

Co-Chairs' Report of the Meeting of the Standing Working Group on Dialogue between Fisheries Scientists and Managers (SWGSM)
(Hybrid/Madrid, Spain, 8 July 2025)

1. Opening of the meeting and meeting logistics

The Commission Chair, Mr Ernesto Penas Lado, and the SCRS Chair, Dr Craig Brown, opened the meeting and welcomed all the participants. The ICCAT Executive Secretary also welcomed everyone and outlined the meeting arrangements. He introduced the 22 CPCs and the seven observers attending the meeting.

2. Election of the SWGSM co-Chairs

Guatemala and South Africa proposed Mr Penas and Dr Brown as co-Chairs of the SWGSM. Mr Penas and Dr Brown were elected as co-Chairs of the SWGSM.

3. Nomination of Rapporteur

In the absence of nominations for Rapporteur, the Secretariat exceptionally agreed to serve as Rapporteur.

4. Adoption of Agenda

The Agenda was adopted without changes and is attached as **Appendix 1**. The List of participants is attached as **Appendix 2**.

5. General overview of the SCRS workplan to draft the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031

Dr Craig Brown provided a presentation regarding the work done by the SCRS on the drafting of the new SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031.

5.1 Drafting process

Dr Brown explained that the current Draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 updates the objectives and associated strategies of the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2015-2020, to reflect the current situation, removing or modifying objectives and strategies that no longer need to be included. In addition, new objectives and strategies were added to reflect current or anticipated needs.

He explained the different phases of the drafting process and highlighted that the views of Commissioners on the perceived effectiveness of this strategic plan in addressing their needs with respect to scientific advice are therefore important for the SCRS to take into account.

He also added that during the 2025 SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting (9-11 June 2025) scientists will review the current draft strategic plan, considering the comments and any proposed edits emerging from this SWGSM meeting.

Finally, he emphasized that the goal is to finalize the 2026-2031 SCRS Science Strategic Plan, for adoption at the SCRS Plenary and consideration at the 29th Regular Meeting of the Commission.

5.2 Highlighted objectives achieved through the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2015-2020

Dr Brown presented several examples of the achievements made under the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2015-2020, which have been reflected in the new Draft Plan.

5.3 SWOT analysis of the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031

Dr Brown made a summary of the SWOT analysis which includes identifying the Strengths and Weaknesses of the SCRS and its processes, the Opportunities for improvement and the perceived Threats to carrying out the work of the SCRS, indicating some examples for all of them.

5.4 Overview of the draft document

Dr Brown indicated that the 2025 SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting is a good opportunity to avoid the delays inherent in doing the work online through shared documents and by correspondence and suggested that the participants in this meeting indicate the main critical topics to focus on, for the SCRS to try to incorporate the suggestions. He said that if this is considered too ambitious, it would be best to focus especially on measurable targets, which were often difficult to characterize for objectives and their strategies.

South Africa indicated that the text has a solid base but, in general, would need some refinement regarding prioritization and suggested that the selected measurable targets should have an assigned responsible group and an indication if they require funding or not. South Africa also suggested that all Parts, Goals, Objectives, Strategies, and Selected Measurable Targets be clearly numbered using a multilevel numbering system which will enhance the clarity of the document. It also suggested that regarding the structure of the document, maybe it could be reconsidered to better reflect the logical flow of activities: Part 3 (Dialogue and Communication) could be the starting point, followed sequentially by Part 5 (Research) and Part 6 (Provision of Management Advice, including Stock Assessments and Management Strategy Evaluations), which set out the research priorities, followed by Part 2 (Data Collection) which will be the operative part supporting the science, and finally, Part 4 (Participation and Capacity Building).

Dr Brown responded that he agreed that the document is a bit difficult and that it should be reorganized, and he would propose it in the 2025 SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting to facilitate reading of the text.

