



**IUCN SSC Best
Practices Guidelines**

**MARINE SPECIALIST GROUPS:
EXPERIENCE AND EXAMPLES**

The IUCN SSC has produced a number of resources for Specialist Groups and Task forces (from here on collectively referred to as SGs). These include the 2021-2025 Species Strategic Plan, which focuses on the Assess-Plan-Act cycle, supported by communication and networking, and a series of resources to guide SGs, including the terms of reference for SSC SGs. The latter provide guidance on the ways in which SGs are expected to help advance the objectives of the Strategic Plan, engaging in all five elements of its conservation cycle, including specific advice on the positions that should be created within an SG, and address multiple elements including assessments, membership, communication, succession planning etc.

While these documents are essential resources that should be consulted regularly to guide all SG endeavours, on a practical level, there are many ways that SGs can structure themselves and their work in order to achieve their objectives. This compilation of current SG Experience and Examples is intended to serve as a resource to acting or potential leaders of IUCN SSC Specialist Groups or Task Forces. Although they were collected from the Marine SGs, the experiences and practices gathered are transferable to any other taxonomic group. The ten 'modules' below focus on a different element of SG leadership and practice. They are based on hour-long interviews that were conducted with 23 SG and Task Force leads in the autumn of 2021. While a list of prompting questions guided the interviews, the aim was to allow conversations to flow naturally and for SG leads to reflect on the strengths and unique features of their groups. As such, and reflect a wide range of practices, which are almost as diverse as the species that each group represents. Wherever possible the text includes concrete examples and hyperlinks to SG websites, social media accounts, and publications to more effectively promote the sharing of experience between groups. The modules can be read in succession, or dipped into individually by users who are interested in learning how other SGs have approached particular challenges and opportunities.



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Page 3, in order of appearance:
Dive with green sea turtle in Moalboal, Philippines © Olga Ga/Unsplash.
Seahorses. Cairns aquarium, Australia © David Clode/Unsplash.

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Executive Summary

The IUCN SSC hosts multiple Species Specialist Groups and Task Forces (collectively referred to as SGs), volunteer groups who dedicate their time and expertise to promoting the conservation of many different taxa around the globe. While the [2021-2025 Species Strategic Plan](#), the [terms of reference for SSC SGs](#), and a series of other formal [resources](#) are available to guide SGs in their work to apply the Assess-Plan-Act Conservation Cycle, these do not necessarily address the less official aspects of how SGs structure their work and motivate their members in these volunteer efforts.

This compilation of 'Best Practice' reflects a series of conversations with the (Co-)Chairs of 23 Marine SGs. Ten different 'modules' address highly practical themes, ranging from 'membership and recruitment' to 'fundraising'. Chairs shared their solutions to overcoming some of the challenges posed by trying to work across a range of geographies and cultures to promote effective and inclusive work on all aspects of the Conservation Cycle.

Although it is difficult to summarise 23 hours of conversations in a single page, here are some of the overarching conclusions related to current Marine SG practices:

- There is no single 'best' way to run an SG. The configurations of SG leadership teams and wider membership vary enormously, depending on the geographic ranges of target species, the particular origins and evolution of each SG, and the most pressing conservation issues each group faces. Groups can range from 12 to over 400 members. Leadership structures can be flat and involve all SG members, or highly structured with multiple vice chairs and regional or thematic working groups that sometimes have their own internal sub-structures.
- Many SGs feel strong and confident when it comes to the Assess element of the Conservation Cycle, but find it more challenging to adequately address the Plan and Act elements given their volunteer membership and, in many cases, lack of official legal status that prevents them from holding bank accounts and managing projects. Some SGs are finding creative ways to create or collaborate with host institutions, or partner NGOs who can act as the SG's 'operational' arm and help to fundraise and implement conservation projects. This has also allowed some groups to be able to compensate Programme Officers or Chairs for the time that they spend on SG work.
- In the context of limited funding and human resources, most SGs advocate careful planning of targets so that the group's work builds on the strengths and interests of members who will be able to share the Chairs' burdens and take the lead on projects and initiatives.
- SGs that have been able to invest in the Network and Communication components of the Conservation Cycle have often reaped the benefits of increased support for their work. Websites and Social media platforms can increase awareness of SG work among a range of stakeholders, including potential donors.



Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina*) LC
Photo © Steve Adams - Unsplash

COMPONENT 1: Membership and recruitment

One of the most fundamental components of a Specialist Group (SG) is deciding who should be in the group and how they should be chosen. SSC Marine SGs address these issues in many different ways, depending on a range of factors, including the number of species in their taxon, the geographical range of those species, cultural aspects of the research and conservation communities of the species, and sometimes the history of the group's original foundation. There is no single 'best practice' in this regard (Marine SGs range in size from 11 to over 400 members), but Marine SG Chairs have shared the following thoughts and examples.

Group size and recruitment

SG's have developed a range of strategies in relation to the size of their group and how they recruit members. The options below are by no means mutually exclusive, but form a continuum with SGs adopting any combination of these strategies.

- **Small and nimble:** Some Marine SGs intentionally keep numbers low so that members all know each other well, can meet easily either virtually or in person, and can have clear roles and responsibilities. These groups often have strict membership criteria, and/or membership by invitation only, with 'self-nominations' discouraged. Candidates are identified and nominated through members' professional networks and the (co-)Chair(s) and/or a Steering Committee make the final decisions on who to invite in order to achieve the necessary expertise, balance, and diversity in the group.
- **Open door policy:** Other groups feel it is important to be as open as possible, and to involve members from a range of categories of stakeholders that contribute to all of the elements of the [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) and its 'Assess-Plan-Act-Network-Communicate' cycle. These groups often have several levels of [sub-structure](#) to help manage members and keep them involved.
- **Expanding and contracting:** Some groups are actively trying to 'grow' their membership after starting out small – especially to encourage wider diversity and geographical representation. Other groups are trying to 'rationalize' their membership to ensure that all members are actively engaged and make concrete contributions to the group, 'weeding out' members who have become inactive or moved on to other activities.
- **Let your mission be your guide:** Almost all Chairs felt strongly that membership should be guided by the SG's core mission and objectives. SGs should seek to identify and engage members who can actively contribute to the core objectives of the SG within the Assess-Plan-Act-Communicate-Network cycle.

Examples of membership policies that are clearly articulated on Specialist Groups websites include (but are by no means limited to):

- IUCN SSC Shark Specialist Group: [Membership Policy and Terms of Reference](#)
- IUCN SSC Cetacean Specialist Group: [Membership Process and Criteria](#)
- IUCN SSC Marine turtle Specialist Group: [Membership Policies](#)
- IUCN SSC Crocodile Specialist Group: [Membership](#)
- IUCN SSC Otter Specialist Group: [Joining the OSG](#)

Maintaining balance and diversity

The terms of reference 2021-2025 for [SSC Specialist Group and Task Force Chairs](#) state that they are responsible for ‘Constituting and maintaining a dynamic, balanced and diverse membership in terms of expertise, geographic location, gender, age and institutional affiliation.’ Here are a few ways that Marine SGs are working to achieve this goal:

- **Regional coordinators:** Many SGs have Regional Coordinators, focal points or Vice Chairs who, among other things, are responsible for ensuring that their region is well represented in SG membership, and that a good geographical balance is maintained. Ensuring that Regional coordinators have the right languages to involve members can be important. For example, the [Otter SG](#) has both a Francophone and Anglophone Regional Coordinator for Africa.
- **Strategic growth:** Some SGs make a concerted effort to ensure that where two equally qualified candidates are being considered for membership or for leadership roles, candidates are chosen who will contribute to the diversity and balance of the group.
- **Outreach and mentorship:** Some Marine SGs, including the Seahorse SG, the [Crocodile SG](#) and the [Shark SG](#) have working groups or initiatives to actively support new or future members in under-represented regions, and to mentor them to become ‘future leaders’. Some SGs, like the [Otter SG](#), have a student membership category that gives young scientists exposure and support.
- **Conference locations:** Some Marine SGs host their periodic in-person meetings or conferences for their taxa in regions that are under-represented in their group as a means of identifying and involving (potential/future) members from that region.

Succession Planning

SGs are encouraged to plan for succession for the critical roles of (Co-)Chairs and Red List Authority Coordinators. Sub-structure in leadership positions, including Vice/Deputy Chair positions makes succession planning more transparent and logical, while outreach and mentorship programmes such as those mentioned above help to ensure that younger members are given opportunities to grow and develop leadership skills.

Ensuring active involvement

Most Chairs are keen to avoid having ‘sleeping members’ or members who want the status of SG affiliation without the responsibility. Here are some of the strategies used to ensure all members have a sense of purpose and are contributing to the group:

- **Regular meetings:** Many SGs traditionally relied on annual/biennial or triennial face-to-face meetings to forge professional and personal bonds and maintain momentum. Meetings often spawn new projects and serve as catalysts to produce outputs for discussion and review. The pandemic has forced many SGs to rely more on virtual meeting platforms. Most SGs meet (virtually) at least once a year, although whether this involves all SG members, or a sub-set of leaders or focal points depends on the group size.

