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25th NEAFC Annual Meeting, London, 13-17 November 2006

Opening Statement

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates and Observers,

At this the third NEAFC Annual Meeting attended by WWF as an observer organisation we would like to recall two key recommendations from the WWF-TRAFFIC report entitled *“Follow the Leader. Learning from experience and best practice in regional fisheries management organizations”* which was published earlier this year:

“Established RFMOs should institutionalise the use of an ecosystem approach and the precautionary approach through explicit recognition of its adoption through either amendment of their conventions or through formal resolutions”; and

“The scope of data collection and scientific advice should be broadened to include mandatory collection of non-target and associated or dependent species and broader ecosystem impacts.”

WWF has witnessed promising signals of NEAFC moving into this direction during recent years. WWF welcomes the progress made by the Working Group on the Future of NEAFC and in particular the extension of NEAFC’s mandate to minimise and mitigate adverse impacts of fishing practices on non-target species and habitats. WWF believes there is a unique opportunity for NEAFC to positively influence the global process of promoting and establishing effective High Seas governance and improving existing management structures and mechanisms respectively.

However, in order to become clearly visible as a leader in this field, NEAFC must move from theory to practice, from commitment to implementation. In 2004, NEAFC adopted the groundbreaking decision to close, to bottom trawling and other gear in contact with the seafloor, four seamounts and a segment of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge on a temporary basis. This was highlighted by WWF as a milestone and important precedent at the global scale.

While the discussion about the role and mandate of NEAFC for reducing fisheries impacts on the wider ecosystem was in progress, the urgent need to prevent damage to cold-water coral reefs and further vulnerable deep-water habitats on Rockall and Hatton Bank was addressed by Contracting Parties, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations. Both Rockall and Hatton Banks feature extensive occurrences of reef-building cold-water coral serving as habitat to hundreds of further species of sedentary organisms, molluscs and crustaceans and providing vital grounds for various commercial fish species, including saithe, redfish, ling

and tusk. On the request of NEAFC, ICES in 2005 has clearly advised areas to be permanently closed on Rockall Bank and the adjacent West Rockall and Logachev Mounds, including their concise coordinates. ICES also provided NEAFC with evidence for the occurrence of cold-water corals within the area on Hatton Bank already proposed for closure by Norway one year before. The ecological information has been corroborated by additional surveys since then and the spatial distribution of fishing impact is ground-truthed by VMS data.

In line with the recommendations for best practice in RFMOs, WWF strongly advocates adherence, without further delay, of the scientific advice received with regard to threatened cold-water coral habitat and to merge it with the ICES advice on closures in the same area to enable the recovery of the Rockall haddock. WWF and Seas At Risk have jointly elaborated such a proposal in geographic detail. Delegates will find a map attached to the printed version of this opening statement which illustrates the overlap of areas recommended to be closed for safeguarding cold-water coral habitat and juvenile Rockall haddock. We believe that this Annual Meeting offers an important opportunity to truly apply the ecosystem approach by combining action to improve the management of some poorly regulated fisheries with steps to afford protection to two of the most outstanding cold-water coral areas in the North-East Atlantic. In this context, there is particular concern about the unregulated nature of the Russian fishery for Rockall haddock and urges NEAFC Contracting Parties to elaborate a sustainable management plan for this fishery in order to secure its long term prosperity.

WWF would like to remind delegates of the fact that most deep-sea species are long-lived, have low fecundity and a slow growth rate, all factors which make them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and which explain their rapid depletion. Similarly, due to the life characteristics of deep-sea fishes, any recovery is likely to be very slow if at all possible.

Effective management and conservation efforts to conserve deep-sea species are urgently needed. Lack of adequate management and problems with enforcement have to date made the exploitation of these fisheries problematic. To manage the fisheries in accordance with the precautionary approach and to minimise impacts on deep water habitats fishing effort in most of these fisheries needs to be radically reduced as well as effectively monitored with data collection systems in place.

