

WPRFMC Ecosystem Reports: *66th Meeting of SSC*

Recommendations to the Council from the 66th Meeting of the Scientific and Statistical Committee

5-7 August 1997

King Kamehameha Hotel

Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

Ecosystems and Habitat

Final region-wide coral reef assessment

Alison Green, contracted by the NOAA-National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, presented a summary of the final draft report on a region-wide coral reef assessment. Status of reef resources, patterns of use and existing management regimes in the US Pacific Islands were reviewed. Areas where significant management issues may need attention were identified. Nearshore areas within a mile of coastlines appear to be most heavily impacted. Overfishing and sedimentation are the major impacts. Conversely, reefs in the US EEZ of Pacific Islands appear to be in relatively good condition due to their remoteness and light use, while information is sparse.

Discussion by the SSC brought up a few noteworthy points. It may be worth identifying underutilized reef fisheries (e.g., in the EEZ) that could be developed. The report defines coral reefs as any hard substrate ≤ 100 m deep. As this includes banks and shoals of low profile (e.g., Penguin Bank), clarification of this definition may be in order. A recent hurricane (Iniki) inflicted more damage to Hawaii's coral reefs than the past 100 years of cumulative human induced impacts.

The SSC concurred with the AP recommendation that the Council consider developing a framework "Coral Reef Resources Fishery Management Plan (FMP)" through the following process:

- 1) Scope out respective responsibilities of the various federal/state/territory/commonwealth agencies with management interest in coral reefs;
- 2) Consider how to handle overlap of management unit species that occur on reefs with existing FMPs;
- 3) Resolve jurisdictional differences, as best possible; and
- 4) Report to the Council (on above) at its next meeting (in Nov 97).

Other important recommendations in the report endorsed by the AP and SSC as recommendations to the Council, or as framework provisions of a new FMP, include:

- 1) Reassess the region's reef resource condition every 3-5 years;
- 2) If the live reef fish trade becomes established, monitor it carefully and implement conservation management measures;

- 3) Support local agencies to better monitor and manage their nearshore coral reef resources;
- 4) Consider establishing marine reserves on certain reef areas in the EEZ to serve as recruitment sources;
- 5) Conduct surveys to obtain information on the condition of the resource in federal waters, where lacking;
- 6) Conduct specialized studies where resource impacts have the greatest potential to occur or are beginning to occur (e.g., Penguin Bank, Esmeralda Bank, Galvez Bank, Farallon de Medinilla; shallow-water reef-fish complexes)
- 7) Investigate other sources of potential funding to conduct the above activities (e.g., NOAA-NFWF, CRI, NMFS, etc.); and
- 8) Encourage the aquaculture of live rock, live groupers and emperors, corals and algae.

Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)

Robert Schroeder briefly reviewed recent activity to meet the requirement to amend our FMP to more fully consider EFH. The generic outline from the national meeting in May 97 was summarized. Prospective assistance through interns and consultants was mentioned. The SSC had no additional comments at this time.

Hawaii Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

Robert Schroeder reported that the Governor accepted about half of the state waters proposed for the Sanctuary plus conditions that it is managed as a state-federal partnership, five-year trial basis, no user fees and no new regulations. The Sanctuary was designated by Congress in 1992 to include 1,300 square nautical miles of state and federal waters (high water mark to 100 fm deep). The original boundaries included less than 20% of waters under federal jurisdiction.

CNMI Farallon de Medinilla EIS survey

Robert Schroeder summarized the issue where the military wants to continue and expand bombing operations at Farallon de Medinilla, an area with rich fringing reefs and fishing grounds. It was noted that the endangered Micronesia Megapod also inhabits this island.

The SSC concurred with the AP recommendations that: 1) the EIS should be a full disclosure document dealing with seabirds and nearshore marine resources, for comment by the public, 2) the Navy should use only dud bombs which should be marked, and 3) the Navy should remove all live bombs to make the area safe for the fisheries. It was also suggested that possibly another northern island in the Mariana archipelago, one with little or no surrounding reef, could be used for bombing.