- **Member surveys:** Some SGs have used member questionnaires to better understand members' profiles, interests and expertise, and who is still committed to making an active contribution to the group. Examples of results include this [2020 Otter Specialist Group overview](#). A generic template for such a questionnaire can be found [here](#).
- **Building on members' strengths and passions:** These same questionnaires can also be used to identify members' strengths and passions, and allow them to indicate what activities or projects they would like to lead or support. Some SGs use this professed enthusiasm to develop new thematic working groups led by members who suggested the topic or activity (see the section on Working Groups on [Component 2](#) Group Structure and Leadership).



COMPONENT 2:

Group structure and leadership

Even the smallest Marine Specialist Groups (SGs) require some degree of group structure and leadership to ensure coherence and momentum. At a minimum, every SG is required to appoint one or two Chairs and a Red List Authority Coordinator. The SSC [SG Terms of Reference](#) also strongly encourage each SG to appoint a Conservation Planning, Sustainable Use and *Ex-Situ* Focal point (find the Terms of Reference for these positions [here](#)). However, beyond this, SGs have found many different ways to structure themselves and organise their work to make the most of the (mostly) volunteer efforts of their members.

Leadership

- **Small and simple:** Some of the smallest SGs have a very simple structure, with a Single Chair or Co-Chairs, a Red List Authority Coordinator or two, and no further named positions or structure. These groups tend to their business by having (in-person or virtual) meetings that involve all members, who contribute equally to the functioning of the group. The Pinniped and Anguillid Eel SGs, for example, both function this way.
- **Co-Chairs:** Many specialist groups have two Co-Chairs who share tasks and responsibilities. Advantages of working as Co-Chairs include:
 - spreading the workload;
 - ensuring continuity if one Chair is unavailable due to travel, fieldwork, or illness;
 - providing a sounding board for new ideas (two heads are better than one);
 - ensuring geographical representation or diversity in leadership (for example, the Horseshoe Crab SG ensures that there is always one Asian and one North American Co-Chair, to represent the two regions where the horseshoe crabs occur, while the Sirenian SG always has one Co-Chair specialising in manatees and another in dugongs); and
 - ensuring continuity with succession planning, by only replacing one Chair at a time, and allowing the newcomer to learn from the continuing Chair.

While there are many advantages to working as Co-Chairs, those who have done so stress the importance of ensuring that the Co-Chairs are equal partners who have compatible working styles.

