in CMM 03a-2025 would be required.”(147) They did not recommend a 3 year TAC with 100% carry over.

The last stock assessments for the Louisville Ridge and Tasman Sea areas were presented to the 2022 SC and no new stock assessments are due to be undertaken for the Challenger Plateau (which includes Westpac Bank) until after 2028 - during which time fishing would continue. So now on the basis of clearly inadequate data, it is proposed to have 3 year TACs with 100% carryovers. This is not precautionary.

New Zealand is proposing that the TAC for Westpac Bank is also set for the 2026-2028 period, “in order to align with the dates for the other areas.” Alignment with dates for the other areas is not the aim; sustainability is the aim. And no new stock assessments are due to be undertaken for the Challenger Plateau (which includes Westpac Bank) until after 2028 - during which time fishing would continue.

As DSCC and ECO-NZ noted at SC-15, orange roughy fisheries have a history of over-optimistic stock assessments that are overturned as new information becomes available, often resulting in large reductions to catch limits (SC Report para 148).

The results in SPRFMO and elsewhere provides numerous examples of over-fishing of orange roughy resulting in the loss of spawning aggregations including in the South-West Challenger fishery which includes the Westpac Bank. Only the Volcano Feature had a spawning aggregation of orange roughy found on it in the most recent research survey, and no spawning aggregations were found inside the New Zealand zone where

spawning had been historically found. Further concerns on orange roughy catches are set out in SC13-Obs05.

Given the absence of new stock assessments, the current orange roughy catch limits are not precautionary. Three year TACs give no opportunity to review the TACs, and are especially risky when a member can carry forward 100% of the last year's un-caught catch limit (para. 20). Additional risks exist to the stability of both target and non-target stocks, including chondrichthyans (including sharks) and non-roughy teleosts; risks that have not been considered by the SC.

An additional issue is that the current CMM03a now allows catches to take two years of allowed catch limit in one year due to the carry-over provision which was adopted last year. This means the cumulative impact of catches on VMEs and other species could be much greater, with the impacts on sharks not considered.

The DSCC urges that one year TACs be issued for all areas with no carryovers and that a zero TAC be issued for the Southwest Challenger Bank (Westpac Bank) due to the uncertainties in the assessment and the status of the stock.

It follows that new and exploratory bottom fisheries should automatically be excluded on such features.

7. Support members' efforts to protect known VMEs: Salas y Gómez and Nazca Ridges

Agenda item 6b Proposals for new CMMs

DSCC welcomes [Decision 17-2024](#) and the work of the Task Team and recommends expeditious formulation of measures to preserve its biodiversity and fishing resources in the Convention Area.

The DSCC welcomes the progress made by the Task team for the Salas y Gomez and Nazca Ridges Area and calls on Members and CNCPs not to allow continued potting or other fishing in these areas.

8. Progress actions on climate change

The DSCC welcomes the Commission's adoption of [Decision 13-2023-on Climate Change](#) and the work of the Climate Change Task Team within the framework of the SC. We urge the Commission to act on the recommendation of the Task Team and endorse the proposed workplan activities for Climate Change Research and provide funding for them.

It is important that all new Measures and Decisions include climate impact risk assessment, that a process to review all existing Measures and Decisions on a regular basis is established, that catch limits and other fishery controls are sufficiently precautionary to reflect uncertainty and risk, and that efforts are strengthened to ensure the maintenance of biodiversity of the SPRFMO area including vulnerable marine ecosystems.

The DSCC urges the Commission to acknowledge the urgent need for this work, including consideration of the impact of ocean acidification, and ensure that the Task Team and resultant program of work within the Scientific Committee is fully funded.

9. Ensure that SPRFMO is ready for the implementation of the BBNJ Agreement

The DSCC in 2025 in [COMM13-Obs03](#) has provided a briefing suggesting that SPRFMO takes steps to ensure that it is ready for the entry into force of the BBNJ Agreement. This includes consultation and cooperation with the BBNJ Agreement and with other RFMOs and bodies, and responding to BBNJ requests with respect to area-based management tools under Part III of the BBNJ Agreement and with respect to environmental impact assessments under Part IV of the BBNJ Agreement.