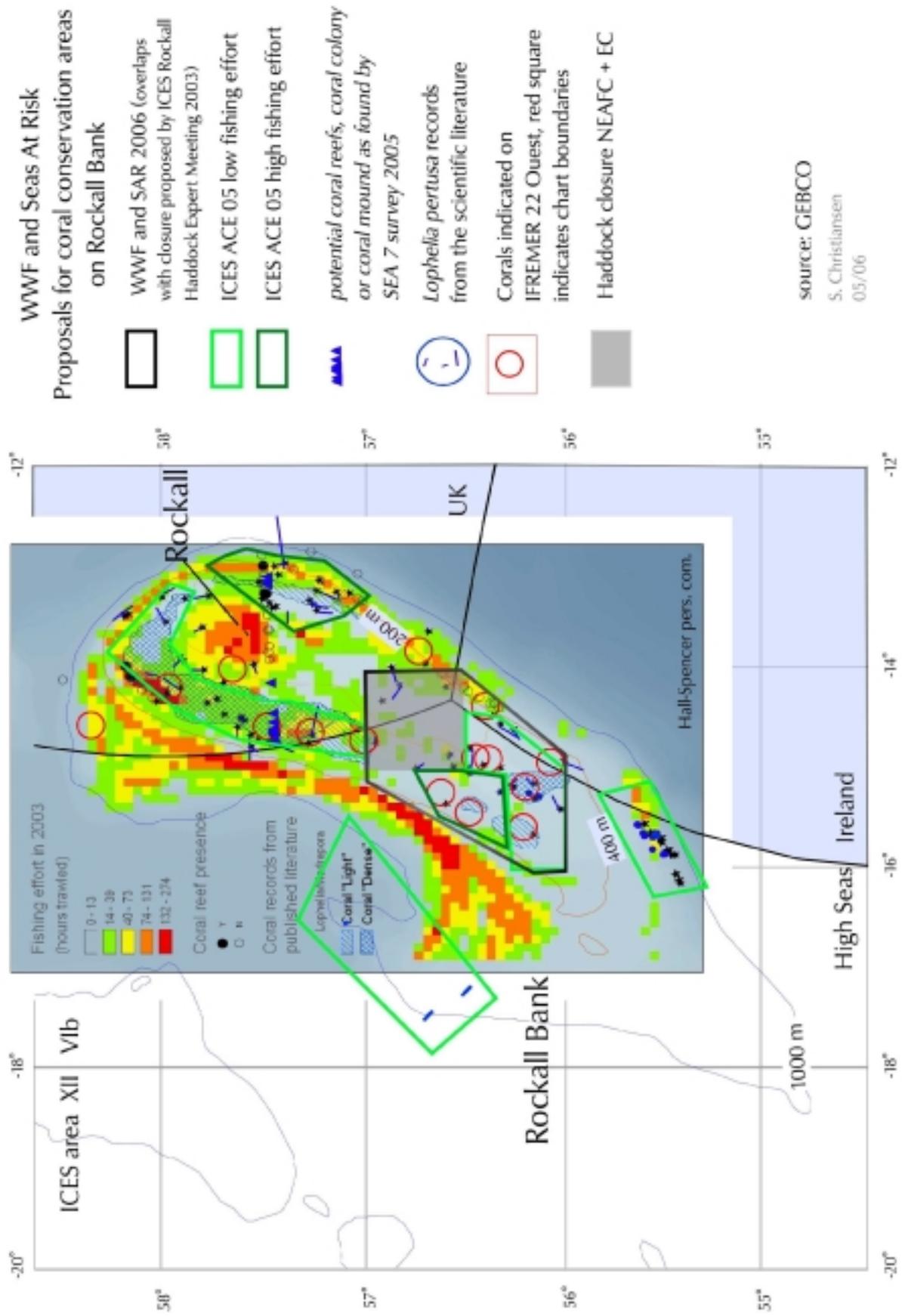
Cross reference is made to the joint statement by Seas At Risk, Marine Conservation Society and WWF to the last meeting of the Working Group on Deep-Sea Species. Given the strong scientific advice received from ICES on deep-water stocks, we had expected a recommendation to prohibit directed fisheries for orange roughy, blue ling and deep-water sharks, minimise their by-catch and close known spawning grounds, and considerably reduce the fishing effort to sustainable levels for species such as tusk, roundnose grenadier, ling and black scabbardfish. While explicitly welcoming the proposed prohibition of fishing for orange roughy we are seriously alerted by the lack of action to immediately close the other fisheries addressed. The overall figure of (at most) 70% to limit the deep-sea fishing effort for 2007 gives additional rise for concern. NEAFC must not gamble with the future of these important deep-sea stocks. It is also important to bear in mind that some of these fish species are simply not well suited for sustainable exploitation.