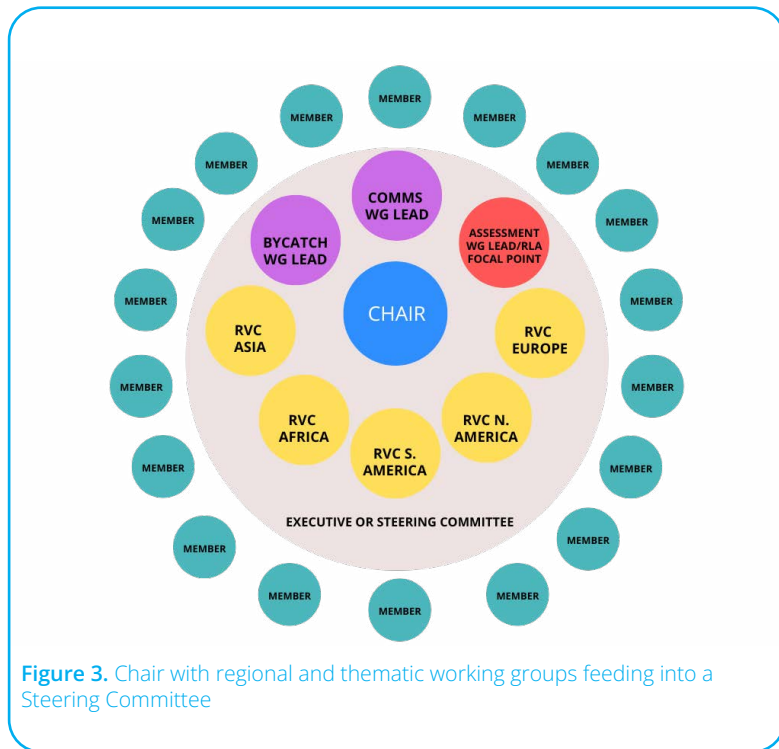
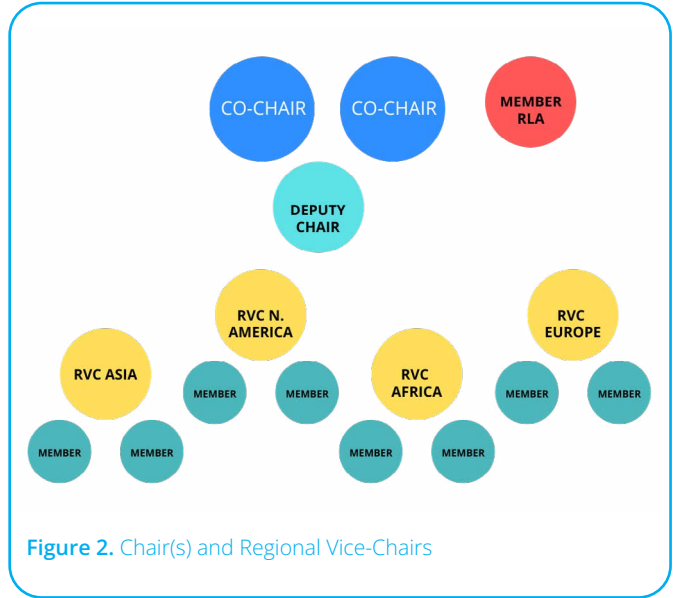
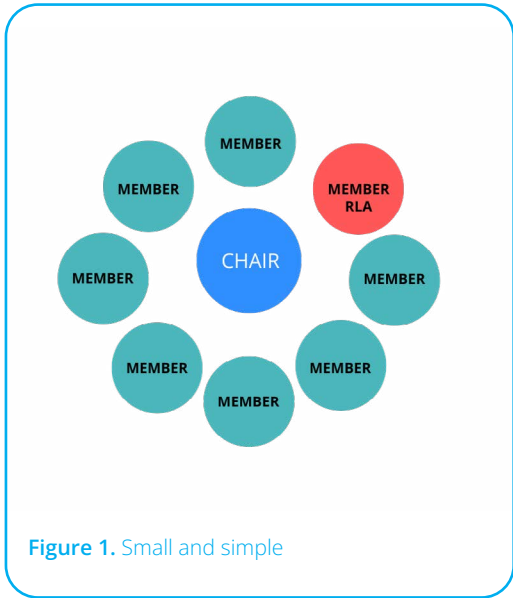
- **Deputy Chairs or Vice Chairs:** Deputy or Vice Chairs can also help to spread the burden of work, and facilitate succession planning.

- **Regional Vice Chairs or Focal Points:** Many SGs allocate Vice Chair positions to regions – ensuring that each major continent or biogeographical region that is relevant to their taxon has a Vice-Chair who is responsible for overseeing membership and issues in that region, and bringing them to the attention of the SG when needed.
- **Steering Committees:** A number of SGs form a core group composed of deputy Chairs, RLA Coordinators, Regional Coordinators/Vice Chairs, or the leads of other thematic groups (see below). This core group meets more regularly than the full membership, and is often responsible for setting annual/quadrennial targets, reviewing membership, etc.

Sub-structure

- **Regional Coordinators:** The majority of Marine SGs with taxa that have global or near-global distributions have regional coordinators or leads. While in some cases their role is limited to an advisory role to the Chairs, in other cases they are also responsible for leading regional working groups, or all the SG members in that region, to make sure they are informed of SG business and/or are actively participating in SG business. Larger SGs often consider this regional sub-structure essential to their functioning. SGs with regional groups include the [Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force](#), the [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG](#), and the [Shark SG](#). Some regional sub-groups even take on a life and identity of their own, as is the case, for example, with a few otter groups, including the [Himalayan Otter Network](#).
- **Thematic Working groups:** Some SGs have thematic working groups tied to particular conservation issues or priorities for their taxa. Working group themes common to a number of Marine SGs include:
 - Aquaria and zoos/ husbandry/*ex-situ* conservation (could be led by the official SG *Ex-Situ* Focal Point)
 - Bycatch
 - Climate Change and Future Proofing
 - Communications
 - Conservation Planning (could be led by the official SG Conservation Planning Focal Point)
 - Education
 - Global Trade
 - Health
 - Industry/sustainable use (could be led by the official SG Conservation Planning Focal Point)
 - Mentorship/future leaders
 - Red Listing/Status assessment
 - Taxonomy
- **Species/Species group working groups:** Some Marine SGs have working groups dedicated to species or groups of species, either to facilitate regular assessment of those species or to foster research and conservation action for species of particular conservation concern. Groups with species working groups include the [Heron SG](#) and the [Crocodile SG](#).

