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**REGIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT: VIRTUAL DECISION MAKING IN A PANDEMIC -
INFORMATION PAPER**

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Regional fisheries management: Virtual decision making in a pandemic

Information Paper

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the management of global fisheries. An analysis conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) revealed that 44% of Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) believe that the pandemic will negatively impact the sustainable management of fish stocks (FAO, 2020). Reasons included, *inter alia*, the lack of physical meetings and the decline of inspections and observer coverage (FAO, 2020).

It is highly likely that travel bans and border closures will continue throughout 2021, further impacting on the ability of RFMOs to implement their conservation and management responsibilities. For example, the Australian government's budget forecast assumes that international travel does not resume until the end of 2021 (Australia 2020).

This poses significant challenges to effective management, particularly in transboundary fisheries that require complex and regular negotiations to adopt, implement and monitor conservation and management measures. This commentary summarizes the different responses of RFMOs and Regional Organizations towards the global COVID-19 pandemic.

RFMO responses

Travel restrictions and border closures have stopped face-to-face meetings. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many meetings have been postponed, cancelled or held online through platforms such as Zoom. Out of 13 RFMOs and Regional Organisations surveyed, only one cancelled its annual meeting, while three postponed to a later date. As represented in the appendix, most of the organizations are either conducting meetings via video conference or are progressing via online correspondence. However, moving meetings online constrains the ability of member states to work effectively on important issues and negotiate contentious decisions.

Online meetings are mostly limited to a few hours per day, with the rest of the discussions occurring in online discussion platforms. Because of these time constraints, agendas are reduced to the most important topics (FAO, 2020). Concerns have also been raised around the capacity of members to properly analyse certain information in the online meeting format, resulting in the deferral of important decisions. For example, the members of the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission have agreed to not address complicated topics and decided that measures that will expire in 2020 will be extended until 2021 (FAO, 2020a).

Members of RFMOs are also concerned with confidentiality issues and the limitation of diplomatic exchange on online platforms (FAO, 2020b). Many delegations have also expressed strong concerns about internet bandwidth, connectivity stability and technical constraints restricting their ability to participate in online meetings (WCPFC, 2020a)). Such technical issues are especially prevalent in developing countries and further limit their ability to effectively engage in important discussions.

The scheduling of virtual meetings can be difficult due to the global membership of some RFMOs. Most delegations appear to support the scheduling of virtual meetings during the

business hours of the secretariat, located in the region where the fishery is located (see Figure 1). Applied consistently, this secretariat scheduling approach ensures fairness as it should enable most adjacent coastal States to participate during business hours and minimises impacts on distant water fishing States that are party to multiple RFMOs.

