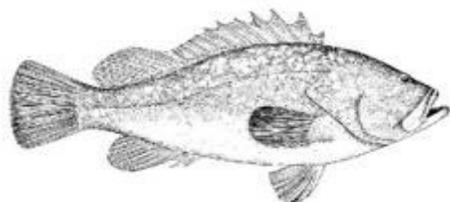
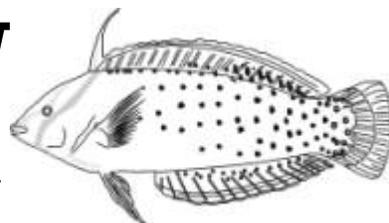


IUCN SPECIALIST GROUP OF GROUPERS AND WRASSES

<http://www.hku.hk/ecology/GroupersWrasses/iucnsg/index.html>



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Introduction

Welcome to newsletter number 5 of the IUCN Specialist Group on Groupers and Wrasses. I hope you are all managing to have a bit of a break over this period. Yvonne has been incredibly busy by the sound of it – it is certainly reflected in her contributions to this issue. How are the rest of you getting on? Let me know about any initiatives you are involved in, field trips you have undertaken, interesting websites you have encountered, any images you may want to share. I am aiming at June next year for the next issue, so let's see what you can come up with!

Sean Fennessy ori@saambr.org.za

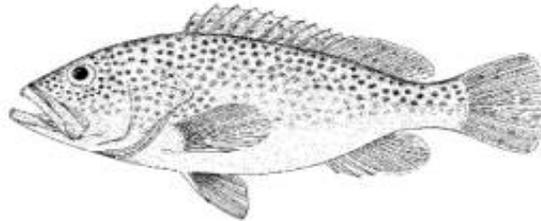
Message from the Chair

Dear SG members,

Christmas greetings to all SG members. I hope that this end of year newsletter finds you well. This year has been eventful for some of our species, especially with respect to several initiatives to protect spawning aggregations of groupers (see the examples below from the Society for the Conservation of Reef Fish Aggregations (SCRFA) newsletter and website (www.scrfa.org)). We hope to see additional similar initiatives as people become more aware of the vulnerability of spawning aggregations to fishing and their inclusion in marine protected areas becomes more common. This is nothing but good news for our vulnerable groupers.

For 2003, I hope that our SG will be able to complete 20 species assessments, concentrating on our priority species in the first instance. For this I will need your help when we come to review each proposal. Things have been slow for our SG in general, partly this is due to my new position with scrfa beginning in July of this year and an inordinate amount of traveling I have been doing lately. There is much overlap and complementarity, however, between my two roles and I plan to build on these next year once I have become more settled wearing my new 'hat' with SCRFA. Michael Domeier, chair of SCRFA and an SG member, has also been really busy on aggregation matters this year. Without his care and attention to detail, SCRFA would not be progressing as it is.

The highlight of the latter part of the year for me was attending the CITES meeting (see article below). Although our humphead wrasse did not get listed this time (the species was up for an Appendix II listing), I am hopeful that we will be very well-positioned for the next meeting, in 2004 in Thailand for more support. I would like to see a greater focus on this species as one of the goals of this SG for the next couple of years if possible.



CITES and Santiago

The recent CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) meeting, held in Chile, Santiago, ended on some high notes in mid-November after two exhausting weeks of debate, politics and a lot of sitting around. This was the 12th Conference of the Parties (CoP). The term Parties refers to the countries that are signatories to the Convention, each of which can send delegations to the Conference and vote on the various proposals discussed for listing on CITES Appendices. There are currently 159 Parties (not all present in Santiago). I was very fortunate to have been part of the IUCN (World Conservation Union) delegation. I was invited by the United States because of their proposal to list the humphead wrasse, *Cheilinus undulatus*, on Appendix II. IUCN is considered to have intergovernmental organization (IGO) status at the Conference that enabled it to comment on the various proposals up for consideration by the Conference. IUCN is considered to be the primary scientific authority on species conservation status and was frequently consulted.