Following are some diagrams depicting different types of Marine SG group structures. Bear in mind that groups can represent almost any combination of the roles and structures here.





Seahorse (*Hippocampus jayakari*) LC
Photo © David Clode - Unsplash

COMPONENT 3:

Time management, motivation and communication

One of the greatest challenges for Specialist Groups (SGs) is carving out the time for members to contribute at the level they would like. This is especially challenging when (almost) everyone is working on a volunteer basis with a myriad of other pressing professional and personal commitments. Marine SG Chairs have found different ways to ensure that they and their members can remain engaged, active, focused, and sane:

Time management

- **Institutional support for SG roles as part of one's 'day job':** Many Chairs, Co-Chairs, or RLA coordinators are employed by organisations, such as universities, zoos, aquaria or NGOs, that recognize the value of their roles in IUCN SSC SGs, and are happy to underwrite the time spent on SG work as beneficial to the organisation and its reputation. This creates 'breathing space' for Chairs or SG members needing to spend normal office hours on SG tasks, and is described by many as an ideal situation for both the SG member and the employer. In other cases, SG targets (in one or more of the Assess-Plan-Act-Network-Communicate cycle) may overlap so well with an individual's 'day job' that there is an almost seamless blend.
- **Partnership or fundraising to support key SG positions:** Some SGs have worked to find funding and support to ensure that key roles within the SG are designated as part or full-time roles with professional compensation. Most often, the funded position is a (part-time) programme coordinator who provides critical administrative support to the SG (e.g. updating membership and websites, soliciting input for newsletters, assisting with group communication, grant applications, management of assessments etc.). However, many SGs have also found financial support for Red List Authority coordinators, Assessors, or other roles within the group to ensure that those individuals can create the necessary time to achieve their objectives. Sometimes these roles are 'hosted' by an organisation like a zoo, aquarium or university. Sometimes SGs create or collaborate with parallel organisations that can raise funds and host contracts for key individuals, as is the case for the collaboration between the [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG](#) and [Project Seahorse](#), as well as the [Marine Turtle SG](#) and the [Oceanic Society](#). More details about these strategies can be found in the [fundraising module](#). One Chair likened the rationale for prioritising this approach to the pre-flight safety briefing instructing adults to 'put on your own oxygen mask before trying to assist others'. The [Marine Mammal Protected Area Task Force](#) is an example of a group that has raised funds to support the work of the Co-Chairs and the [Secretariat](#).

- **Working evenings and weekends:** In the absence of institutional support or funding, many SGs rely on volunteer efforts of retired individuals or individuals passionate enough to spend their evenings and weekends on SG tasks. This probably represents the vast majority of all SG efforts at the moment. While this is not ideal and demands a great deal of energy, many Marine SG Chairs see this as part of the territory, and rather than feeling resentful, they try to focus on the positive aspects of working in a field they feel passionate about.

Maintaining momentum and passion

- **Share the load:** While creating [sub-structure](#) within SGs can initially require more time from Chairs to launch and nurture, once Vice-Chairs, coordinators and/or working groups are up and running, they can help to spread the load of work that falls to an SG and achieve targets beyond the minimum of assessing species and offering advice.
- **Build on members' interests and passions:** Through [structured member surveys](#) or 1-1 discussions, Chairs have been able to identify individuals with an interest in leading or joining new initiatives, projects or thematic working groups. By appointing these individuals as working group leads or coordinators, Chairs have unlocked new potential in the group, often contributing to the Planning and Acting targets of the group.
- **Go with the flow:** Seldom are all SG members able to focus on (volunteer) SG tasks as much as they would like to. SG Chairs often have to accept that work will proceed in fits and starts as members find time around their other obligations, and take advantage of the momentum when it is there.
- **Be generous with praise and recognition:** A little bit of praise and (public) recognition can go a long way to maintaining momentum and passion – particularly for volunteer efforts. Electronic communications, websites, and social media make public recognition increasingly easy, but less flashy personal email communications offering thanks and praise can also go a long way.

