

Report to the UM Independent System for Peer Reviews.

Submitted by R. Mohn for chairing SARC Nov-Dec, 1999

Overview:

SARC 30 reviewed 5 stocks or stock complexes: weakfish, skates, tautog, mackerel and surf clam. The skate complex (7 species) was assessed and a special analysis with respect to ESA Listing Factors was reviewed. The weakfish and tautog resources are wide ranging and the assessments had to integrate a large number of abundance indices. Surf clams were assessed with traditional and new biomass dynamics models. Because of the fullness of the agenda, all the available time was spent on review and document production. There was not sufficient time to investigate a number of scientific issues which came up during preparation for, and the meeting itself.

Activities:

Upon receipt, the various assessments and related documents were read, summarized and specific questions compiled. Some pre-meeting time was also spent reviewing the agenda and becoming more familiar with the SARC process and related documentation. The meeting was chaired and first drafts compiled for each stock. In a couple cases, final results were not available until after the SARC. Upon return to Halifax, an Advisory Draft was compiled and circulated to participants, Their comments were in turn compiled and integrated into the draft. A second draft was completed and forwarded to the SAW chair.

Review related observations:

This report is significantly harder to write than the previous ones. In those, most comments concerned the chair and how the meeting was run. It is a bit trickier when you are the chair. Therefore, my comments will tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive. It is also a bit presumptuous to criticize a process that has been evolving over a couple decades after chairing a single meeting.

Chairing the meeting itself was not too difficult. By and large, the Committee knew what was to be done and how to do it. I thought the SARC went well, but you will have to ask others for a less biased critique.

The agenda was quite full. There were 5 stocks which included a relatively controversial skate complex (7 species) and two widely ranging state assessed resources, weakfish and tautog. There were a couple of implications arising from these two stocks. In the first place they were relatively complex due to the large number of state and federal surveys used in the population analysis. Unfortunately, this complexity fell into hands which were somewhat less experienced in assessment methods which meant more time consuming presentations and slower re-runs. Too much spurious information was brought forward. I do not see any obvious solution to this; we all had to learn the tricks of stock analysis and presentation at some time. I can understand that the state agencies would wish to remain independent of federal labs, but it might have helped if more liaison with NMFS assessment staff had taken place in preparation for the SARC. I do not know to what degree such technical cooperation took place, but some more should have helped.

Also, there was a need for more technical expertise on the panel. A couple of Steve Muraski's staff (and Steve himself) had to carry most of the technical review and help with technology transfer. Fortunately they were highly motivated, as well as competent, and made significant contributions to the success of the meeting. (Names available upon request.) Similarly the SAW staff, Terry and Pie, made every effort to expedite things for me.

As mentioned above, a couple of scientific questions, which were not directly related to the review process were brought forward. One was a qualitative approach to fishery status and productivity and the second concerned inference of natural mortality of skates from length frequency distributions. As they were not directly concerned with the review process they were given lower priority and pushed to the end, and then time ran out and they were not tabled. Instead of being relegated to the end of the meeting, time should be

set aside, say on the second day, to assure a forum. These topics tend to be of interest to staff, help disseminate methodology, and are a rare opportunity for a wider peer review.

Project administration related observations: (semi repeats from previous reports)

If some specific questions could be posed, they might help focus my comments, or those of future chairs. In a similar vein, I had previously mentioned to Victor the desirability of some sort of checklist to help the reviewers avoid omissions and to establish a degree of comparability among reviews. I still think that it is a good idea and any sort of feedback would be constructive.

On the issue of a balance between the desirable quality of independence and the undesirable quality of ignorance. As you recall before the SARC, I was concerned that I would be too inexperienced with the process to put issues into context or be able to deal with some of the subtleties and nuances. My fears were a bit over blown, but I would be able to do a much better job the next time, were the opportunity to arise. The main problems were in the post-SARC document preparation phase. I did not appreciate the potential role of the 'SARC Leaders'. Had I better understood their role and used them more wisely, producing the Draft Advisory would have easier. Specifically, I did not delegate enough responsibility to the SARC Leaders. They, in conjunction with the assessment presenters, should be responsible for a technically correct (right tables, figures etc.) draft for each stock which incorporates a first stab at SARC comments. These should be in consistent formats (MS Word, Excel etc.). Too much time was spent going back and forth to individuals during this phase. The technically correct stock documents could then be rolled up and sent to the SARC panel to assure completeness and solicit final comments and clarifications. Maybe everyone else in the room knew this, except me. The other problems for a neophyte were smaller, like knowing the proper jargon in various situations. The endangered species implications concerning barndoor skate comes to mind.