WECAFC

WESTERN CENTRAL ATLANTIC FISHERY COMMISSION

CFMC/WECAFC/OSPESCA/CRFM Spawning Aggregations Working Group (SAWG)

Intersessional Report 2024-2025

Convener: Dr. Alfonso Aguilar-Perera, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán

alfonso.aguilar64correo.uady.mx

Table of Contents

1. Introduction & Background
2. Objectives
3. Main Accomplishments during the Intersession period
4. Challenges and Mitigating Steps
5. Funding
6. Change of Convener
7. Conclusions

Photo Credit: Myles Phillips/WCS

Background & Introduction

Regional Workshop - Nassau Grouper 2008

SAWG est. 2012

SAWG First Meeting 2013

SAWG Second Meeting 2018

SAWG Third Meeting 2019

SAWG Fourth Meeting 2020

SAG-XII/ SAWG Fifth Meeting 2023

SAG-XII/ SAWG Sixth Meeting 2024

SAWG Objectives –TOR

- Identify issues (e.g., gaps, deficiencies), challenges, and best practices in data collection
- Collect, review, and share the past and present data and information, involving both the fishers and the private sector.
- Analyze data and information collected from capture fisheries
- Monitor changes in distribution and abundance.
- Develop common methodologies for data collection, assessment, and monitoring
- Seek partnerships with other institutions
- Monitor and provide advice on the management and implementation of regional strategies, regulations, and management plans
- Establish channels of communication to strengthen regional collaboration
- Ensure development of education and outreach programs
- Report to WECAFC and contribute to visibility of its objectives

Introduction & Background

This intersessional report presents activities accomplished under the SAWG 2024/2025

- Sixth Meeting of **WECAFC-SAWG**, San Juan Puerto Rico
- Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Management Plan (RFSAMP)
- **EU DG MARE** Project accomplished
- Education/Outreach products **Big Fish** Communications Plan
- Contributions to SPAW-STAC Recommendations
- Amended Workplan

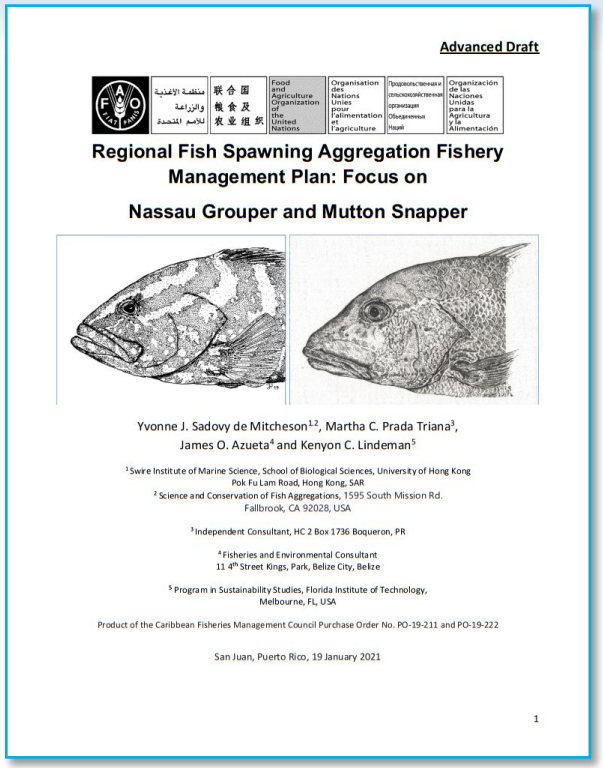
Sixth Meeting of the Working Group on Spawning Aggregations (SAWG-VI):

- Hybrid, 6-7 June 2024 in Puerto Rico, United States of America.
- Objectives: (a) implementation and efforts of **RFSAMP**
  (b) Discussed changes needed to SAWG's terms of reference
  (c) Implementation of the 2023–2025 SAWG work plan
  (d) Review the status of implementation of Recommendation WECAFC/XVIII/2022/4
  (e) Present progress of the European Union-funded project

- It was discussed non-extractive uses of FSAs; opportunities for short-medium term objectives of FSAMP; and updates to the 20232–2025 work plan
- The report of the SAWG-VI meeting was published online in October 2024 .

Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Management Plan (FSAMP)

- Published in October 2024 Online (English, French, and Spanish) (see QR)
- Authors: **Yvonne Sadovy de Mitcheson, Martha C Prada Triana, James Azueta, Kenyon C. Lindeman**
- Addressed the FSA of **Nassau grouper *Epinephelus striatus*** and **Mutton snapper *Lutjanus analis***
- A novel approach to protect critical and highly specific aspects of their **life cycle, engaging small-scale and artisanal fishers, governments, academics and NGOs, among other stakeholders.**



Advanced Draft

Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Fishery Management Plan: Focus on

Nassau Grouper and Mutton Snapper

Yvonne J. Sadovy de Mitcheson[1,2], Martha C. Prada Triana[3], James O. Azueta[4] and Kenyon C. Lindeman[5]

[1] Swire Institute of Marine Science, School of Biological Sciences, University of Hong Kong Pok Fu Lam Road, Hong Kong, SAR
[2] Science and Conservation of Fish Aggregations, 1595 South Mission Rd. Fallbrook, CA 92028, USA

[3] Independent Consultant, HC 2 Box 1736 Boqueron, PR

[4] Fisheries and Environmental Consultant 11 4th Street Kings, Park, Belize City, Belize

[5] Program in Sustainability Studies, Florida Institute of Technology, Melbourne, FL, USA

Product of the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council Purchase Order No. PO-19-211 and PO-19-222

San Juan, Puerto Rico, 19 January 2021

1

Regional Fish Spawning Aggregation Management Plan (RFSAMP)

- **Chapter 1** Regional context and rationale for management
- **Chapter 2** Summarized FSA aggregation sites, socioeconomic knowledge needed for developing effective management actions
- **Chapter 3** Management actions and guidance for implementation
- **Chapter 4** Implementation strategy, responsibilities of stakeholders at national levels and instruments for coordination, integration, implementation and enforcement and timing

RFSAMP

Six objectives

1. Increase information to support FSAs protection
2. Identify status of FSAs and those for protection
3. Develop monitoring frameworks and protocols to record biological, trade and socioeconomic information
4. Establish coordinated mechanisms for FSAs protection
5. Increase stakeholders' awareness and engagement to protect FSAs
6. Integrate FSAs protection into ecosystem-scale management

Photo Credit: Peery Institute for Marine Science

EU-Funded Project "Improving ecosystem approach to fisheries by advancing fish spawning aggregation information gathering and increase of public engagement in the WECAFC region

- Three pilot countries (The Bahamas, Belize and Cuba) for the RFSAMP
- Helped modification WECAFC Information System (WECAFIS) & Data Collection Reference Framework (DCRF) to accept FSA data
- **Three parts**: (1) Compilation of info of FSAs (fishery-dependent, fishery independent, socio-economic and trade (2a) Regional harmonization of data collection,
- (2b) compiled information in long term databases and (3) launch a HUB multimedia repository for education and capacity building

EU-Funded Project “Improving ecosystem approach to fisheries by advancing fish spawning aggregation information gathering and increase of public engagement in the WECAFC region

Key outputs include

- Reports of Belize, The Bahamas and Cuba
- Joint Workshop of the WECAFC Working Groups on Spawning Aggregations and Fisheries Data and Statistics
- WECAFC-WCS (Wildlife Conservation Society) Letter of Agreement - Final Narrative Report
- The Big Fish Digital Hub

Big Fish Initiative

The Big Fish Initiative (BFI) reaching out key target audiences (decision-makers, managers, fisher folks and fish consumers) digitally and through live events.

BFI continues creating original content:

(1) for partner events;

(2) feeding its social media (IG, FB, X, Threads, YouTube and LinkedIn);

(3) key products (academic and communications resources, podcasts, PSAs, short-films, featured film Treasure of the Caribbean)

Contributions to SPAW-STAC Recommendations

In 2024, SAWG led the draft "**Opportunities to improve MPA management and protection for Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)"** with the SPAW Protocol Regional Activity Center in the Wider Caribbean (SPAW-RAC).

Recommendations will be presented at the Eleventh Meeting of the Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee (STAC) to the SPAW Protocol in the Wider Caribbean from **30th June 2025 - 3rd July 2025.**

Challenges and Mitigating Steps

EU-funded project – No Cost Extension

Administrative and logistical challenges which resulted in a no-cost extension from February 2024 - October 2024.

EU funded project - Key Findings

- Funding is limited factors in Bahamas, Belize and Cuba, and enforcement an issue. Varieties in monitoring, conservation and management, collaborative effort, and regulatory frameworks. Solutions for multi-agency collaboration financing are needed. Capacity building for communications are key to alleviating deficits for small-scale fisheries and FSA management-
- Unknown on the status of mutton snapper and Nassau grouper and challenges since fishery-dependent information are recorded in general (“groupers” or “snappers”) rather than at species
- WECAFC member states must record species specific data on WECAFC priority species.
- No universal accepted methods for stock assessments of aggregating species are based on underwater visual census
- Stakeholders believe they have enough information to update/adapt management and national management planning exercises and adaptations are underway.
- The SAWG remains committed to providing technical advice to all member states as they navigate these issues.