Meetings and internal communication

- **In person meetings:** Many Marine SGs traditionally relied on regular face-to-face meetings to maintain personal as well as professional working relationships and build a sense of shared purpose and belonging. These meetings are often tied to annual, biennial or triennial conferences or symposia held for the focal species (group). Members either fund their own travel and participation, or raise funds to support participation of the whole SG, or the Steering Committee. Most Chairs still find this face-to-face personal contact invaluable.
- **Virtual meetings:** Since the spring of 2020, the pandemic has made face-to-face meetings impossible for most SGs, inspiring many to experiment with virtual annual meetings. As many groups become more familiar with and reliant on virtual meeting platforms like Microsoft Teams or Zoom for their wider membership meetings, they also begin to use them for more regular monthly or quarterly meetings (Steering Committee, working or regional groups meetings, etc.). While time zone differences present a challenge, and 100% attendance is almost never possible due to conflicting demands on members' time, some SGs find creative solutions such as:
 - Holding monthly or quarterly meetings on fixed days (e.g. first Tuesday of the month) but alternating times so that those who had to get up early/stay up late for the previous meeting have a more social meeting time the next time.
 - Holding an open 'Chair's hour', akin to a professor's office hours, where the Chair is online for drop-in consultations or discussions with any Vice-Chairs/coordinators etc. who are able to join and raise issues.
 - Holding duplicate meetings on the same day to ensure that all time zones are covered.
- **Email groups and shared online drives:** Many Marine SGs use [Google Groups](#), [Google Drive](#), [Microsoft OneNote](#), or other tools to create email and discussion groups, shared document storage and archiving, or project management. Other groups have 'members only' sections of their websites with sign-in required for access to resources and documents.



Black-blotched porcupinefish (*Diodon liturosus*) NE
Photo © David Clode - Unsplash

COMPONENT 4: Assess

The [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) is built on the Species Conservation Cycle of 'Assess-Plan-Act', incorporating the overarching elements of 'Networking' and 'Communicating'. SSC Marine SGs and Task Forces should aim to address each element of this cycle for their respective taxonomic remit. However, given the recognition and reliance on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as the global standard upon which the conservation status of species is assessed, many SGs view species assessments as one of their most important activities.

The [terms of reference for SSC SGs](#) dictate that every SG should appoint a Red List Authority Coordinator, and there are many resources available on [Red List Categories and Criteria](#) including an openly available online [training course](#) that takes roughly 15 hours to complete. Beyond these official guidelines and criteria, however, Marine SGs have found many different ways of ensuring that assessments are conducted in a robust and timely manner.

Identifying RLA Coordinators and Assessors

- **Volunteer members of the SG:** The majority of Marine SGs rely on RLA Coordinators and Assessors who are members that have volunteered for these roles. Sometimes these members are organized in an assessment [sub-group](#) within the SG. In other SGs, while the RLA Coordinator remains constant, assessors volunteer or are invited to contribute to assessments on an *ad-hoc* basis depending on their knowledge of a particular species.
- **External expertise:** Some (smaller) SGs consult species experts outside of the SG to contribute to assessments, either on a volunteer or contractual basis – identifying and approaching individuals who have published on or been involved in the management of a particular species.
- **Paid students, interns or post-graduates:** Some SGs and/or RLAs are able to raise funds to engage interns or post-graduate students to undertake the first phase of compiling information for RL assessments. In some cases, because assessing is in itself not very 'sexy', the costs of assessments can be 'nested' in larger grant applications for regional conservation initiatives.
- **Partnering with a separate Red List Authority:** [Bird Life International](#) acts as the RLA for all bird species, including marine birds. Similarly, the [Marine Biodiversity Unit](#) acts as the RLA for most marine fish species. In these cases staff (and in the case of the Marine Fishes RLA – paid graduate students) are responsible for compiling the first draft of an assessment which is then reviewed by the relevant SG. For species-rich taxa, this can be an efficient way to work- as the time required for initial assessments is professionally compensated. However, it does require very clear communication and mutual respect between the RLA and the SG in question.

Assess workflow

- **Training:** Ideally all individuals undertaking Red List assessments should undergo the [online training course](#) provided by the IUCN and the Nature Conservancy. In practice, this does not always happen. At a minimum Reviewers should all undertake the training.
- **Review:** Reviewers of assessments are almost always volunteer SG members with a significant amount of expertise and experience in Red Listing, to ensure that criteria have been interpreted and applied appropriately and that the format, tone, and length of each assessment is consistent with standards. Most SGs recommend that a minimum of 2 people review assessments, where at least one reviewer is familiar with the species, and at least one is trained to properly apply the Categories and Criteria.
- **Uploading assessments to the SIS:** Often an SG's RLA Coordinator is also responsible for uploading assessments into the SIS – recognized by many as a time-consuming and meticulous task. Some SGs have support from (graduate) students or programme coordinators for this final step of the process.