The United Kingdom (UK) reminded the meeting of document “Development of a new SCRS Science Strategic Plan” (PLE_114/2024) which suggested to prioritize the work of the SCRS and its subsidiary bodies to make the workload easier to manage and to improve dialogue between the Commission and the SCRS with the aim of increasing efficiencies and reducing resource pressures. Regarding the Plan itself, the UK asked for clarifications regarding the main objectives and, since it is a “Strategic Plan”, he indicated that the “strategic” element of the Plan should be developed further noting that it is important that strategic objectives for the SCRS for the period of the Plan are identified and incorporated into the Plan. Regarding the SWOT analysis, he considered it very useful to understand the strategic objectives of the SCRS, and supported South Africa’s comments regarding numbering to place different sections adequately. The UK also noted that it would like to see specific links between the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 and the work of the various SCRS Species Groups and sub-groups. Finally, the UK indicated great support for measurable targets for the objectives to measure progress of the implementation.

Dr Brown noted the importance for the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 to have measurable targets and to regularly review the progress in achieving those targets in order for the Plan to be effective.

Guatemala highlighted the importance of the Plan to really value the scientific perspective when taking management decisions. Regarding some elements in the SWOT analysis, Guatemala noted that in the Strengths are included the diversity in participation, the diversity in analytical approaches and adaptation to changes as important elements. In this regard, it indicated the importance of assuring an inclusive, transparent and effective participation of all CPCs in the SCRS, including but without limiting to, the constant use of the 3 official languages and the importance for the Commission to build technical capacity so that there are no inequalities between CPCs. Regarding financing opportunities, Guatemala asked what should be done to make financing opportunities a reality. On data collection, it noted the need to work with the different countries to identify the problem, and if it is confidentiality, work with the different countries to assure that this confidentiality does not have the negative influence it is having. He also noted Guatemala’s concern regarding the “undue influence” of participants with political, ideological, or financial interests, as listed under Threats, which could have different interpretations. On Goal 5 (Research to support the inclusion of ecosystem/climate change/bycatch considerations in the provision of scientific advice), Guatemala considers it would be a good moment to include socioeconomic components. Regarding Goal 6

(Consider the establishment of a Research Steering Committee to improve consistency of approaches, coordination, and overall prioritization of research activities across Working Groups), it indicated some concerns, because its understanding is that the SCRS structure has some guidance from the chairs. Finally, Guatemala noted the need to distinguish between qualitative and quantitative elements.

Dr Brown noted that regarding the funding opportunities, the previous plan referred to specific programmes existing at that time; currently, given the limits of ICCAT funding and voluntary contributions, if there are sources of external funding, the SCRS should be looking to make use of them. This may apply not only for the SCRS as a whole, but also for those individual CPCs needing support in building science capacity or data collection. Regarding inappropriate influences during SCRS meetings, he noted that maintaining the integrity of the science is something which has been always very important, and we must ensure that our debates focus on scientific arguments. We must support the Commission through objective scientific advice, without introducing biases on matters not related to science, and that also is part of our Values. Every delegation has the right to include whoever they want in their delegations, and many are not scientists. We value the contributions of non-scientists, but what we want to avoid is that management advice or results are modified to suit the interests of particular parties, rather than on a scientific basis. Regarding socioeconomic aspects, in the previous plan there were some sections about this and they have been deleted because the SCRS does not have the resources, in terms of data and expertise, to provide advice considering these aspects. Furthermore, although this lack of resources might be addressed over time, what may be more critical is that the SCRS would need very specific guidance from the Commission if the Commission wants socioeconomic advice. There are many different metrics through which to reflect socio-economic impact, which may vary in importance across CPCs. In addition, there are so many possible associated objectives to provide scientific advice on achieving, which may have conflicting benefits across CPCs, that the best place to address this is the Commission. As regards the Research Steering Committee, he highlighted that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 only calls for a discussion in 2026 of whether or not a Research Steering Committee should be established, and if established, the membership and responsibilities would be determined. Dr Brown also noted that one reason it is being suggested is because the SCRS establishes research plans and sets priorities within each Species Group and this Steering Committee could coordinate across those groups to establish overall priorities in research so that, in case of insufficient funding, there would be collective guidance on where to accommodate any reductions in available budget. The Research Steering Committee might also provide an independent view of research needs and budget estimates, etc. since we need to be very precise in our estimates for budgeting requests. As far as the question regarding capacity building, there has been some progress, but we are still very limited in expertise in key areas. Interpretation and the hybrid format have increased participation, but usually the same people take care of things, so we are still very limited in capacity and the requests are increasing.