So why is CITES important for conservation and what is the significance of the different CITES Appendices? CITES is the only international instrument that is widely recognized, respected and implemented that deals with sustainable international trade in wild species. It involves 3 appendices. The best known is Appendix I that prohibits any commercial trade in species that are already endangered, such as tigers, gorillas or the coelacanth. In practice, the most important Appendix is II. This includes species that are not endangered but may become so if trade is not regulated. An inclusion on Appendix II requires that listed species are properly monitored and regulated to ensure that any trade (all of which requires a licence or permit) is sustainable and comes from a legal source. Appendix II includes about 95% of the 30,000 species listed by CITES. Appendix III includes species at the request of a particular Party that already regulates trade in the species and that needs the cooperation of other countries to prevent unsustainable or illegal exploitation. More details can be found on <http://www.cites.org/index.html>.

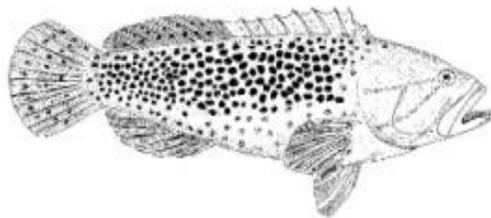
One of the biggest successes was the inclusion in Appendix II, for the very first time, of fishes of significant commercial importance. Two species of shark, the basking shark *Cetorhinus maximus* and the whale shark, *Rhincodon typus* and 32 species of seahorses (genus *Hippocampus*) were listed. These listings represent landmark decisions because, until now, the Convention has not played an important role in global fisheries. Why have commercial fish species not been included before? There are several reasons but probably three that are most important. I give them in some detail since all are relevant to the humphead wrasse proposal. The first is that it is only relatively recently that we humans are coming to realize, and accept, that commercially exploited fishes could possibly be threatened with extinction (or rather, that there is no reason to believe that they are any different from other plants and animals in this respect). Misperception lingers, however. One Party, that shall remain nameless, actually suggested in this global forum that it was obvious that 'primitive' groups such as the sharks could never become extinct because they had already survived for such a long time on Earth! No comment. The second reason that commercial fishes have not previously been seriously considered for CITES listings is that, for many commercially important species, there are regional fishery management authorities or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations that can, or at least should, deal with threats to the species. In such cases, it is argued, CITES is not needed. This is often not the case; the FAO does not manage fish and many regions have no regional authority. The third reason is that there is insufficient information on most fishes to be able to properly assess their conservation status. While it is certainly true that aquatic marine species are difficult to evaluate in terms of population status, fishery management is often based on similarly inadequate data. Unfortunately, it may be the best information available and the sole information to act upon. Clearly such arguments are no longer excuses to exclude fishes from CITES Appendices; indeed a listing may be the only means of ensuring sustainable use.

This brings me to the humphead wrasse. As you probably now know, this species was not listed; another fish proposal, the Patagonian toothfish, was withdrawn. In the case of the humphead, the proposal fell just 7 votes short of the two thirds majority needed; it gained 65 votes and needed 72. I was told two things of importance at the end of the meeting. The first was that the first time a species is proposed at a CoP, particularly if it is not well known to the Parties, it is unlikely to go through (*if you don't know, vote no!*); this means that we need to continue to raise awareness about this species throughout its

geographic range. The major opponents, sadly, were countries within Asia, including China. Hong Kong, as part of the China delegation, had earlier submitted comments that they could not support the proposal for the humphead wrasse, in part because its protection would not stop cyanide fishing (?). Clearly some work for me to do here in Hong Kong. The Japanese and Malaysian delegations also spoke out against this proposal and Indonesia did not support it, so clearly work to be done in this region. Please do what you can to give this species a higher profile.

During the debate on this species the following points were raised and we can try to address some of them during the next two years. 1. FAO should deal with this species (*my comment*: this is not going to happen with this species so this is not an issue for us to address). 2. The data are inappropriate because they come from many areas and the stock is not in serious condition. This was a comment from Japan, one of which delegates provided me in writing with some unofficial landings data for this species, a few tonnes a year, but had no other data. I will write to the government about this to follow up. 3. Identification of the meat is a problem (*my comment*: the threat appears to be from sales of live fish and all life history phases of this species can be readily identified – we might want to determine the extent of chilled exports, however). 4. All other comments supported the proposal. The consensus informally was that once the species is better known, another proposal would have a very good chance of being adopted, especially given the advances on fish listings at this CoP. Those of us in Asia, in particular, need to work hard to gain support, particularly among ASEAN signatories of the Convention. Remember the website www.humpheadwrasse.info.

