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Summary of Discussions held during the ICES Advice Webinar

Monday 1 June 2020

Dave Meerburg (Atlantic Salmon Federation): noted Dr Robertson's conclusion that factors other than fisheries were affecting stocks. He stated that Dr Robertson had mentioned that the returns of two-sea-winter (2SW) salmon in 2019 were the lowest in the time series from 1971. However, the graph on the 'Exploitation Rate' slide appeared to show a steadily increasing exploitation rate on 2SW North American salmon at West Greenland since around 2001. The most recent year assessed showed the highest level of exploitation of these fish at West Greenland since 2001, yet the home waters had the second lowest returns they have ever had. He questioned the conclusion that the fisheries are not having an effect if there is an increase in exploitation rate in one place, yet a decrease in returns at another. He felt that there may be a problem there.

Martha Robertson (ICES): agreed that fisheries is one component but that survival of salmon at sea has a large unexplained component.

Dave Meerburg (Atlantic Salmon Federation): agreed with Dr Robertson, but pointed out that she had not highlighted the fact that the exploitation at Greenland was the highest it has been since 2001 on North American stocks, despite the fact that that year, 2018, saw a much reduced fishery from some previous years. He also indicated that the quota was exceeded by about a third in the year 2000.

Gennady Zharkov (Russian Federation): asked whether there were any estimates of escaped farmed fish.

Martha Robertson (ICES): responded that the ICES advice does mention the production of farmed salmon, but the Working Group on North Atlantic Salmon (WGNAS) does not provide a summary of reports of escapees. This is not within the Working Group's Terms of Reference.

Paul Knight (Salmon and Trout Conservation UK): noted that the NGOs are extremely worried about introgression and asked whether this is something that could be modelled or calculated so that it could come through the advice models in future. He stated that Norwegian rivers are becoming more and more 'polluted' with introgression, and lots of NGOs believe that many other European rivers are the same. He asked if this would be a reasonable or credible question to ask of ICES.

Martha Robertson (ICES): advised that there is already a separate Working Group within ICES looking at the impacts of introgression on wild Atlantic salmon. She noted that Ian Bradbury, a geneticist, and member of the WGNAS, is also part of that Group.

Arnaud Peyronnet (European Union): thanked Dr Robertson for her presentation. He noted that Dr Robertson had shown the reproductive stock complex in North America, and that there is reduced reproductive status for all the different rivers. However, a large number of those rivers were shown to be attaining their conservation limits. He found it difficult to reconcile these two elements, how it was possible to have attained conservation limits while also having reduced reproductive status and asked Dr Robertson for further clarification.

Martha Robertson (ICES): agreed that this is difficult to understand.

Gerald Chaput (Canada): commented that the conservation limit attainment for individual rivers is for all sea-ages, whereas the reduced reproductive capacity shown in Figure 3.3 in the presentation is specifically for 2SW salmon.

Martha Robertson (ICES): reiterated this point, indicating that a river may have lots of one-sea-winter (1SW) fish returning, but may not have many 2SW fish returning. So the river is healthy, but the MSW fish component is not so healthy. MSW fish are the only fish from North America that travel to Greenland, so while, in general, North American stocks are healthy with 1SW fish, the MSW stock component that travels to Greenland is not as healthy.

Alan McNeill (Canada): asked whether the recreational catch included caught and released fish or only harvested salmon?

Martha Robertson (ICES): replied that in North America ‘catch’ or ‘harvest’ means those fish that are retained, and that the advice document includes how many fish were released. She noted that a large number of fish are released, but they are not considered part of the harvest.

Katrine Kærgaard (Denmark (in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland)): noted that ICES concludes that factors other than fisheries must affect the decline in the stock and asked if it would it be possible for ICES to map which other factors affect the stock.

Martha Robertson (ICES): stated that the end of the advice document contains an ‘other factors for consideration’ section, which she believes requires updating. She indicated that she would raise this with the WGNAS in 2021. The advice document does not specify the other factors, although given the poor returns and restrictions on fisheries, we know that there must be other factors. There is a large at-sea mortality but at this point, the mechanisms of that mortality cannot be explained.

Gennady Zharkov (Russian Federation): asked whether there was any progress in respect of new measures concerning mixed-stock fisheries in Norway.

Martha Robertson (ICES): stated that she was unaware of new management measures for coastal fisheries in Norway, and that this would be a question for Norway.

Paul Knight (Salmon and Trout Conservation UK): noted Dr Robertson’s comment about at-sea mortality, and that most people are in agreement that this is a problem. He felt that some scientists now think that more fish are lost in the freshwater environment than was previously thought, before they go to sea. He asked if this were something that ICES was aware of and whether it could be investigated further.

Martha Robertson (ICES): replied that ICES does have estimates of smolt production on many rivers. There is a decline in output for some rivers, and this is going to become a bigger concern as populations decline and they go below the point at which freshwater production will decline. At the moment, most of the focus is still on the marine environment as there are rivers which are considered to be at full reproductive capacity, but to which the fish are not returning. This is the key issue for many populations at present. The good thing about freshwater is that freshwater issues can be managed. Most freshwater declines are site specific, although some relate to climate change in the south. Different jurisdictions are looking at the freshwater issues in their own rivers, and there is a wide range of issues such as predation, warm water, or hydro dams. From the North Atlantic perspective, the focus is on impacts in the marine environment.

Dave Meerburg (Atlantic Salmon Federation): thanked Dr Robertson for her very informative presentation. He noted that this would be the last year she presented the ICES advice to NASCO as her term as Chair of the WGNAS was coming to an end; he thanked her for her work over the past three years in this role.

Gennady Zharkov (Russian Federation): noted that a complete ban on netting was being discussed in Norway.

Martha Robertson (ICES): indicated that she was not part of those discussions but stated that there are constant reductions in marine fisheries. Each year there seem to be more and more restrictions on marine fishing.

Katrine Kærgaard (Denmark (in respect of the Faroe Islands and Greenland)): asked whether the planned predation workshop had taken place in 2019, and if ICES could use that information in its advice.

Martha Robertson (ICES): stated that she recalled there being a predation workshop in 2019, but it was not part of the ICES WGNAS. She suggested it may have been part of the Likely Suspects Project.

Ken Whelan (Atlantic Salmon Trust): noted that while predation is being looked at in the context of the Likely Suspects Framework, he was not aware of any workshop being held or planned on the issue. He indicated that there was extensive work planned in the Moray Firth in Scotland which would specifically look at predatory birds. Marine Scotland would also be involved in this work.

Martha Robertson (ICES): noted that there are now a lot of jurisdictions looking at predation in the freshwater environment. She thanked everyone for their comments and questions.

Emma Hatfield (NASCO and Webinar Chair): thanked Dr Robertson for her presentation and for her sterling work as the Chair of the WGNAS in recent years. She also thanked everyone for being willing to participate in this unusual way of presenting the advice from ICES in this unusual year.