Japan noted that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 has to be flexible enough to accommodate the Commission's requests and that prioritization is critical, with specified time frames, as it is essential to know when the target will be achieved.

Dr Brown indicated that the text will be ready after the SCRS Plenary and clarified that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 covers 6 years, but that the SCRS is aware that shorter deadlines have to be set for many of the targets.

Norway asked if the SCRS has enough resources to adopt the ecosystem-based approach and Dr Brown answered that to more fully adopt Ecosystem Based Fisheries Management, more relevant expertise will be needed, as well as collection or access to relevant data, some of which may be currently available either publicly or through collaborative agreements. Considerable thought is needed on how to best integrate current and future ecosystem work into the scientific advice.

The UK reiterated the importance of effectively prioritizing and regularly reviewing the Species Groups' priorities. The UK signalled its agreement with Japan regarding the importance of viewing the Draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 after the SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting. On the socioeconomic aspects, it indicated that it is not the mandate of the SCRS.

The observer from Pew Charitable Trusts (PEW) offered help with prioritization and noted that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 is also a Commission plan, so it should be included somewhere.

There were several interventions regarding the importance of incorporating the contributions from this meeting in the Draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031, because the Commission has to approve it.

Canada asked for clarification on if the Plan is approved by the SCRS, would it then be transmitted to the Commission.

Dr Brown indicated that first the SCRS Plenary would approve the Plan and then the Commission would adopt it.

The co-Convenor of the Subcommittee on Ecosystems and Bycatch noted the importance of being clearer and better defining the elements necessary to review the performance of the SCRS. He also highlighted that the SCRS has to respond to the Commission, but that it has the independence of proposing actions and activities.

Dr Brown noted that the SCRS needs the support of CPCs regarding the participation of National Scientists in SCRS meetings. He added that the SCRS needs to keep its independence.

Brazil indicated that regarding the socioeconomic aspects, it would be very useful to have feedback from the Commission, and regarding capacity building, there are many efforts in place but there is still much to be done.

The United States (U.S.) agreed that the SCRS requires independence in its research and highlighted again the absolute need to prioritize since the Plan is very long. Dr Brown clarified that he refers to independence to provide advice to the Commission.

Japan noted that the SCRS is part of ICCAT, which is why dialogue and this Group are so important.

The co-Chair, Mr Penas, asked Dr Brown several questions regarding the low recruitment, the SCRS needs in terms of requests from the Commission, the need for flexibility in funding and the pressure on the SCRS to work on climate change, biodiversity, etc.

With respect to low recruitment, Dr Brown responded that it is not so much a problem of low attendance at meetings, but of a low number of new active participants with specific knowledge or expertise (stock assessment modelers, knowledge of ICCAT fisheries, etc.) while, at the same time, a loss of experienced scientists for various reasons (e.g. retirement, focus on other RFMOs, career change). He noted that 2025 has been particularly difficult in this regard, with several very experienced and key SCRS Officers with important roles in 2025 (including chairing meetings and an assessment process, as well as being lead stock assessment modeler) unexpectedly departing from their CPC delegation. This particular situation was addressed through a combination of other SCRS scientists stepping up temporarily and an *ad hoc* solution of contracting some of the departing SCRS Officers as invited experts. But this *ad hoc* solution is not a long-term answer, and these losses are expected to add to the scientific capacity shortfall in coming years, unless CPCs support the SCRS work through including scientists with relevant expertise in their delegations, or the SCRS can build capacity from within. Dr Brown also noted that it can take a long time to gain knowledge of ICCAT fisheries, and to learn data and scientific processes, so the inclusion of younger, capable scientists in CPC delegations with a longer term commitment to support their participation would be an effective way to restore lost capacity.

