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Annual Report of the Cook Islands to the Scientific Committee

Cook Islands

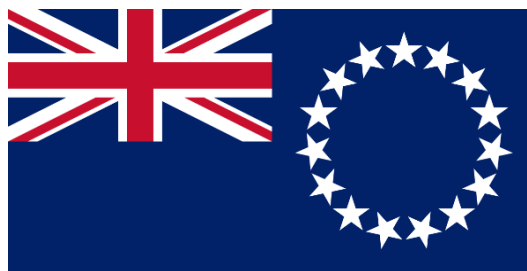


Ministry of Marine Resources
GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS

SOUTH PACIFIC REGIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT ORGANISATION

Cook Islands Annual Report in the SPRFMO Convention Area for 2025

5 – 12 September 2026



Prepared by the Ministry of Marine Resources, Cook Islands

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1 Description of Fisheries

The Cook Islands vessel did not complete any fishing trips in 2024 due to a vessel change and a required refit. The vessel resumed operations in late 2025 targeting lobster (*Jasus caveorum*) and crab (*Chaceon sp.*) and to begin fishing for hapuka (*Polyprion oxygeneios*) under an exploratory framework. In 2025, one Cook Islands-flagged vessel, size 201–500 GRT (Table 1.) operated and completed a single trip under Conservation and Management Measures (CMM) 2024-14d and 14g, two observers were onboard, and the vessel was monitored using a Vessel Monitoring System (VMS).

Observers collect size-frequency data as well as sex, maturity, and shell-state data for *J. caveorum* and *Chaceon sp.* For *P. oxygeneios*, observers collect otoliths, length, weight, sex and stomach content information. The Cook Islands has purchased genetic sampling kits and developed protocols to collect genetic samples from *J. caveorum* and *P. oxygeneios* to evaluate stock structure analysis to assess links between broad scale fishing areas and seamounts within the two areas (the Foundation Seamount Chain (FSC) and the Northern Seamounts (NS) indicated in Figure 1). Observers collect catch and effort data and monitor interactions with VME indicator taxa and species of special interest such as seabirds and marine mammals and marine turtles. Cook Islands vessels are not allowed to retain elasmobranchs, which must be released at landing. Protocols are in place to minimize interactions with marine mammals, reptiles, and seabirds.

A new laboratory has been established in Rarotonga, enabling in-house analyses of ageing material as well as the processing of genetic samples as well as capacity development within the administration.