Identifying priorities for Assessment

- **All in one go:** Some Marine SGs that have only one species or a relatively small number of species undertake all of their species assessments/updates at the same time at regular intervals (e.g. 5 years or 10 years, the period after which assessments are formally considered outdated). This allows them to raise the necessary funds for in-person meetings or to pay an Assessment Coordinator for the increased workload in an assessment year. These groups sometimes undertake annual species or regional status reports that feed into assessments, making them more robust and less overwhelming. Examples include the [Polar Bear SG](#) and the [Marine Turtle SG](#).
- **A rolling cycle:** SGs with a higher number of species (e.g. many of the fishes, including sharks and rays) often establish a 'rota' or rolling cycle to determine which species are (re-) assessed. This spreads the workload as evenly as possible and ensures that each species is (re-) assessed within the maximum interval of 10 years.
- **Prioritising new, Data Deficient (DD) or threatened species:** When deciding which species require (re-) assessment, many Marine SG's prioritise those for which new information is available that would merit a change in status, particularly if the species is unassessed, DD or is already in, or likely to move into a threatened category (VU, EN or CR).
- **Following the money:** Some SGs that have many species, or many sub-populations to assess have made practical decisions to prioritise the species/sub-populations for which funding is available to support in-person assessment workshops or assessors' time.
- **Transparent criteria for prioritisation:** Given the practical limitations of time and resources, in order to avoid the risk that only those (sub)species/sub-populations with strong advocates or funding are assessed, some SGs are developing criteria that can be used to objectively prioritise (sub-)species and sub-populations.

Collaborating to undertake assessments

- **In-person meetings:** Many Marine SGs undertake Red List Assessments through in-person workshops or meetings. These are sometimes tied to regional meetings to assess species or (sub)species/sub-populations, or held on the margins of annual/biennial conferences for the focal taxa. The [Marine Mammal Protected Area Task Force](#) has used face-to-face [regional workshops](#) to collaboratively assess and identify candidate Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAS), and considers face-to-face meetings where members are together for a week focusing entirely on the assessments, as the most effective and efficient way to undertake assessments.

- **Virtual workshops:** In light of the pandemic, some Marine SGs have undertaken virtual assessment workshops. These have been largely successful, but do not provide the same opportunity for undivided attention, with participants often feeling torn between online meetings and ongoing professional and personal obligations in their home settings.
- **Email communication:** Many, if not the majority of assessments for marine taxa are undertaken entirely through email exchanges. Draft assessments are shared first for editing and review by fellow-assessors and then for formal review by the SG's appointed RL reviewers. The Shark and Ray SG has a clear workflow established for this process which can be viewed [here](#).



COMPONENT 5: Plan

The [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) is built on the Assess-Plan-Act-Network-Communicate cycle. SSC Marine SGs should be addressing each element of this cycle. The [terms of reference for SSC SGs](#) dictate that every SG should appoint a [Conservation Planning Focal Point](#), and there are many resources available to SGs on the [IUCN SSC's Conservation Planning SG's website](#). Here we will not focus on best practices for conservation planning itself, but rather on how SGs can ensure they are equipped to include effective conservation planning in their planned targets and activities.

Identifying a Conservation Planning Focal Person

- **Volunteer from within the SG:** Those SGs that have dedicated Conservation Planning Coordinators or focal points have almost always appointed these individuals from within their membership. This individual usually undertakes an online or in-person [Conservation Planning training course](#), and works with the rest of the group to ensure that the practices promoted by the IUCN's Conservation Planning Group are implemented wherever possible.
- **Conservation Planning Group:** Some SGs including the [Cetacean SG](#) have specific sub-groups working within or with the SG that focus on conservation planning for one or more species of concern.
- **Conservation Planning as integral to all other activities:** Many groups have not appointed specific Focal Points, but view conservation planning as integral to all the other activities that the group undertakes. Many of these SGs encourage their members to follow the online Conservation Planning training offered by the CPSG.

