

The Western Central Atlantic Fishery Commission (WECAFC): Its Implications and Impact

PHILIP M. ROEDEL
Fisheries Advisor
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, D.C. 20523

HISTORY AND FUNCTION OF WECAFC

The concept of a regional fisheries commission concerned with the West Central Atlantic has been with us for a long time. Ideas as to its geographic scope and its areas of responsibility have ranged from a single-purpose shrimp commission for the Caribbean to a managerial body concerned with all fisheries in the Western Atlantic from Cape Hatteras to the mouth of the Amazon.

There was general, but certainly not unanimous, agreement among nations that some sort of a body was needed, and there was general, but again certainly not unanimous, agreement in the U.S. commercial and sport fishing industry that this was the case.

The major debates revolved around several critical issues: what should such a body's geographic area of competence be; should such a body have managerial and regulatory authorities, or should it be limited to coordination of efforts and the compilation and dissemination of information; should it be concerned with all species or should it be limited to shrimp; should it be established within or outside of the United Nations – Food and Agriculture Organization family?

The question of a West Central Atlantic body was brought before the FAO's Committee on Fisheries (COFI) at its Eighth Session held in Rome in April 1973. This followed extensive discussions during a meeting of COFI's Subcommittee on the Development of Cooperation with International Organizations Concerned with Fisheries held in Vancouver, Canada in February 1973.

I participated in both of those meetings, and the debate was intense with respect to the topics I have noted, though there was eventually enough give-and-take to permit everyone concerned to reach substantial agreement. Essentially we had left Vancouver agreeing (1) that there was need for a *non*-regulatory body that would provide a forum for discussion of matters of mutual concern, (2) that it should be set up as a subsidiary body of FAO, and (3) that it should be concerned with all species, but with emphasis on shrimp. Its exact geographic extent and its precise terms of reference remained to be determined, though with respect to the latter point the Subcommittee recognized the particular need for (1) collection and compilation of statistics and biological data, (2) research coordination, (3) information exchange, and (4) training. The Subcommittee recommended that COFI set up an *ad hoc* Working Party to consider these matters during the Eighth Session.

The FAO staff subsequently prepared draft terms of reference designed to

reflect the Subcommittee's views, which, with the Subcommittee's report, were presented to the Eighth Session (FAO documents COFI/73/4 and COFI/73/4 Sup. 1.).

The Working Party met as suggested, and proposed with respect to geographic area "that such area should include the whole Western Central Atlantic as defined by FAO for the purpose of fishery statistics. It considered that this was desirable in order to encompass all stocks not yet covered by international fishery bodies responsible for adjacent areas." Further, it endorsed the terms of reference drafted by the FAO staff (FAO Doc. COF/73/4 Sup. 2.).

COFI accepted these findings and recommended to the FAO Council that the Director-General of FAO be authorized to establish the body (FAO Fish. Rept., 135, 1973).

The Council took action in November 1973 (61st Session, Resolution 4/61). It noted in the resolution "the need for international cooperation for the conservation, development and utilization of the living resources, especially shrimps," and stated that the new body "would not be concerned with management and regulation of the fisheries." The Resolution defines the geographic area in these terms:

The Commission's area of competence shall be all marine waters of the Western Central Atlantic bounded by a line drawn as follows:

From a point on the coast of South America at 5° 00' N latitude in a northerly direction along this coast past the Atlantic entry to the Panama Canal; thence continue along the coasts of Central and North America to a point on this coast at 35° 00' N latitude; thence due east along this parallel to 42° 00' W longitude; thence due south along this meridian to 5° 00' N latitude; thence due west along this parallel to the original point at 5° 00' N latitude on the coast of South America.

This boundary is identical with that of FAO's statistical area 31.

The terms of reference are unchanged in substance from those recommended by COFI:

- (a) to promote and assist in the collection of national statistics and biological data relating to fisheries in general, and the shrimp fisheries in particular; and to provide for the compilation and dissemination of these data on a regional basis;
- (b) to facilitate the coordination of national research programmes and to promote, where appropriate, the standardization of research methods;
- (c) to promote the interchange of information relating to the fisheries of the region;
- (d) to promote and coordinate, on a national and regional basis, studies of the effect of the environment and of pollution on fisheries, and studies of appropriate methods of control and improvement;
- (e) to promote and assist the development of aquaculture and stock improvement;
- (f) to encourage education and training through the establishment or improvement of national and regional institutions and by the organization of training centers and seminars;

- (g) to assist Member Governments in establishing rational policies for the development and utilization of the resources consistent with national objectives and the conservation and improvement of the resources; and
- (h) to promote and coordinate international aid to further the achievement of the objectives referred to in the preceding sub-paragraphs.

FAO has taken the actions asked of it, and WECAFC is a reality which last week (Oct. 20-23, 1975) held its First Session in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.