Funding

- Regional level data-dependent recommendations for 2022-2025 work plan and RFSAMP have not been achieved due to **data scarcity and limited resources for implementing associated high-level tasks**.

- Assets generated during the EU-funded project will **require further support to ensure sustainability**.

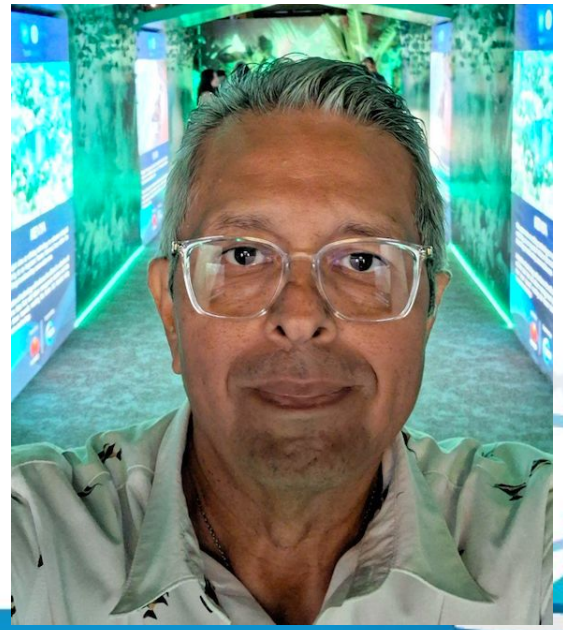
- **Fundraising efforts will be necessary** to continue activities under the 2025-2028 work plan.

- Key importance is support and update **Big Fish Initiative Public Engagement Campaign,** for socializing the RFSAMP to decision makers, fishers and fish consumers

Change of Convener

- **Mr. Myles Phillips** (Wildlife Conservation Society) **has stepped down** from the convener position after five years of service to the working group and to the Commission (2020-2025).

- **Dr. Alfonso Aguilar-Perera** (Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán) has succeeded him in the role **as of February 2025**.



- Mr. Phillips will continue to participate in the SAWG as a member of the task force.

Conclusions

- Intersessional period (September 2023-February 2025) was **productive** with collaborations with the **Fishery Data & Statistics Working Group, The Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, BelugaSmile Productions, SPAW-RAC, and the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute.**
- Pilot implementation of RFSAMP in The Bahamas, Belize and Cuba was historic and aligned between WECAFC and national and regional agencies for the conservation of FSAs
- Findings will be informed at the proceedings of the **Seventh Meeting of the SAWG**
- Next steps: a call for regional self-implementation of the RFSAMP by WECAFC member countries and operation of a RFSAMP coordination committee.
- Task force is commended for its support for the execution of 2023-2028 work plan.

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
5. Maintain the SAWG network intersessional communications by regularly posting FSA news and events to the GCFI, CAMPAM, and other lists	**2025–2027**	GCFI (Acosta), BigFish Campaign and WECAFC Secretariat.	In progress	Education/ Outreach	2	Medium		
6. Final cooperative monitoring programme and database (after pilot project) Separate activities: a) Creation of the programme/ database (under the pilot project) b) Data collection/ submission by countries (after pilot project)	**2026**	WECAFC/-FDS/SAWG, CFMC, SAWG members and researchers, and others, WCS	Pending	Technical/ Scientific Advisory	2,3	Medium	USD 70 000	6b will require additional funding

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
7. Endorse standard FSA Protocol to: a) report on the status of spawning aggregations and associated environmental factors; and b) evaluate local management initiatives. Identify lessons learned and apply positive outcomes.	**2026**	WECAFC/-FDS/SAWG, CFMC, SAWG members and researchers, and others, WCS	Pending	Technical/ Scientific Advisory	1,2	High	USD 25 000	Lessons learned emerged from European Union DG MARE Funded Pilot Project. However, endorsement of a standard protocol has not been completed. To be discussed at SAWG-VII.

