

SAWs: Making the rules of the game clearer every year

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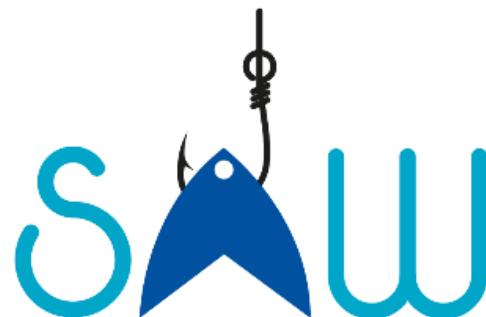
Since 2006, the Pacific Community (SPC) has held annual stock assessment training workshops (widely known as the “SAWs”) for participants from member countries. The purpose of the workshops is to: 1) help fisheries professionals in the region improve their understanding of stock assessments of tunas (and tuna-like species); 2) communicate this information to fishery managers and stakeholders within their countries; and 3) increase their confidence in participating in scientific discussions of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), in particular during meetings of its Scientific Committee. These topics can be quite technical, and fisheries professionals from member countries are often keen to expand their knowledge in a setting more supportive than regional meetings. The content of SAW courses is also useful for day-to-day fisheries work, and for other WCPFC and subregional meetings.

Because the courses have been run for many years, some previous participants have gone on to become well-known fisheries personalities in the region. Many of the more than 150 previous participants have attended the courses multiple times (the record is seven attended courses), and it is common for participants to progress from the introductory course to the advanced course in the same, or subsequent years. This repetition is beneficial for understanding more difficult topics, and the improved confidence of participants with each attendance is clear.

In recent years, two back-to-back, one-week-long workshops have been held in Noumea, and the content has been delivered as a mix of presentations and hands-on, computer-based practical sessions. The first week is aimed at people new to the topics, while the second week digs a deeper into technical details and is typically attended by more experienced participants.

The COVID pandemic has necessitated a change of tact for how these workshops are delivered. The 2020 workshops were cancelled under the assumption that travel restrictions would be relatively short-lived, and that face-to-face workshops would resume at some point. Unfortunately, the reality has meant that online-based alternatives needed to be explored.

For the 2021 workshops, a more compact agenda was adopted, with two, four-day workshops run, which were again split into introductory and advanced modules. A fewer number of topics could be delivered, and so the fo-



2021 Introductory Stock Assessment Workshop



2021 Advanced Stock Assessment Workshop

The introductory and advanced SAW logos.

cus was directed towards only the most important stock assessment topics. The workshops were still based on presentations by SPC scientists, but these had to be delivered via Zoom, which meant that much of the usual interaction among participants was lost. The practical sessions, which typically are the more popular component of the in-person workshops, were not used due to the high level of interaction required between tutors and participants, which was impossible through Zoom. Instead, short quizzes were given to reinforce the main points of presentations. These quizzes, along with the presentations and other content, were packaged and organised as modules in “Moodle”, an online learning platform.

While e-workshops have their drawbacks, the positive side of the SAW online courses was that a higher number of participants could be involved. In a typical year, only 15–20 people can attend each week due to travel and accommodation costs. This year, 107 people registered, although the

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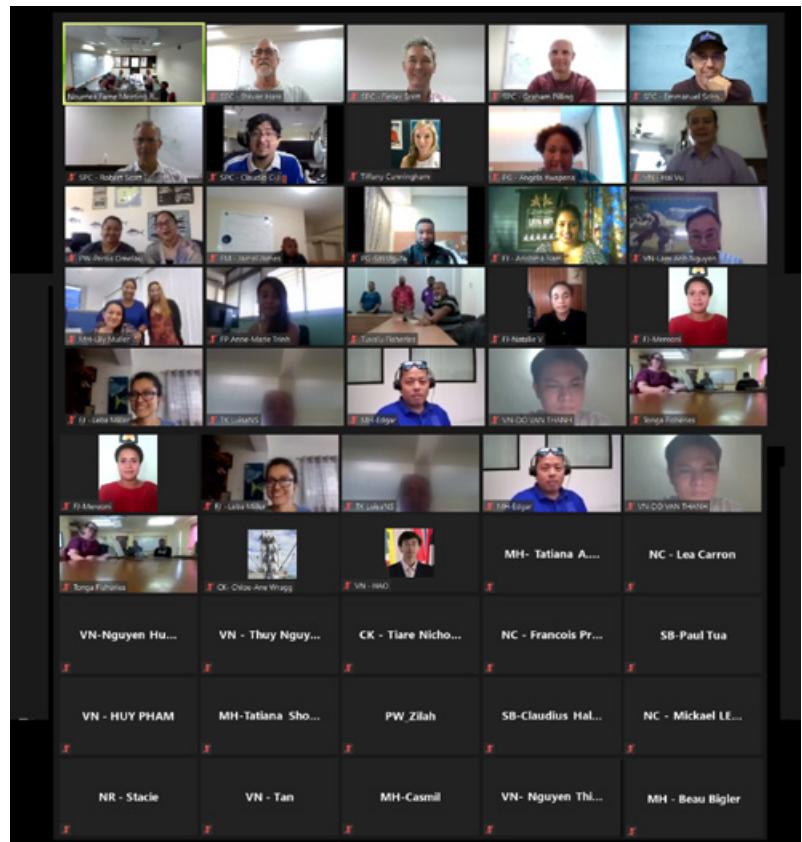
• SPC activities •

true number of attendees was difficult to know, with some of those registered unable to attend, and multiple people (some unregistered) sharing screens. However, 61 individuals completed the final introductory test and 41 completed the advanced test, with a 50–50 gender split. Participants from 18 countries participated, with some countries not having been represented at the workshops in recent years.

Feedback from participants suggests that the workshops were well received, and the Zoom and Moodle approach was very user-friendly. This approach also has the benefit of providing a repository for the course content, including recordings of presentations that were delivered during the live workshops. Several people who missed the courses due to work commitments were subsequently able to work through the content on their own time by viewing the presentations

and completing the associated quizzes and final tests. Any-one who would like to do the same is encouraged to contact the authors of this article for access directions.

The outlook for SAW workshops remains uncertain. Re-establishment of face-to-face workshops would require a return to regional travel, and it is unknown when that will happen. Until that time, the e-workshop approach will continue to be the focus of the workshops, and if, and when, travel becomes possible, there is still the question of how much the e-learning component can continue to complement the traditional workshop. The delivery of e-workshops this year provides a strong base to work from in refining the approach and trying to maximise the benefits to participants from member countries.



SAW workshops before (left) and after (right) the start of the COVID crisis. The virtual format of SAW 2021 limited the usual interaction among participants but increased the number of participants able to attend.