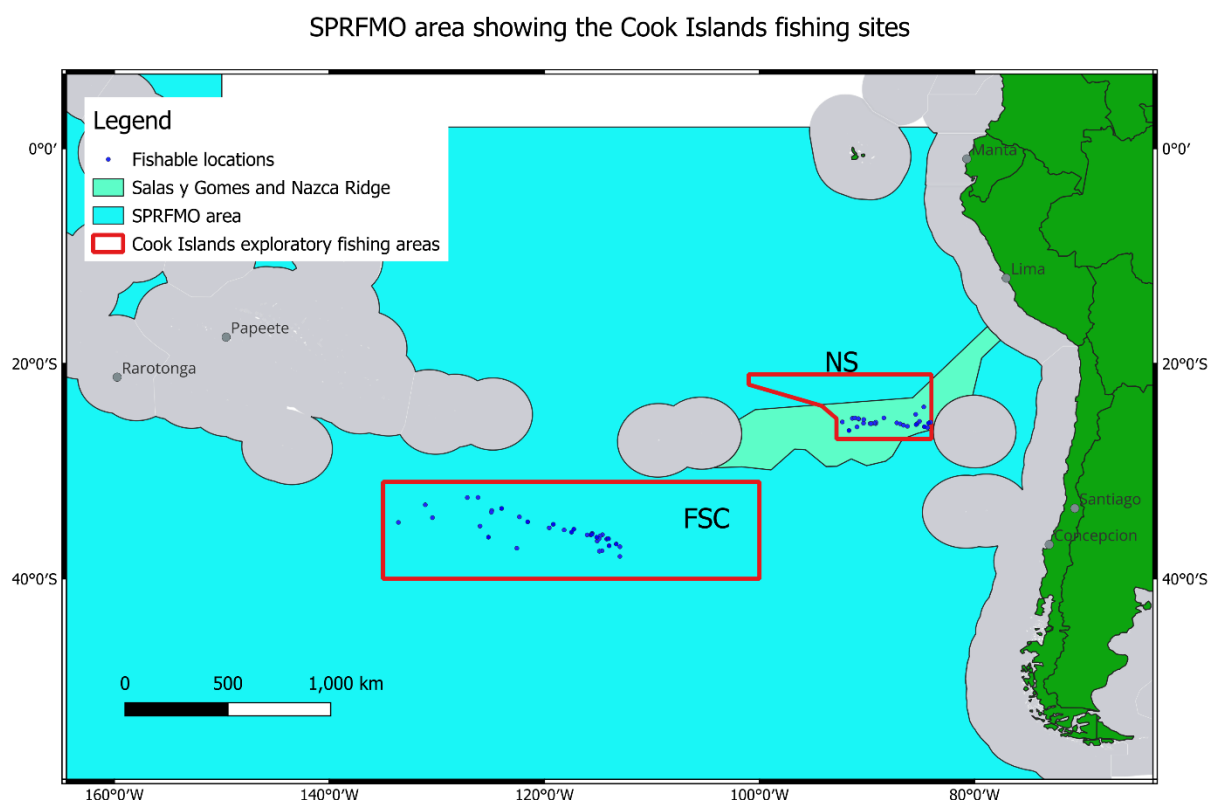


Figure 1. Area of proposed exploratory operations, FSC = Foundation Seamount Chain; NS = Northern Seamounts.

In line with sustainable fisheries management, the Cook Islands is developing a new *P. oxygeneios* fishery under CMM 14g-2024. This exploratory fishery aims to establish regulated harvesting in compliance with international conservation measures while promoting sustainable practices. The *J. caveorum* and *Chaceon sp.* fisheries will continue under CMM 14d-2024.

Collaboration with regional stakeholders supports the Fisheries Operation Plan (FOP) for the *P. oxygeneios* fishery, including stock assessment strategies, monitoring protocols, and catch limits to ensure the long-term viability of *P. oxygeneios* populations in the region. The Cook Islands remains optimistic about commencing fishing activities under CMM 14d and CMM 14g in 2025. Developments in *P. oxygeneios* are intended to diversify the fishery portfolio and support economically viable boutique fisheries. The Cook Islands is focused on building an innovative and sustainable fishery sector while safeguarding marine resources. Implementing conservation measures will strengthen the resilience of the *P. oxygeneios* fishery and contribute to responsible fisheries stewardship.

Table 1. Fleet composition of Cook Islands flagged vessels operating in the SPRFMO area for the most recent 5 years.

Vessel GRT	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
0-200	-	-	-	-	-
201-500	-	1	1	1	1
500+	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	1	1	1	1

2 Catch, Effort and CPUE Summaries

The 2025 SPRFMO season saw a single Cook Islands-flagged vessel (201–500 GRT), conduct an exploratory multi-species voyage from August 30 to December 15, 2025, within the Foundation Seamount Chain and Northern Seamounts. Catch was reported in Green Weight using the Hapuka conversion factor of 2.97. Crab dominated the catch at 10.43 t, followed by Hapuka at 4.66 t, and a small bycatch of 0.05 t. The fishery operated under CMM 14g-2024 and the Fisheries Operation Plan, recording no significant adverse impacts on VMEs and zero bycatch of species of concern. Total trip effort remained well within limits, with a per-trip seamount cap of 15 t, and Hapuka harvest of 4.66 t was well below both the 500 t TAC and the 100 t bycatch allowance, illustrating a precautionary, staged approach. For 2026, it is recommended to maintain current gear configurations (up to 10 droplines and 12 jigging lines) to preserve a safe buffer while allowing gradual expansion. This season demonstrates the Cook Islands' commitment to precautionary ocean governance and the long-term viability of deep-water ecosystems within the SPRFMO area. More details on catch and effort from this and previous trips can be found in Brouwer *et al.* (2026), Brouwer and Wichman (2020), Brouwer *et al.* (2020a), Brouwer *et al.* (2020b), and Brouwer *et al.* (2019).

Table 2. Vessel logsheet reported 2025 catch by species and percentage of quota.

Species	Catch total (t)	% of quota utilised
<i>Jasus caveorum</i>	0.02	0.01%
<i>Chaceon</i> sp.	10.43	3.48%
<i>Polyprion oxygeneios</i>	4.66	0.93%
Others	0.05	0%

Table 3. Catch by species in tonnes (t) for potting fishery for most recent 5 years.

Year	<i>Jasus caveorum</i> (t)	<i>Chaceon</i> sp. (t)	<i>P. oxygeneios</i> (t)	Others (t)	Total (t)
2021	-	-	-	-	-
2022	43.78	4.44	-	0	48.22
2023	3.95	21.94	-	0	25.89
2024	-	-	-	-	-
2025	0.02	10.43	4.66	0.05	15.16
Total	47.75	36.81	4.66	0	89.23

3. Fisheries Data Collection and Research Activities

In 2025 exploratory missions within the SPRFMO Management Area (Conventions Areas 81 & 87) represent a vital strategic initiative to map the biological and commercial potential of remote high-seas regions. By concentrating effort on the Foundation Seamount Chain (FSC) and the Northern Seamounts (NS), these operations provide the baseline scientific data required to establish sustainable exploitation limits. This research is essential for evaluating the abundance of deep-water demersal species and crustaceans, ensuring that future management frameworks are predicated on empirical evidence rather than extrapolation.

