

DSCC priorities for the protection of seamounts and other topographical features in areas beyond national jurisdiction in the Southern Indian Ocean

March 2023

In anticipation of the the Meeting of the Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement Scientific Committee (SIOFA SC8) in Tenerife, Spain in March 2023, the DSCC wishes to draw your attention to the following priorities for action as a part of our collective responsibility for the protection and preservation of deep sea ecosystems:

1. A prohibition on all bottom trawling on seamounts and other similar topographical features in areas beyond national jurisdiction (ABNJ) in the SIOFA region;
2. Recognition of vulnerable marine ecosystems (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';
3. Acceptance of 100% VME protection strategy based on spatial closures of all known and projected VMEs, in conjunction with move-on rules and closures to protect unexpected encounters with VMEs;
4. Consistent application of the precautionary approach and the ecosystem approach as required by the Convention to protect VMEs, close areas, conduct impact assessments and protect deep-sea biodiversity;
5. Implementation of stock assessments and associated management measures for ALL targeted fisheries and prior to opening of new and exploratory fisheries;
6. Definition of VMEs includes the Saya De Malha Bank.
7. Protection of deepwater shark species.

In the SIOFA 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 Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (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 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. This was reflected in the UNGA Sustainable Fisheries resolution 77/181 adopted in 2022 which once 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.

At the same time, there has been growing international recognition and increasing global commitments over the past 20 years to halt and reverse marine biodiversity loss, most recently demonstrated by the agreement of a historic new Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Treaty, which will enable the protection of biodiversity in the deep ocean. States should continue this momentum at SIOFA and support a prohibition on destructive bottom trawling on seamounts and other fragile and vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems.

Protecting biodiversity in the marine environment is an obligation under the UN Fish Stocks Agreement (Article 5(g)) and is recognised in the SIOFA Convention. The SIOFA Convention specifically requires that members ensure the long-term conservation and sustainable use of fishery resources in the Convention Area, and, in so doing, safeguard the marine ecosystems in which these resources occur on the basis of the best scientific evidence available and the application of the precautionary approach and an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

More information

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