The Santiago meeting is considered to have been one of the most politicized of all CoPs, but it also made ground-breaking progress with several listings, including those of commercial fishes. One thing is clear : for species that are heavily traded, vulnerable and not effectively managed, CITES is a critically important management and conservation tool....for many species, including our humphead and probably many of the others that we deal with, it is likely to be the only one.



Grouper spawning aggregation news (note that aggregation news is taken from the December 2002 SCRFA newsletter)

Belize - In November of 2002, we heard of the excellent news that the Government of Belize had signed legislation that provides for a closed season for the Nassau grouper, during its spawning season in Belize which runs from December 1st – March 31st. In addition, full, year-round protection was declared for 11 spawning sites, many of which are also spawning areas for other reef fish species. This legislation was the result of many years of hard work by a coalition of NGOs (Belize Audubon Society, Friends of Nature, Green Reef, TIDE, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society and World Wildlife Fund) striving together with the government, fishing cooperatives, researchers and other stakeholders, and shows the importance of the collaborative and

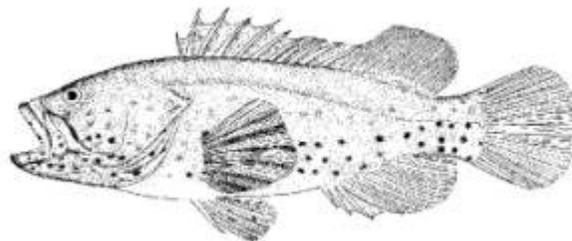
consultative approach. Congratulations to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Cooperatives of Belize.

Cayman Islands - New legislation is to be introduced in January 2003 to protect Nassau grouper at designated spawning areas. The plan is to allow no fishing in alternate years and to permit a bag limit of 12 fish per boat per day in those intervening years when fishing is to be permitted. Moreover, from November to March inclusive, no fish traps are allowed within 1 nautical mile of any boundary of any designated grouper spawning area, and no Nassau grouper under 30.5 cm may be taken at any time. Currently there are 3 legally designated traditional grouper spawning areas and 5 more have been proposed. The Cayman Islands has a commendable history of Nassau grouper aggregation protection. This started in 1985, when the government issued a license that allowed only residents to enter the 3 traditional Nassau grouper spawning areas and prohibited the use of traps, spear guns, explosives or nets. The areas were legally demarcated in 1998 along with marine park legislation, and the current law has built on this history of protection. Congratulations to the Department of the Environment.

Gulf of Mexico, United States - Several spawning aggregation sites of the gag grouper, *Mycteroperca microlepis*, are protected in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico, within the Madison Swanson Fishery Reserve and Steamboat Lumps fishery Reserve, each roughly 100 square nautical miles. They have a 4-year sunset and so come up for re-authorization (or dismissal) next year. Presentations have to be made to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (National Marine Fisheries Service) in May of 2003. Other aggregations of this species are still heavily fished with no protection other than size limits. Please support continued protection of the gag if you can.

Bahamas – Currently (as of end of November 2002) being considered in the Bahamas is a closed season for the Nassau grouper. The Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries is evidently meeting with fishermen and with Fisheries officials to discuss the closure and determine the most appropriate dates. If you can support the closure in the Bahamas, please write to: Hon. V. Alfred Gray, M.P. Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Local Government, P.O. Box N-3028, Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas. The Nassau grouper is listed as endangered on the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Red list of threatened species and the protection of its aggregations in the Bahamas would represent a significant measure for population recovery.

Pohnpei – A spawning aggregation for 3 grouper species (brown-marbled grouper *Epinephelus fuscoguttatus*; camouflage grouper *E. polyphekadion*; squaretail coral grouper *Plectropomus areolatus* is closed to fishing for 3 months of the year. No market sales of these species are allowed in 2 of the 3 spawning months and a proposal to extend the sales ban has been submitted.



News from Brazil

Leopoldo Gerhardinger of the ichthyological laboratory at Universidade do Vale do Itajai recently informed Yvonne about their research project on *Epinephelus itajara* (the lord of the rocks) in Brazil, following that country's five year prohibition on fishing for the species. The prohibition came about as a result of increasing public concern for the species, as well as pressure from NGOs and university institutions. Beatrice Ferreira informs me that this is the first marine fish to be protected by federal law in Brazil. The project is focussing on spawning aggregations, behaviour and migratory patterns of juveniles and adults. More information is available on the web at garoupa1@cttmar.univali.br.

Publications/websites of interest

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