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
• 8. Conduct a regional and national status and needs assessment of FSA sites/seasons in the WECAFC region (will continue beyond European Union DG MARE)	**2025-on wards**	WECAFC, CFMC, SAWG members and researchers, and others, WCS	In progress	Technical/ Scientific Advisory	1,2	Medium	USD 100 960	Requires funding to expand beyond pilot countries

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
9. Establish clear and simple guidance to: a) update and/or verify the status (timing and/or location, fish numbers, catches) of known spawning aggregations at the national level, and b) facilitate prioritization of those spawning aggregations or spawning seasons most urgently needing protective action.	**2025-2026**	WECAFC/-FDS/SAWG, CFMC, SAWG members and researchers, and others, WCS	In progress	Technical/ Scientific Advisory	1,2	High	USD 87 300	European Union DG MARE Funded project yielded lessons learned; guidance not formally endorsed.

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
10. Mobilize resources from bilateral and international agencies to assist with Activities called for in SAWG workplan	**2025–2027**	WECAFC, CFMC, NOAA Fisheries, SAWG members, and others	Pending	Coordination/ Collaboration	4	High		
11. Finish ongoing upgrade and update of Digital Hub in support of Communication Plan with downloadable resources and resource library	**2025–2027**	SAWG, CFMC (support to BelugaSmile Productions)	In progress	Education/ Outreach	4	Medium		Funding Required to keep it up-to date from 2025 onward

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
13. a) Produce and distribute radio kits in Spanish and French; Produce & distribute two short films: i. a 3-minute film on fishing communities to stop decline of mutton snapper; and ii. a film that calls on the general public to protect FSAs by not consuming grouper and snapper during spawning periods	**2025–2027**	CFMC (support to BelugaSmile Productions)	In progress	Education/ Outreach	4	High		Radiopm kit in Spanish in production. Funding required for Spanish & French Versions of radio kit. Funding required for both of the videos

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
14. Secure support to: a) Assist WECAFC members with most urgent RFSAMP Implementation Activities; and b) Create resource channel for member states to build capacity to identify and manage aggregating species, especially where FSAs have not been documented or characterized (e.g. Eastern Caribbean).	**2025–2027**	WECAFC	Pending	Technical/ Scientific Advisory	2	Low		Task for RFSAMP Coordination group under their TOR Requires funding. Merged with #16.

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
15. Implementation of a) Public Broadcasting Service's Outreach plan and b) The Howard Hughes Medical Institute's (HHMI) Science Outreach Plan.	**2025–2027**	BelugaSmile Productions	In progress	Education/ Outreach	4	Low		Activities are being extended. HHMI: Spanish production of Treasure of the Caribbean; screenings in multiple countries.

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
17. Charter of a 10-person RFSAMP Coordination Committee	**2025–2026**	CFMC, WECAFC Plan to implement under the next FSAMP implementation project	Pending	Coordination/ Collaboration	1,2	High		a) Design of TOR b) 1st Meeting of FSAMP-CC

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
20. Next steps to continue Big Fish Campaign a) Hire the new (4) team to lead and continue producing content for the campaign. b) Identify/ Officialize Communication subcommittee	**2025**	BelugaSmile Productions, SAWG Communication Subcommittee	In progress	Coordination/ Collaboration	4	High		Fundraise for this effort and next years of the 10-year plan to #RecoverBig Fish

Updated WECAFC SAWG Workplan 2025-2027

Activity	Time frame	Responsibility	Status	Group	Link to Commission Strategic Objective	Priority	Estimated costs	Notes
21. Secure funding to facilitate fisher exchanges	**2025–2027**	Perry Institute for Marine Science	Pending	Coordination/ Collaboration	1,2,3,4	Low		Requires Funding
22. 7th Meeting of the WECAFC-SAWG (in Miami?)	**Tentative Q3 2025**	WECAFC, NOAA Fisheries, CFMC	Pending	Coordination/ Collaboration	1,2,3	Medium		Requires Funding; CFMC can host if in MIA or PR

Acknowledgments

WECAFC Secretariat:
Yvette Diei-Ouadi, Eric Wade

SAWG Task Force:
Martha Prada, Yvonne Sadovy, Stephania Bolden,
Ana Salceda,
Miguel Rolon, Laura Cimo

Key Institutional Partners:
Caribbean Fisheries Management Council (CFMC)

Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute
BelugaSmile Productions

Photo Credit: Peery Institute for Marine Science

Past Convener: Myles Phillips, WCS

New Convener: Dr. Alfonso Aguilar Perera

Universidad Autonoma de Yucatan, Mexico

alfonso.aguilar@correo.uady.mx

wecafc-secretariat@fao.org

https://www.fao.org/wecafc/en/