Regarding requests from the Commission to the SCRS, Dr Brown responded that the difficulties are multi-faceted. Sometimes requests are unclear, which can delay responses or cause unnecessary work. Sometimes requests are maintained in the text when a measure is rolled over, and it is unclear if the SCRS is expected to provide an additional response. There are a huge number of requests each year, and the SCRS is unable to dedicate appropriate effort to respond thoroughly to all of them. Yet the Commission does not prioritize its requests, so the SCRS has no clear guidance on where to focus its limited resources.

Dr Brown explained that the need for flexibility in research funding is being highlighted due to changes in funding protocols. In the past, the SCRS was able to carry funds over from one year to the next if unable to fully expend them in one year. This can often occur, particularly involving field work, when conditions may be different in a given year/season from what was expected in planning the research, or when the season to carry out the work straddles calendar years. Also, some research may take more than one calendar year to

complete. But, under the new protocols (with some exceptions in the case of some voluntary contributions), all contracts must be initiated and completed within one calendar year. For some longer-term projects, with Commission support, funding may be provided for multiple years (e.g. MSE work), but even then, contracts must be carried out and finalized within the calendar year. The SCRS has also been experiencing difficulties when there is no suitable response to calls for tender to carry out contracted work. With reissued calls for tender (with or without modification) there may be suitable responses, but no longer time to carry out the work before the end of the calendar year.

Finally, in response to Mr Penas' question regarding the pressure on the SCRS to work on climate change and biodiversity, Dr Brown said that it would be best to start addressing these topics gradually, using existing and accessible resources (e.g. current expertise within the SCRS, accessible data and scientific literature), including seeking ways to integrate related research into the process of developing scientific advice across SCRS working groups.

The European Union (EU) provided some general remarks, e.g. prioritization, how to implement the targets proposed, lack of resources, lack of dynamism to react before unforeseen circumstances. The EU also noted it would be a good idea to implement a traffic light system to indicate the status of achieving an objective, and a revision clause to monitor what has been done. It suggested that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 be a living document, in the sense that new Goals and Objectives can be included if the needs change over the course of the Plan. Finally, the EU also asked about the process to incorporate the Commission feedback once the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 has been approved by the SCRS plenary.

Dr Brown acknowledged that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 must be at least partially a living document, so that it can be adapted if unanticipated needs or significant new approaches arise. He mentioned that living sections associated with each objective are being considered, or a link to a separate document, where progress towards the objective can be updated. But he also emphasized that the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 cannot be too "alive" in the sense of changing the objectives all the time, or it would not achieve its utility as a strategic plan. It is necessary to find the proper balance.

The U.S. mentioned two issues, the importance of scientists with expertise to continue working with the SCRS once retired and that some requests from the Commission, repeated year after year, make the SCRS spend time and resources.

Dr Brown explained that this year the SCRS is trying to solve this topic, trying to get rid of these time-consuming responses. He indicated that the objective is to know which of the responses are still active and prioritize among them. Mr Penas indicated that prioritizing between panels would be difficult because each CPC has an interest in some panels and not in others, and the Commission should prioritize in an equitable manner. It was further noted that establishing priorities across Commission requests is difficult during the Annual Commission meetings following the current process, as Recommendations are adopted on the last day and might not be finalized until then.

The observer from PEW noted that prioritization is a very difficult issue, which highlights the importance of meetings like this one indicating his hope for this Group's meetings to be periodical and not only for one day. Mr Penas answered that there are a lot of challenges so this meeting should not be an isolated effort.

6. Focused discussion of the draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 (SCRS is seeking feedback and editorial suggestions)

The SCRS Chair presented the document section by section, and several CPCs made specific comments. The co-Chairs requested CPCs to provide both general and specific comments, in written form, to be considered during the SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting.

