

Supporting information from the North Western Waters AC and the North Sea AC for a request to the STECF for an Expert Working Group on the Management of Skates and Rays

Background information

Skate and ray fisheries constitute important targeted and by-catch fisheries for several Member States. The management of these fisheries has been subject to ongoing research and review across the various EU institutions over the past years including requests to the STECF to evaluate possible management approaches and changes to TAC calculation (STECF 15-01), and also to comment on a possible bycatch provision for undulate ray (*Raja undulata*) (STECF 15-03).

In 2017 the Commission received advice from the North-Western Waters Advisory Council (NWWAC) suggesting several alternative management measures and request their review by STECF. DG MARE organised a seminar fishers, scientists, national administrations and other stakeholders addressing this advice and assisting in drafting terms of reference for an STECF Expert Working Group (the EWG 17-10). The work of the EWG and STECF plenary resulted in the 2017 STECF report on long-term management of skates and rays (STECF-17-16).

Since the publication of this report numerous studies and trials have been and are being carried out regarding the management of skates and rays, including the INTERREG SUMARIS project¹, Bord Iascaigh Mhara², Harokit³, INNORAYS⁴, Raywatch⁵, Bridging Knowledge Gaps for sharks and rays in the North Sea⁶.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) publishes skate and ray advice usually on a two year cycle. Assessments are carried out on stocks and fisheries from the Arctic to the Azores by the ICES working Group on Elasmobranch Fishes. In 2021, WGEF provided advice for 16 stocks of rays and skates distributed the North Sea ecoregion, the Azores and MAR; catsharks (Scyliorhinidae) in the Greater North Sea, Celtic Seas and Bay of Biscay and Iberian Coast ecoregions; smooth-hounds in the Northeast Atlantic; and tope shark in the Northeast Atlantic. ICES plans to organise a benchmark for porbeagle, thornback ray in the Bay of Biscay, cuckoo ray in subareas 6 and 7, and in divisions 8.a–b and 8.d and undulate ray in the English (WKLASMO) in March 2022. Furthermore, a benchmark for three North Sea

¹ <https://sumaris-project.com/en/homepage/>

² An assessment of cuckoo ray (*Leucoraja naevus*) survivability in an Irish otter trawl fishery 2021; Post-capture condition of cuckoo ray in an Irish otter trawl fishery 2019; Staggering the fishing line: a key bycatch reduction option for whitefish trawlers 2019; Raising the fishing line to reduce cod catches in demersal trawls targeting fish species 2017 <https://bim.ie/publications/fisheries/>

³ <https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/nl/nieuws/harokit>

⁴ INNORAYS: Improving our knowledge-base for North Sea rays using 'Electronic Monitoring', Wageningen Marine Research

⁵ <https://ilvo.vlaanderen.be/nl/nieuws/raywatch-moet-kennis-over-roggen-vergroten-in-functie-van-beter-beheer>

⁶ <https://www.wur.nl/en/Research-Results/Research-Institutes/marine-research/show-marine/New-shark-and-ray-research-project.htm>

stocks is proposed for 2023, and a second WSKATE workshop that would examine the remaining skate and ray stocks is being planned.

In addition, the political landscape has changed considerably since 2017 with the UK's full exit on 01 January 2021. This has resulted in additional challenges to the TAC setting for skates and rays.

Considering the progress made in the past three years on the knowledge base for skate and ray management and recognising the fact that the current temporary exemption to the Landing Obligation will have to be reviewed in the near future, it would seem timely to revisit the recommendations from the 2017 STECF EWG report. We suggest the setting up of an STECF EWG to evaluate future skate and ray management options including the following:

- To consider different methodologies for the setting of TACs for skates and rays as discussed during the negotiations between the EU and UK including the establishment of bespoke management plans as a replacement for group TACs.
- The progress made in underpinning the exemption to the landing obligation and next steps including by species and gears:
 - Catch data
 - Discard survival rates
 - Methods for improving avoidance, selectivity and survival
- The development of transparent criteria to classify skate and ray species as prohibited in the TACs and quota regulations.

This EWG could be supported by ICES experts regarding the provision of biological/scientific advice.

STECF conclusions (STECF, 2017)

STECF acknowledges that the general skate and ray TACs may not offer adequate protection for stocks that require reductions in F and conversely, may limit catch opportunities for stocks in good condition. There are also potential impacts on skates and rays management when the landing obligation is applied from 1 January 2019.

STECF acknowledges that data limitations exist for skate and ray stocks, and concludes that the nature of these limitations and the stocks to which they apply need to be better identified.

STECF highlights that the main impediment to setting more specific TACs is the lack of evidence in terms of total catch (landings + dead discards). Similarly, more detailed catch information is needed to assess the utility of spatio-temporal, effort and other management measures.

STECF acknowledges the progresses achieved by ICES, which produced advice for 33 stocks of skates and rays in 2017. However, in most of these cases the absence of discard data prohibits catch advice. STECF concludes that emphasis should be given on utilising what discard information and survival information is available, applying the same protocols as with other stocks. This will identify those stocks for which data are sufficient to assess management options. STECF considers that this work is of sufficient scale to warrant a follow-up EWG that would focus on collating stock specific discard information and use survey data as a validation for species identification. Socioeconomic considerations could also be included.

STECF observes additionally that, assuming the approach used in recent years for implementing the Landing Obligation continues, any available discard data will be utilised as part of the TAC adjustment process when skates and ray stocks come under the Landing Obligation in 2019.

STECF concludes that when reporting on survival studies it is preferable to include the method applied and an assessment of the quality of the estimates using the critical review process developed by ICES WKMEDS. STECF concludes that evidence on discard survival of skates and rays is limited to a few métier-area-species combinations. Because the factors that influence survival are poorly understood, extrapolation across species, fisheries and areas is difficult, and more practical studies to estimate discard survival of skates and rays for key fisheries are needed.

STECF concludes that there is potential to improve selectivity towards skates and rays. To date, there are only few trials in European fisheries which have focussed on improving gear selectivity towards skates and rays, however, the incentive to avoid catches of skates and rays may increase with the implementation of the Landing Obligation.

STECF concludes that the development of transparent criteria is needed to classify species as prohibited in the TACs and quota regulations.

Background documentation

1. PLEN 15-01⁷
2. STECF 15-03, inclusive of background documentation from this contract⁸
3. STECF 17-16⁹
4. 09 Dec 2020 [Joint NWWAC/NSAC advice on the Fishing Opportunities 2021 for undulate ray in the English Channel \(ICES 7d, e\) \(EC reply\)](#)
5. 18 Dec 2020 [Joint NWWAC/NSAC advice for a non-recurrent request to ICES on criteria for listing on the Prohibited Species List \(EC reply\)](#)
6. 26 Apr 2021 [NWWAC Advice on best practice measures for the management of skates and rays in the North Western Waters](#) to the NWW Member States Group
7. 14 May 2021 [Joint NWWAC/NSAC request to the Commission for updated scientific advice on skates and rays \(EC reply\)](#)
8. ICES WGEF Vol 3, Issue 59¹⁰

⁷ https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/991908/STECF-PLN-15-01_JRCxxx.pdf

⁸ https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/55543/2015-03_STECF+15-03+Possible+by-catch+provisions+undulate+ray_JRC95199.pdf

⁹ <https://stecf.jrc.ec.europa.eu/documents/43805/1853075/STECF+17-16+-+LTM+skates+and+rays.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.ices.dk/sites/pub/Publication%20Reports/Forms/DispForm.aspx?ID=38116>