



## **DSCC Priorities for the protection of seamounts and other topographical features in areas beyond national jurisdiction in the South Pacific**

In anticipation of the 11<sup>th</sup> SPRFMO Scientific Committee meeting in Panama, 11-16 September 2023, the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) draws your attention to the following priorities (as identified by the DSCC) for SC analysis and as a part of our collective responsibility for the protection and preservation of deep sea ecosystems.

To inform full protection of seamounts and other vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) across the SPRFMO region, the DSCC is calling on SPRFMO members to prioritise the following in light of the full recognition required under relevant UNGA resolutions:

- a. An analysis of the limitations of the data and use of the HSI models currently underpinning the proposed protection of a percentage or portion of VMEs in a given area (as part of SPRFMO's 'minimum level of protection' approach).
- b. Identification and recognition of VMEs as the ecosystems themselves, including the totality of the populations and species associated with each VMEs, rather than simply the species or groups of species which have been designated as VME 'indicator taxa', applying the ecosystem approach. (UNGA resolution 77/118, para 213 (a) To use, as applicable, the full set of criteria in the Guidelines to identify where vulnerable marine ecosystems occur or are likely to occur, as well as for assessing significant adverse impacts on such ecosystems, including their associated and dependent species).
- c. An assessment of the impacts that carrying forward annual TACs to the following year (i.e. not fishing 1 yr and then doubling the TAC in the subsequent year) will have on VMEs and other bycatch, including the impact of any expansion of existing footprint a doubling of the TAC will have on VMEs.
- d. Initiation of a process for the identification of VMEs (para 48 of CMM 03-2023) and related, a reduction in the uncertainties in risk assessments to prevent significant adverse impacts (SAIs) on those VMEs.

In the SPRFMO context the effective implementation of these actions will require the consistent application of commitments that all Contracting Parties have made through the UN General Assembly (UNGA) Sustainable Fisheries Resolutions.

### **Background**

Since 2004, the DSCC has been working with scientists, NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and governments to protect the biodiversity associated with seamounts and other deep-sea topographical features from damage and loss caused by bottom trawling in areas beyond national

jurisdiction. In 2004 the member nations of the UNGA first committed to “take action urgently, and consider...the interim prohibition of destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling that has adverse impacts on VMEs, including seamounts, hydrothermal vents and cold water corals located beyond national jurisdiction” in UNGA resolution 59/25.

Significant global progress has been made over the past two decades with the adoption of conservation measures and regional regulations prohibiting bottom trawling on seamounts and other VMEs in many areas. There has also been growing international recognition and increasing global commitments to halt and reverse marine biodiversity loss. Protecting biodiversity in the marine environment is an obligation under the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (Article 5(g)). Recent reflections of this include the 2022 UNGA Sustainable Fisheries resolution [77/118](#) which again highlighted the importance of protecting deep-sea biodiversity by protecting VMEs and called for the assessment of the potential impacts on all species that constitute a VME “including their associated and dependent species” and not simply VME indicator taxa. In December 2022, the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed a global target to protect 30% of the planet, including marine areas, for nature, and in June 2023, the United Nations adopted Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction" (currently available as [A/CONF.232/2023/4](#)).

Protecting biodiversity in the marine environment is recognised in the SPRFMO Convention which specifically requires that members ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fishery resources and, in so doing, safeguard the marine ecosystems in which these resources occur through the application of the precautionary approach and an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

In the SPRFMO area there are major gaps in the information on both VME indicator taxa and non-VME indicator species associated and dependent on VMEs. These gaps include identification of the full range of species associated with VMEs (including cryptic and undescribed species), and biological information about these species and ecosystems, such as population structure, connectivity, endemism and source and sink populations – all of which is essential to assessing the impacts of bottom trawling.

Despite the paucity of scientific information necessary to effectively develop and implement a model which can determine whether bottom trawling can be managed to prevent SAIs on VMEs, and the likelihood that information gaps will not be addressed for many years to come, the Commission recently agreed to the use of models to predict the presence of VMES and to a 70% VME protection target. Yet, the scientific data underpinning the models is patently inadequate, the subsequent reliance of the proxy data of environmental variances has been found inadequate and the data of historical catches that does exist shows VME taxa was caught in significant to enormous quantities. Rather than being opened as part of a ‘minimum level of protection’ approach, these areas should be targeted for identification for VMEs, and identified VMES (e.g. through camera surveys) listed and closed.

Over the past ten years, SPRFMO Members have attempted to demonstrate, on a scientific basis, that bottom trawling on seamounts can be managed to prevent significant adverse impacts (SAIs) on VMEs without applying the UNGA resolutions detailing how this should be done. It has consistently failed to do so.