7. Intersessional workplan to finalize SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031

Dr Brown noted that the intention was to finalize the Draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 during the SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting, and that later it should be adopted at the SCRS Plenary, but it has become clear that additional intersessional work will be necessary before finalizing the Plan. Several CPCs indicated that it would be necessary to see the Draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 with all modifications made during the SCRS Strategic Plan Meeting and before submitting it to the SCRS Plenary. Mr Penas noted that he will try for the Plan to be adopted by consensus at the Commission meeting.

8. SWGSM Workplan

8.1 Topic(s) and timing of the 2026 Meeting of the SWGSM

The Group decided to wait until the Commission meeting in November, and depending on whether the Plan is adopted, a decision will be made.

Dr Alex Hanke (Canada) provided a presentation on the importance of incorporating ecosystem, climate and bycatch considerations into the management of ICCAT species and following the precautionary approach and to include those elements in the SWGSM Workplan.

8.2 Intersessional work

The co-Chairs indicated that this point would be covered from now until the annual Commission meeting in November, according to the following schedule:

The SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 work proposal will be drafted considering the following steps:

- **By 18 July 2025:** SCRS Chair will send an email to the SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting participants, inviting them to participate in the process, and then giving them permission to edit documents;
- **By mid/22 August 2025:** Deadline for comments from the SCRS Science Strategic Plan Meeting participants;
- **By 25 August 2025:** SCRS Chairs will compile and deliver new version to the Secretariat, to be circulated before the end of August.
- **By 10 September 2025:** Deadline for final comments from CPCs to be received.
- **By mid-September 2025:** Deadline for the Secretariat to receive final version for translation and dissemination at the SCRS level.

9. Recommendations

The co-Chairs noted that the Group is not able to make formal recommendations because there are still some points open and there is still work to be done. The only recommendation made was that the CPCs provide their comments in writing and that Dr Brown oversees the preparation of a new draft aiming adoption by consensus during the SCRS Plenary.

10. Other matters

The Secretariat informed the Group of the need to update the *Rules and Procedures for the protection, access to, and dissemination of data compiled by ICCAT*, noting that this Group is considered the most adequate since it involves both the SCRS and Commission.

Mr Penas indicated that given the current workload it would be a good idea to advance the work in the SCRS Plenary meeting and include it in the meeting of the SWGSM in 2026.

Canada noted that the Group must do some intersessional work before the Commission meeting because the Group has not addressed the structure of the Group nor the 2026 meeting structure. It also indicated that, from a budgetary point of view it would be useful if the meetings are virtual.

Mr Penas specified that the Group already has a procedure for the SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031 and that during the next Commission meeting in November it should be decided how to proceed, but requested Canada to send suggestions regarding the structure.

11. Adoption of report and closure

The co-Chairs suggested that instead of approval by consensus of all participants, the Report will be done as a report of the co-Chairs, so that adoption would not be done by correspondence. Participants accepted this option.

The co-Chairs thanked the participants, the interpreters and the Secretariat for all the work done and the meeting was adjourned.

Agenda

1. Opening of the meeting and meeting logistics
2. Election of the SWGSM co-Chairs
3. Nomination of Rapporteur
4. Adoption of Agenda
5. General overview of the SCRS workplan to draft the Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031
 - 5.1 Drafting process
 - 5.2 Highlighted objectives achieved through the Science Strategic Plan 2015-2020
 - 5.3 SWOT analysis of the Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031
 - 5.4 Overview of the draft document
6. Focused discussion of the draft SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031
(SCRS is seeking feedback and editorial suggestions)
7. Intersessional workplan to finalize SCRS Science Strategic Plan 2026-2031
8. SWGSM workplan
 - 8.1 Topic(s) and timing of the 2026 Meeting of the SWGSM
 - 8.2 Intersessional work
9. Recommendations
10. Other matters
11. Adoption of report and closure

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