WWF does not support the establishment of new deep-water fisheries or spread to new areas unless the current deep-water fisheries can be demonstrated to be managed effectively using the ecosystem approach. Hence we call on Contracting Parties to adopt strict limitations of new fisheries and work towards a freeze of further expansion of deep-water fisheries and deep-water bottom trawling.

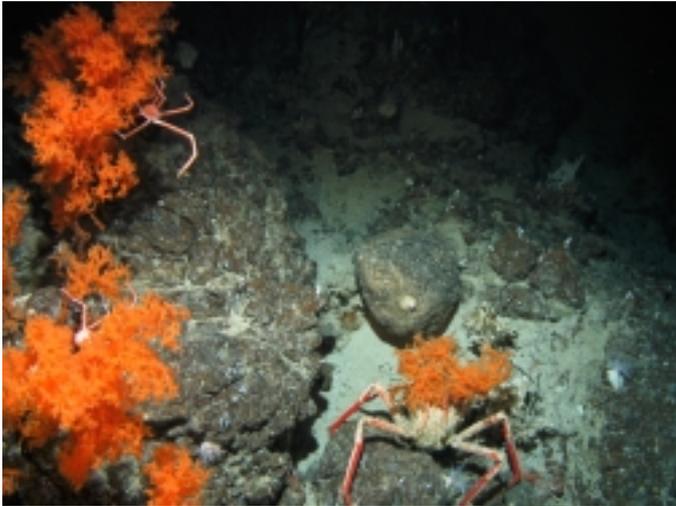
Last but not least, WWF would like to flag its support to the new scheme of control and enforcement proposed by PECCOE. Illegal, unregulated and uncontrolled fishing (IUU) represents a significant environmental, economic and social problem in many areas of the world, so also in the NEAFC regulatory area. The High Seas Task Force comprised fisheries ministers from six nations and three conservation organizations including WWF. The report from the Task Force identifies practical initiatives to "close the net" on these modern-day pirates, and highlight the need for RFMOs to adopt measures to help flag states and port states control fishing operations and landing of fish. The new scheme from PECCOE is a good step on the way as it links flag state notification with port state control and is supposed to cover all fish caught in the NEAFC area once it will be operational.

WWF would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this meeting. We wish this meeting all success it will need to make progress on the implementation of an ecosystem approach to fisheries management including the necessary steps to safeguard deep-sea stocks and vulnerable habitats.

Annex



Cold-water coral habitat on Hatton Bank

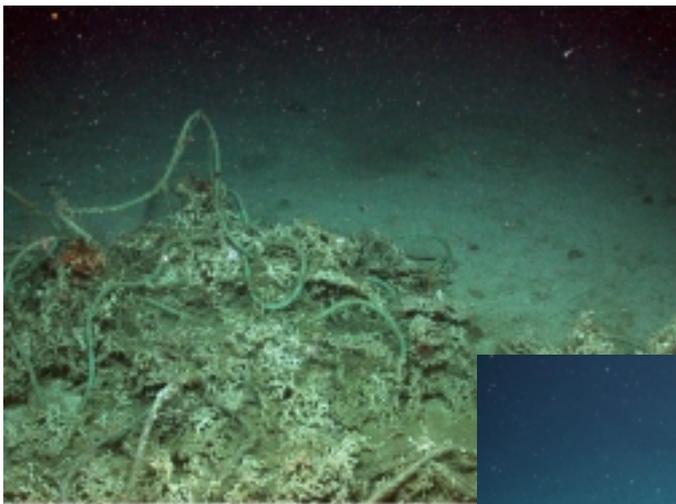


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Destroyed cold-water coral habitat on western Rockall Bank



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