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Current developments in marine policy and treaties

Regional fisheries management: Virtual decision making in a pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The global COVID-19 pandemic is impacting on the fisheries sector and posing significant challenges for the management of transboundary fisheries. Due to travel bans and border closures, regional organizations are not able to hold face-to-face meetings. This commentary provides a summary of the meeting procedures of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and Regional Organizations during the global pandemic. Most organizations have transitioned to online platforms and are holding virtual meetings. These online meetings impose significant challenges concerning sustainable fisheries management, such as limited discussions and negotiations on important issues. Thus to continue their work effectively, these organizations need to develop new decision-making procedures that are more resilient in the upcoming future.

1. 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 [1]. Reasons included, inter alia, the lack of physical meetings and the decline of inspections and observer coverage [1].

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 will not resume until the end of 2021 [2].

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.

2. 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 Table 1, 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 [1]. 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 [4].

Members of RFMOs are also concerned with confidentiality issues and the limitation of diplomatic exchange on online platforms [5]. Many delegations have also expressed strong concerns about internet bandwidth, connectivity stability and technical constraints restricting their ability to participate in online meetings [6]. 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...
Table 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 | 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 | Scheduled time: outside secretariat business hours Duration: 4 h |
| GFCM    | General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean | 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 | The following meetings were held virtually this year: 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-EAFMF) 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) Pandalus 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 | Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: NA |
| NPFC    | North Pacific Fisheries Commission | Meeting of the Technical Working Group on Chub Mackerel Stock Assessment: online SSC BF-ME meeting: online SSC PS meeting: online Scientific Committee meeting: online Annual meetings: postponed to February 2021 | Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: 4 h |
| 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: 120 min - video conferences |
| SPRFMO  | South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organization | 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. | 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. Daily duration of video conference sessions: 3 h for science meetings and 4 h for the main part of Compliance and Extended Commission meetings. Science meetings had a shorter duration due to the late start for some participants | |
| IATTC   | Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission | Permanent Working Group on Fleet Capacity: postponed Meeting of the Ad Hoc 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 h |
| ICCAT   | International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna | 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 | Scheduled time: online meetings - secretariat business hours Duration: 4:30 h |

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secretariat, located in the region where the fishery is located (see Fig. 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.

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 [5], while requirements to carry fisheries observers have been temporarily suspended in many fisheries due to logistical difficulties and health and safety concerns [5]. In the WCPFC, the requirements for at-sea transhipment observers and purse seine observers has been suspended until 15th of February 2021 [7]. 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.

3. Conclusion

Our study finds that most of the organisations that are holding virtual meetings are holding these meetings during the business hours of the secretariat. The two that are not holding meetings during secretariat are CCAMLR, which is circumpolar and is holding meetings outside secretariat business hours due to its 24 h 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. Some organizations have already made urgent decisions, but to continue working towards sustainably managed fish stocks, RFMOs need to develop new decision-making procedures that can work effectively in the ongoing COVID-

Table 1 (continued)

| Acronym   | RFMO                          | COVID-meetings                                                                 | Meeting information                      |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| IOTC      | Indian Ocean Tuna Commission  | Symposium of the Atlantic Ocean Tropical Tuna Tagging Programme (AOTTP); replaced by an online Symposium of the WCPFC FAD Management Options IWG (WCPFC SPRFMO); replaced by an online Symposium of the IOTC Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. |
| WCPFC     | Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission | Meeting of the WCPFC FAD Management Options IWG: correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. |

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

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| WCPFC     | Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission | Meeting of the WCPFC FAD Management Options IWG: correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence Compliance Committee meeting; correspondence All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. All the other meetings are online. | Scheduled time: secretariat business hours Duration: 2 h – 4 h 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 Brussels), 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 [3]. The Commission in December has similarly responded to EU complaints. Duration: 4 h

Fig. 1. Schematic map with RFMO and regional organization secretariat locations and time zones.
normal context that is likely to continue into 2022 and potentially beyond.

Declaration of Interest

None.

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