BBNJ is now in force, and the first BBNJ Commission of the Parties (COP1) must take place before the next SPRFMO Commission (it must be convened before January 17, 2027 under BBNJ article 47). It is urgent for SPRFMO to amend its procedures to respond to BBNJ consultation requests, receive, distribute and respond as necessary to BBNJ information including notifications from the Clearing-House Mechanism (and any Interim Clearing-House Mechanism) and implement measures to be responsive to and consistent with time-bound requests particularly on Part III (on area-based

management tools including marine protected areas) and Part IV (on environmental impact assessments) as well as Part V (capacity building and the transfer of marine technology) and marine genetic resources in Part II.

The DSCC urges the Commission to amend its procedures to be ready for BBNJ requests and initiatives and for its ABMT and EIA procedures in particular to be amended to be BBNJ compliant.

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Attachment: [IUCN Resolution 8.032 Protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive practices](#)

8.032 Protecting seamounts and vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive practices

RECALLING IUCN Resolution 3.066 *The protection of seamounts, deep-sea corals and other vulnerable deep-sea habitats from destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling, on the high seas* (Bangkok, 2004);

REMEMBERING that many seamounts are the result of unique geological processes on planet Earth and that they contain a rich geodiversity with a geological heritage that we must acknowledge and conserve;

RECALLING ALSO United Nations General Assembly Resolutions 61/105 (2006) and 64/72 (2009) that committed States to closing areas to bottom fishing in areas beyond national jurisdiction where vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) such as seamounts are known or likely to occur, unless conservation and management measures have been established and effectively implemented to prevent significant adverse impacts on VMEs, acknowledging different regional ecological characteristics, including areas without seamounts or deep-sea features, such as shallow shelf seas and hyper-arid marine environments;

RECOGNISING the progress made since 2004 in protecting VMEs from damage caused by bottom trawling, particularly through the efforts of regional fisheries management organisations and arrangements (RFMO/As), which have closed some seamounts, sections of oceanic ridge systems and other areas where VMEs are known or likely to occur;

NOTING the requirement in Article 194, paragraph 5, of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to take measures “necessary to protect and preserve rare or fragile ecosystems as well as the habitat of depleted, threatened or endangered species and other forms of marine life”;

NOTING that the United Nations General Assembly, in Resolution 79/145, recognised “the immense importance and value of deep-sea ecosystems and the biodiversity they contain”;

ACKNOWLEDGING the 2021 United Nations Second World Ocean Assessment’s acknowledgement that “fishing, especially bottom trawling, constitutes the greatest current threat to seamount ecosystems”

NOTING that the United Nations General Assembly, in Resolution 79/145, emphasised the need for full and urgent implementation by all States and relevant RFMO/As of their commitments;

RECALLING FURTHER the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) adopted by the 15th meeting of the Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP15), and the Agreement under UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) to enter in force in January 2026; and

NOTING ALSO the importance of protecting VMEs, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold-water corals, across all RFMO regulatory areas, the Antarctic Southern Ocean under the Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), and all areas beyond national jurisdiction;

The IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025, at its session in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates:

1. REQUESTS the Director General and Commissions, in implementing the IUCN Programme 2026–2029, to promote this Resolution in engagement with RFMOs, multilateral agreements and other relevant legal instruments, including CCAMLR and regional seas conventions and frameworks, and relevant global, regional, subregional and sectoral bodies (IFBs) and individual States; and

2. CALLS on all State Members, individually and through relevant RFMO/As and IFBs, to:

a. fully implement United Nations General Assembly resolutions (including 61/105 (2006), 64/72 (2009), 66/68 (2011), 71/123 (2016) and 77/118 (2022) that call for the protection of VMEs, including seamounts, cold-water corals and hydrothermal vents in areas beyond national jurisdiction from significant adverse impacts caused by destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling, recognising the immense importance and value of deep-sea ecosystems and the biodiversity and geodiversity they contain;

b. support and advocate for the protection of seamounts, based on the best available science, and interconnected seamounts (networks) for species associated with seamounts, such as marine mammals, elasmobranchs, as well as associated VMEs and pelagic fish stocks, at RFMO/As and other relevant IFBs;

c. support and activate a transition away from bottom trawling on seamounts at the United Nations General Assembly bottom fishing review at the end of 2026; and

d. support, generate, share and collate scientific, technical and cultural knowledge on the functions and importance of VMEs to facilitate regionally appropriate conservation and to understand their heritage and to make inventories of seamounts that can support their effective protection.