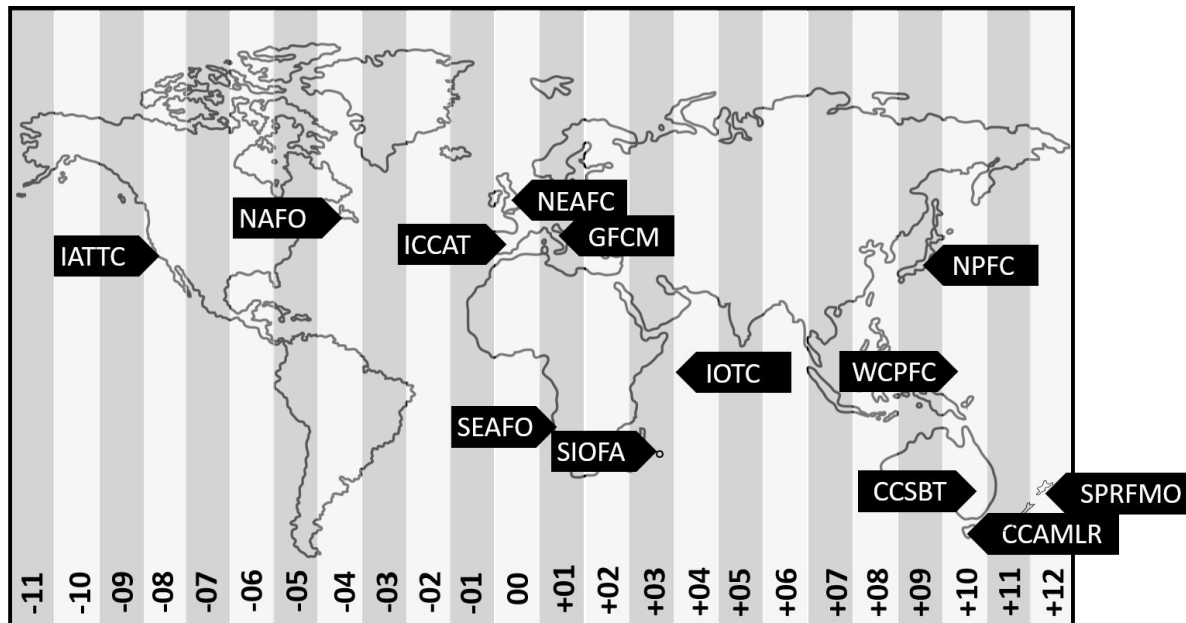


Figure 1: Schematic map with RFMO and regional organization secretariat locations and time zones.

There is no apparent need for RFMOs to amend their rules of procedure to accommodate online meetings, although in some cases it may be useful to clarify procedures and to increase options for electronic decision-making. For example, the IOTC sought confirmation from their members concerning the conduct of online meetings and adapted Rules of Procedure. RFMO conventions typically require at least an annual commission meeting and may specify that principles of “cost-effectiveness” apply regarding the “frequency, duration and scheduling” of meetings. However, there is nothing in the typical wording that would preclude a virtual (online) meeting using a video-conferencing application or a meeting via correspondence. Decision-making by consensus and by vote can both be accommodated in an online meeting format. If desirable, voting by show of hands is able to be substituted with a roll-call in a number of the organizations surveyed (WCPFC, SPRFMO, CCAMLR).

Travel restrictions and border closures also impact on the ability of States and RFMOs to implement monitoring, control and surveillance programmes. Many countries have closed their ports, which has reduced the number of port inspections (FAO, 2020b), while requirements to carry fisheries observers have been temporarily suspended in many fisheries due to logistical difficulties and health and safety concerns (FAO, 2020b). In the WCPFC, the requirements for at-sea transshipment observers and purse seine observers has been suspended until 15th of February 2021 (WCPFC, 2020b). The IOTC had also suspended their observer program until further notice.

On a positive note, virtual meetings may improve accessibility for observers, and for smaller delegations with limited budgets, thereby increasing the transparency of meetings. However anecdotal evidence suggests that participants still tend to prefer meeting face-to-face. It is notable that most of the surveyed organizations are still intending to resume face-to-face meeting when it is safe to do so.

In addition to fisheries, the travel bans and other covid-related restrictions are impacting other decision-making processes that have critical implications for equity on the global ocean. Another example is the development of a new internationally legally binding instrument for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biodiversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ agreement), under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The development of this agreement has been decades in the making, and the fourth and final round was scheduled to be held in March 2020 but postponed due to the pandemic until 2021. To keep the momentum going for the treaty, the President of the intergovernmental conference is convening platforms where delegations and observers can exchange views on questions that are being posed by a Facilitator and post comments and proposals or pose questions to other delegations. These are occurring in the form of written exchanges taking place in an online forum moderated by the UN Division on Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea. While these are specifically not attempting to be a substitute for negotiations (i.e. these discussion platforms are explicitly not negotiations) – they do provide an opportunity to keep the momentum going and enable delegations to better understand views and discuss proposals. Complementing these written forums, several workshops are being convened (by governments and observers and NGOs) to enable delegates to discuss the issues (often under Chatham House Rules and with limited numbers of observers and facilitated by governments).

Conclusion

Our study finds that most of the organisations that are holding virtual meetings, are holding most meetings during the business hours of the secretariat. The two that are not holding meetings during secretariat business hours are CCAMLR, which is circumpolar and is holding meetings outside secretariat business hours due to its 24hr coverage, and SPRFMO, which is rotating meetings during different times. While most RFMOS are now conducting virtual meetings or preparing to, this virtual format limits the ability of RFMOs to effectively discuss and negotiate important issues concerning sustainable fisheries management. While some organizations have already made urgent decisions, RFMOs need to develop new decision-making procedures that can work effectively in the ongoing COVID-normal context that is likely to continue into 2022 and potentially beyond.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix 1: Meeting arrangements of the 13 RFMOs and Regional Organization