The mission utilised a multi-gear approach to assess diverse habitats across a depth gradient ranging from 140m to the vessel's operational limit of 1,000m.

Table 4. The technical specifications and operational outcomes of the gear

Gear Type	Key Specifications	Operational
Potting Gear	20mm x 5,000m polypropylene mainline 25m Ganyon spacing, utilizes Round base and Square base conical top-loader pots.	Primarily targeting crustaceans with 6,728 successful trap line deployments.
Dropline Gear	Transitioned from 1.2m monofilament to 1.2m braided rope for durability, ~11kg anchor weights, 160cm branchlines with 13/0 circle hooks.	Effective for hapuka sampling after monofilament breakage issues were resolved.
Jigging Gear	Oilwind 03-16 Electric Jiggers, computer-controlled automated payout/retrieval, fish-sensing technology.	Abandoned after one set due to insufficient power to haul in large catch.

The 2025 fishing effort focused on the FSC, specifically the Kopernik (38 fishing days) and Lavousier seamounts. In addition, fishing at the Northern Seamounts (NS2, NS16, NS19, and NS25) was undertaken but due to fuel limitations these operations were limited and somewhat unproductive. Despite promising acoustic indicators, many features yielded only a few non-target species.

The catch rates were influenced by several critical factors. The failure of the jigging gear prevented a comprehensive assessment of jigging as a viable commercial method for hapuka. Operations at the Kopernik seamount were stopped as the vessel approached the seamount trip limit, demonstrating that the trip limit is effective at moving the vessel on during a trip. An anchor was lost and is marked with six pressure floats to facilitate a delayed operational recovery on a subsequent voyage, it currently remains a seafloor snagging hazard.

4. Biological Sampling and Length/Age Composition of Catches

Accurate biological parameters, including length, weight, and age data, are the cornerstone of deep-water species management. Because species such as hapuka are characterized by slow growth and high longevity, understanding their population structure is critical for long-term resource stability.

The catch data for crabs and lobsters or providing good information on changes in catch rates over time, but the hapuka data currently only provide a single data point but given the reliable catch rates, should be informative as the fishery develops. The primary catch figures for 2025 are shown in Tables 2 and 3. Whole weight to processed weight conversion factor data are also being collected from all three species.

Sampling procedures remained rigorous. Green weights for hapuka were recorded individually using observer scales on the working deck. Biological parameters were also systematically collected for lobster. The metrics for crab in the FSC were significant, achieving an average of 3.2 kg per pot across 6,728 deployments. Notably, while the Northern Seamounts yielded no target commercial species, the deployments were not devoid of life, sounding and sampling efforts landed six sharks (released alive) and one tarakihi (retained for bait). At this stage it is not known what was influencing the target species catchability, as it appeared on the echosounder that they were present in high abundance but no catch was made. More effort will be needed to elucidate this.

5. Ecosystem Approach considerations

The vessel demonstrated a highly efficient bait strategy, starting with four harbour caught squid and eventually transitioning to a 100% internal bait system using hapuka offal and fish bycatch. This circular resource management eliminated the need for external commercial bait and minimised shipboard waste. Bycatch rates in these fisheries were very low with just 13 individual VME indicator taxa being encountered in the trap fishery and none in the dropline of jug fisheries, see Brouwer *et al.* (2026) for details.

Waste management practices were adhered to, with all non-biodegradable waste being machine compressed on the boat deck and stored for land-based disposal. Wildlife interactions were minimal, with no recorded interactions with sea turtles, marine mammals, or seabirds, a result attributed to the gear type and the daylight jigging negating the need for deck-light during operations.

6. Observer Implementation Reports (refer CMM 02 and CMM 16)

In 2025 the vessel continued to have 200% observer coverage, with two observers onboard for the entire trip observing all sets ensuring comprehensive monitoring. The Cook Islands National Observer Program, authorized for the SPRFMO Convention Area since 2018, has continued to grow, expanding training and enhancing observer capabilities. Despite logistical challenges in 2021 due to COVID-19, coverage was maintained through collaboration with Capricorn Marine Observers, and observer data collection manuals were developed to guide future data collection. These manuals are being trialed in preparation for the commencement of fishing activities in 2025 and are designed to meet all data requirements necessary for effective monitoring and management of the fishery, ensuring reliable and useful data for sustainable practices.

More details on observer information from this and previous trips can be found in Brouwer *et al.* (2026), Brouwer and Wichman (2020), Brouwer *et al.* (2020a), Brouwer *et al.* (2020b), and Brouwer *et al.* (2019).

7. References

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