Even though WECAFC has neither managerial nor regulatory authority, its importance to U.S. fishermen both commercial and sport is quite clear. Over time, the debates at its meetings and the recommendations it makes are sure to have an impact on all fisheries in the area, regardless of the outcome of Law of the Sea negotiations. Certainly organizations such as the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute will have a major interest in WECAFC, and can, I believe, make significant contributions to its success.

THE ROLE OF THE AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT (USAID)

The interest of USAID may be less evident, for many of you here will remember that in recent years the Agency's concern with fisheries has diminished, and that its major input has been in the field of tropical aquaculture, largely in the freshwater environment.

In the past year, the United States has reaffirmed its interest in fisheries development as part of AID's program. This reflects a growing concern in governmental circles, fisheries and otherwise, with the increasing problems of nutrition in much of the world, the seemingly neglected potential of small-scale fisheries and a tendency to overlook the difference in human terms that a relatively modest increase in coastal and inland catches could make.

Taking stock of the strengths and weaknesses of the United States in fisheries science and technology, it seems self-evident that the fisheries sector can do more than it has toward helping alleviate the world food shortage. The United States has a considerable body of technical knowledge and experience in fisheries, a large part of which could usefully be transferred to the lesser developed countries (LDCs).

The disciplines in which competence is required, especially biology, economics, statistics, law, and public administration, are all subjects in which the United States has strong capabilities.

In developing concepts as to an appropriate U.S. bilateral fisheries assistance program, AID collaborated with NOAA's Office of Marine Resources, and this led in March 1975 to my secondment to AID as a fisheries advisor with the task of evaluating the existing AID fisheries program and of recommending policy positions for fisheries development. The evaluation is taking into account small-scale fisheries, aquaculture in the broadest sense, and the conservation and

management needs of LDCs, especially those likely to be brought about by increased coastal state control over coastal resources.

It is too early to say what precise form USAID policy will take with respect to fisheries. However, the Agency's administration fully supports, and the Congress has endorsed, a strong position tailored to today's needs, so our planning calls for the creation of a viable and responsive fisheries program as the Agency's goal. Its magnitude and exact direction remain to be delineated, but I believe it will encompass small-scale fisheries, aquaculture, and fisheries management and administration.

THE FIRST SESSION OF WECAFC

The first session got the new body off to a fairly good start. The results were not earthshaking, nor, in fairness, could they have been expected to be, for this was after all largely an organizational meeting.

The test of WECAFC's substance will come during the next 2 years of work and its performance at its second session in 1977. Two things bear watching and these relate to membership and participation.

Membership is open to nations whether or not they are riparian to the West Central Atlantic and regardless of whether they fish there. Twenty-three, including such unanticipated signators as Togo and Zaire, have adhered, and the application of the Bahamas is sure to be approved. However, one of the "Big Four" fishing nations in the area, Mexico, is not a member. Neither are three smaller producers from the Caribbean, Barbados, the Dominican Republic, and Honduras. (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Member nations of the Western Central Atlantic Fisheries Commission (WECAFC) at the time of the First Session

Brazil*	Netherlands*
Colombia*	Nicaragua
Cuba*	Poland*
France*	Senegal
Guatemala	Spain*
Guinea	Togo
Guyana	Trinidad and Tobago*
Haiti	United Kingdom*
Italy*	United States*
Jamaica	Venezuela
Japan	Zaire
Korea*	

*Attended the First Session

Twelve member nations attended the first session: Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, France, Italy, Korea, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, the U.K., and the U.S. The Bahamas, Canada, and the USSR sent observers.

The significant absentee was the region's number two producer, Venezuela. Other Caribbean member nations that did not attend were Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, and Nicaragua.

Table 2. Western Central Atlantic fisheries catches exceeding 2000 MT in 1973

	(000 MT) Catch	Member WECAFC
United States	886.2	yes
Venezuela	144.5	yes
Mexico	132.6	no
Cuba	72.5	yes
Colombia	27.8	yes
Korea, Rep. of	19.8	yes
Jamaica	18.0	yes
Guyana	17.6	yes
Trinidad & Tobago	12.8	yes
Dominican Republic	8.9	no
U.S.S.R.	8.8	no
Nicaragua	7.9	yes
Guadeloupe	4.8	(France)
Honduras	4.3	no
Barbados	4.0	no
Surinam	3.8	(Netherlands)
Bahamas	3.1	(appl. pending)
Martinique	3.0	(France)
Haiti	2.2	yes
Total Catch in Area	1405.0	

Data from FAO Yearbook of Fishery Statistics, 1973, vol. 36.

The host government, Trinidad and Tobago, was elected chairman of the session, and Mr. Overand Padmore, Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries, served in a most distinguished manner. Trinidad and Tobago was later elected chairman to serve through the next session 2 years hence. Vice-chairmen include Brazil, Cuba, and Colombia, while the Bahamas (contingent on its membership), Guyana, Jamaica, and the U.S. were elected to the Executive Committee.