Acronym	RFMO	COVID-meetings	Meeting information
CCAMLR	Commission for the Conservation for Antarctic Marine Living Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Working Group on Fish Stock Assessment: postponed - Scientific Committee working groups: online informal discussion - Standing Committee on Implementation and Compliance: online informal discussions - Standing Committee on Administration and Finance: online informal discussions - Scientific committee meeting: online formal meeting - Commission meeting: online formal meeting 	<p>Scheduled time: outside secretariat business hours</p> <p>Duration: 4 h</p>
GFCM	General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technical meetings and webinars: conducted online. - High-Level meeting to reflect on the new GFCM strategy: conducted online. - All statutory meetings and working groups: postponed until 2021, however technical preparatory work for working groups, as well as technical assistance activities are being conducted online whenever possible. 	NA
NAFO	Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization	<p>The following meetings were held virtually this year:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - NAFO Standing Committee on International Control (STACTIC) Intersessional Meeting - NAFO Scientific Council and its Standing Committees Meeting - NAFO Joint Commission–Scientific Council Working Group on Ecosystem Approach Framework to Fisheries Management (WG-EAFFM) Meeting - NAFO Joint Commission–Scientific Council Working Group on Risk-based Management Strategies (WG-RBMS) Meeting - NAFO 42nd Annual Meeting - Joint NAFO/ICES (International Council for the Exploration of the Sea) <i>Pandalus</i> Assessment Group Meeting - NAFO Scientific Council Working Group on Ecosystem Science and Assessment (WG-ESA) Meeting - NAFO Commission Ad Hoc Working Group on Bycatches, Discards and Selectivity (WG-BDS) in the NAFO Regulatory Area Meeting 	NA
NEAFC	Northeast Atlantic Fisheries Commission	All meetings are online	<p>Scheduled time: secretariat business hours</p> <p>Duration: NA</p>
NPFC	North Pacific Fisheries Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meeting of the Technical Working Group on Chub Mackerel Stock Assessment: online - SSC BF-ME meeting: online 	<p>Scheduled time: secretariat business hours</p> <p>Duration: 4 hours</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SSC PS meeting: online - Scientific Committee meeting: online - Annual meetings: postponed to February 2021 	
SEAFO	Southeast Atlantic Fisheries Organization	All meetings are progressing via internal correspondence	----
SIOFA	Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement	All annual meetings were and will be organised through a mix of correspondence and online video conference.	Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: 120min - video conferences
SPRFMO	South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scientific Committee meeting: online - Commission meeting: online 	Scheduled time: Scientific Committee meeting rotated among 3 different times of each time zone Duration: NA
CCSBT	Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna	All scheduled meetings for 2020 were conducted online and with full agendas. Pre-meeting discussions by correspondence were conducted for some agenda items to reduce the amount of time required for video conference discussions.	<p>Scheduled time: Chosen as the best compromise for Member participants and invited experts. Science meetings started between 5am and midnight for these participants, Compliance and Commission meetings started between 7:30am and 6:30pm for these participants. Science meetings were mostly inside Secretariat business hours. Compliance and Extended Commission meetings were mostly outside Secretariat business hours.</p> <p>Daily duration of video conference sessions: 3 hours for science meetings & 4 hours for main part of Compliance and Extended Commission meetings. Science meetings shorter duration due to late start for some participants</p>
IATTC	Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Permanent Working Group on Fleet Capacity: postponed - Meeting of the <i>Ad Hoc</i> Working Group on FADs: postponed - Meeting of the Working Group on Bycatch: postponed - Workshop on Management Strategy Evaluation (MSE) for tropical tunas: postponed - Scientific Advisory Committee meeting: online 	Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: 3 hours



ICCAT	International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Scientific Committee Meeting: cancelled (advice adopted by correspondence)- Commission annual meeting: cancelled (replaced by a correspondence based decision-making process)- Meeting of the Working Group for the development of an Online Reporting System: postponed- Symposium of the Atlantic Ocean Tropical Tuna Tagging Programme (AOTTP): replaced by an online Symposium- Other 14 intersessional working groups: online	Scheduled time: online meetings - secretariat business hours Duration: 4:30 hours
IOTC	Indian Ocean Tuna Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Standing Committee on Administration and Finance: correspondence- Compliance Committee meeting: correspondence- All the other meetings are online.	Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: 2 hours – 4 hours
WCPFC	Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Meeting of the WCPFC FAD Management Options IWG: correspondence- All the other meetings are online.	Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Note that SC16 re-scheduled one of its six meeting days to better suit the European Union delegation (4pm Pohnpei / 7am Brussel), following repeated complaints by the EU. The EU is the only WCPFC member that is not located in the Pacific region and demanded that some of the meeting be re-scheduled during EU business hours (WCPFC, 2020c). The Commission in December has similarly responded to EU complaints. Duration: 4 hours

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