

## WORKSHOP SUMMARY REPORT

# RESEARCHING SCOTTISH ELASMOBRANCHS – OPPORTUNITY FOR A COMBINED APPROACH?

**8/29/2013**

**MASTS ASM –  
HERIOT WATT  
CONFERENCE  
CENTRE**



The purpose of the workshop was to highlight the current elasmobranch research taking place in Scottish waters and to see if a collaborative approach might be beneficial in driving future research forwards. The workshop attracted 31 participants from a wide range of backgrounds.

The workshop and session 1 was opened by the Chair, Prof. Teresa Fernandes, who provided an overview of MASTS, highlighting areas (such as community projects) that might benefit an elasmobranch group. This followed with 10 excellent presentations on current elasmobranch work from: Ali Hood (UK Shark trust), Ian Burrett (Scottish Sea Angling Conservation Network), Francis Neat (Marine Scotland), Vicki Bendall (CEFAS), Suz Henderson (SNH), Lea-Anne Henry (Heriot Watt), Les Noble, Lili Lieber, James Thorburn (all Aberdeen University) and Mark Hind (Sealife).

These talks provided a good overview of current research taking place in Scotland and highlighted the opportunities that might be available such as Marine Scotland and CEFAS sampling and Sealife's 'seeding' project. One thing that was highlighted by the talks was that in many cases a multi-disciplinary approach was providing good data on specific species e.g. the Common Skate work being undertaken by Marine Scotland and Aberdeen with support from the Scottish Shark Tagging Programme (SSTP). A combined study using citizen collected

mark/recapture data, acoustic and archival tagging programmes alongside genetic studies have yielded good insight into regional population composition and suitability for spatial management in the form of an MPA. Another example would be the basking shark, where a combined approach between Aberdeen University, Scottish Natural Heritage and the University of Exeter is providing some excellent spatial data using a combination of genetics and satellite tagging. An addition to this is some exciting new work involving multi-beam surveillance of the sharks in the water, providing real-time data on shark movement and interactions.

The talks also highlighted how two different spurdog populations had been the focus of archival tagging studies by CEFAS and Aberdeen University, with the shared goal of gaining insight into the spurdog spatial ecology. Looking at initial findings, it would appear that the two regional populations display quite different movement behaviours, suggesting a national management strategy might not be as effective as more local measures. One population of spurdog showed strong site association, a theme in common with the deep sea environment. Work at Heriot Watt is beginning to reveal the importance of deep sea reef habitats for species of deep water elasmobranchs such as blackmouth catshark.

Taking a slight sidestep out of academia, we also saw the importance that citizen science can play in elasmobranch research. The Scottish Shark Tagging Programme has been collecting data on shark species in Scotland for over 5 years, often providing good insight into shark behaviour that allows scientists to tailor their research projects more effectively. They also have excellent local knowledge and can even provide opportunities for access to some of the shark species. Similarly with the Shark Trust, they too have excellent communication with a wide range of people and have many projects involving citizen science, such as the Great Eggcase Hunt and their angler diary project. Both groups provide excellent data, but also excel in public outreach, a step that is vital to raise the public's awareness and encourage funders to give grants to elasmobranch research. Another important aspect of public outreach is carried out by the Sealife centres that have hands-on access to many species of Scottish elasmobranchs with which they undertake breeding programmes. As a result of this they have an opportunity to develop a 'seeding' project where they release new-born elasmobranchs back into the local environment.

One thing that was clear from all the talks is that in Scotland, we have a wide range of experience in elasmobranch research with many exciting opportunities to carry research forward. This will be far more effective, providing more insight and results if institutions work together, by bringing their own areas of expertise to a project as well as the use of their facilities, shark research in Scotland can really be driven forward.

Session 2 was an open discussion on the direction that a combined approach towards future elasmobranch work could take. While discussion time was shorter than planned, some useful points were raised which will enable us to move forward.

#### Summary of the key points from session 2 interactive discussion

- Most participants agreed that a collaborative approach to future work was mutually beneficial.
- It is important to match the needs of the academic community to the management problems facing elasmobranchs.
- It was suggested that an 'elasmobranch group' was formed, although the exact function/remit of the group would have to be decided upon – there is a possibility of fitting this under the MASTS BEF theme, but with several potential aims:
  - supporting and promoting sustainable fisheries that reduce bycatch
  - protection of endangered elasmobranch populations
  - identification, protection and restoration of habitats critical to life stages that are key to elasmobranchs
  - improved scientific knowledge and creation of standardised regional benchmarks and datasets
  - public awareness of elasmobranch conservation

This is a very positive first step and provides a good foundation to build future meetings and actions upon.

## Summary of feedback

- Very beneficial
- Highlighted the diverse range of elasmobranch research currently taking place
- Highlighted potential opportunities for sampling
- Good networking opportunity
- Needed a longer discussion section
- Another meeting is needed

Generally feedback was very positive. The short discussion section, while unfortunate, did highlight the fact that there is much to discuss, which should be taken as a positive and something to move forward with. A follow-up meeting either at, or before, the proposed conference next year would be of benefit.

We will be contacting you all again soon to further develop plans in accordance with some of the points raised at the workshop and look forward very much to meeting you all again and really carrying this forward to advance elasmobranch research in Scotland.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you all for attending and showing an interest in this area. I would like to offer special thanks to the speakers, some of whom travelled significant distance to join us for the afternoon, your contributions were very much appreciated and each and every one contributed significantly to the workshop.

I would also like to give special thanks to Dr Lea-Anne Henry who contributed significantly to the organisation of the workshop and Prof. Teresa Fernandes for taking an interest in this research areas and chairing the workshop. Thanks also to MASTS for giving us the space to facilitate the workshop and their technical assistance.

Thank you!