The agenda included three principal items: (1) a review of existing knowledge of the fishery resources; (2) statistical needs; and (3) possibilities for fisheries development.

With respect to the first item, the review of existing knowledge of fishery resources and identification of future requirements, the Commission, as you would expect, devoted a good deal of time to shrimp and to spiny lobster. On shrimp, the Commission in its draft report "noted that a substantial amount of information on the shrimp resources was available and that several shrimp fisheries were now already fairly heavily or fully exploited, but that with further development of the fishery on some resources and with adequate management of the fisheries, a moderate increase in the shrimp production of the area was thought to be possible."

The Commission agreed that a working party on shrimp stock assessment should be set up. Its terms of reference were later expanded to include spiny lobster.

The Commission discussed the need for more detailed knowledge about fin fish resources as a basis for fishery development, and agreed to establish a Working Party on Assessment of Fish Resources. It emphasized that the Working

Party should concentrate its activities on certain priority areas, especially reef, coastal pelagic, and trawl resources.

The second major agenda item dealt with the need for adequate statistical information on fishing activities and catches. The subject received a great deal of emphasis, and the draft report says: "It was agreed that there was need for international standardization and improvement of the fishery statistics in the area and that measures were needed to ensure dissemination of these statistics. It was therefore decided to set up a WECAFC Working Party on Fishery Statistics."

The final substantive item, and I think the most important, dealt with prospects for development of fisheries in the Western Central Atlantic.

An advisory team to the FAO Department of Fisheries had concluded that the possibilities for development were considerable, although certainly not everywhere identical. In the Antilles, for example, the immediate opportunities lay with existing small-scale fisheries.

Several delegations, perhaps particularly the U.S., stressed the importance of improving post-harvesting facilities and techniques that would lead to wider marketing opportunities for small-scale fishing communities.

Delegations emphasized the need to provide employment, food, and cash income, and pointed out that appropriate institutional frameworks were essential to progress. Similarly, governments in the region needed to take a more decisive attitude toward fisheries development.

Finally, in this context, and I think most significantly: "Delegations stressed the need to give priority to the provision of every assistance to the small scale fisherman to free him from poverty. Small scale fishermen contributed a major part of fish landings in many countries in the Western Central Atlantic and this situation was likely to remain unchanged. Purely commercial criteria could not be accepted in establishing priorities for action to improve small scale fisheries. The importance of developing acceptable social criteria was emphasized" (from the draft report).

Another factor affecting fisheries development is the International Project for the Development of Fisheries in the Western Central Atlantic, which was approved by UNDP in January 1975 and became operational in March 1975 using UNDP funds: \$124,000 for an 18-month period. Consultants, in cooperation with FAO, are preparing reports on the primary areas of project activity (statistics, resources evaluation, small-scale fishery development, fishing industry development, marketing, and training). The Commission, while endorsing these activities, pointed out that the UNDP funds would not be sufficient to support everything, and hoped that such activities as pelagic surveys, small scale fishery development, and aspects of training would be supported by bilateral donors.

The Commission also agreed to act as the Government Cooperating Agency for the project, and to do this through an Executive Committee that would act for it on all project matters between sessions of the Commission. Hence, the importance of this Committee, of which the U.S. is, as I said earlier, a member.

Several delegations said that their governments would at least consider supporting the WECAFC project through their bilateral aid programs. In this

connection, Canada and the UK sent their fisheries assistance people to the meeting, these men serving in each instance as his country's delegate.

Coastal aquaculture received some attention as a possibility for fisheries development in the WECAFC area, though opportunities were considered marginal for most of the littoral states.

While WECAFC's competence is limited to marine waters, it did endorse a proposal to establish a joint working party of aquaculture specialists to advise the Regional Fisheries Advisory Commission for the Southwest Atlantic (CARPAS), WECAFC and the proposed inland fishery body for Latin America.

The Commission strongly recommended that a Latin American Center for Aquaculture be established soon. Such a Center could, it felt, be a major factor both in conducting and in coordinating aquaculture research in the region.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

The Commission at its first meeting established three working groups that will deal with: (1) stock assessment of shrimp and lobster resources, (2) assessment of fish resources, and (3) fishery statistics.

It endorsed a joint working party on aquaculture and a Latin America Center for Aquaculture.

It endorsed the FAO/UNDP Western Central Atlantic fisheries development project, and, through its Executive Committee, will act as the project's government cooperating agency.

Its members emphasized time and again the importance they placed on small-scale marine fisheries development, believing this should be a major aspect of WECAFC's work.

As I said at the beginning, WECAFC has its problems. However, its members, at least those who attended the first session, are keenly interested in making the organization a success, and many of them are prepared to play dynamic roles. I include the United States in this group, and my prediction is that by the time of the second session WECAFC will be a major fisheries force in this part of the world.