Setting SG Targets

- **Leadership team:** Many Marine SGs undertake the exercise of setting the group's quadrennial targets as a collaborative exercise between the Co-Chairs and other key members of the group involved in [leadership](#) and decision-making (e.g. the RLA Coordinator, deputy- or vice Chairs, or steering committee members).
- **Wider group input:** A number of Marine SGs solicit input to their SG planning targets by undertaking planning collaboratively during face-to-face meetings, or including questions about planning and/or ranking of targets in [member surveys](#). This has yielded valuable information on planning priorities for groups like the Seabream, Snapper and Grunts SG:

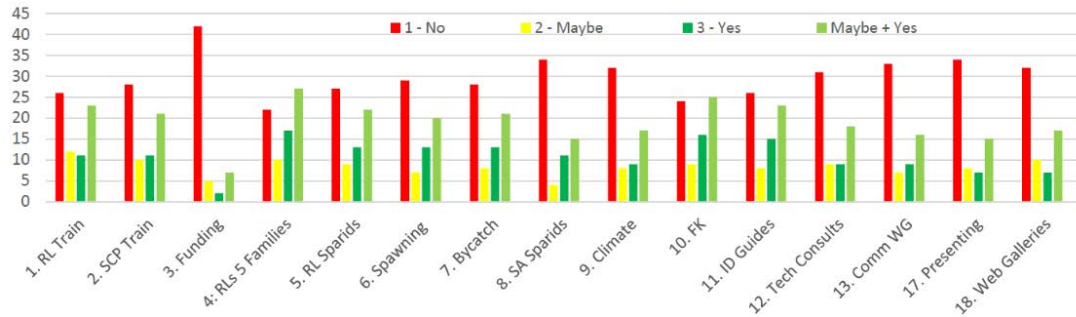


Figure 4. Quadrennium targets (QTs) - Member interest. We solicited member interest in 15 of our 18 QTs (1 - No, 2 - Maybe, 3 - Yes). Primary responses below.

Developing Conservation Plans

- **Multi-species conservation plans:** Some SGs periodically develop conservation plans for an entire species group. When done well, these can be enormously valuable to guide conservation efforts by a variety of stakeholders beyond the IUCN. Good examples include the Shark and Ray SG's [Manta and Ray Conservation Strategy](#), the [Global strategy for Marine Turtles](#), the [Global Otter Conservation Strategy](#), and the [2002-2010 Cetacean Action Plan](#).
- **Species- or region-specific action plans:** Many Marine SGs also undertake more specific regional or species-focused conservation strategies or action plans. Examples include:
 - [Sea turtles in the Mediterranean](#)
 - [Crocodile SG Action Plans for multiple individual species](#)
 - [Agami](#) and [Reddish](#) herons
 - [Angel Sharks](#)

Ensuring planning complements national, regional or international frameworks

- **Contributing to national conservation plans:** SGs are often consulted by national government agencies responsible for conservation management to provide professional advice.
- **Collaborating with other NGOs or IGOs:** A number of marine SGs have collaborated with NGOs and IGOs to contribute to collaborative conservation planning initiatives. Examples include:
 - The Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) [Dugong MoU](#), to which the Sirenian SG provides vital input.
 - Contributions to CMS concerted actions such as those for [Arabian Sea humpback whales](#) and [Atlantic humpback dolphins](#), as well as [Conservation Management Plans](#) of the International Whaling Commission.
 - Leading contributions to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) from the [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG](#), as this taxon has comprised the first marine fishes through the CITES Appendix II listing and implementation process.



COMPONENT 6:

Act

The [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) is built on the Assess-Plan-Act-Network-Communicate cycle. SSC Marine SGs should be addressing each element of this cycle. And yet, given most SGs' limited resources, Acting is often the element of the cycle that seems most challenging for groups to adequately address. While many groups have traditionally been focused on Assessment, more and more groups are finding ways to effectively catalyse and/or implement conservation action in different spheres:

Creating resources for conservation stakeholders

- **Toolkits and guidelines:** Several Marine SGs have developed resources for conservation stakeholders, including educational materials, toolkits, best practice manuals, or capacity building manuals. Examples can be found on the following SG sites:
 - [Conservation toolkits for priority regions](#)
 - [Otters of the world](#)
 - [Otter Mortality Web](#)
 - [Best Management Practices for Crocodylian Farming](#)
 - [Crocodylian Capacity Building Manual](#)
- **Delineation of important habitats that merit protection or management:** Some SGs and Task Forces are focusing on identifying and delineating habitat that is important for their species (group) and merits protection. These areas can be used by a variety of stakeholders to inform the planning of marine protection and/or to mitigate threats in these areas. Examples include [Important Marine Mammal Areas](#), [Important Turtle Areas](#) and plans to create [Important Shark and Ray Areas](#). Marine SGs also contribute to multi-species habitat identification and delineation processes, such as [Key Biodiversity Areas](#) (KBAs) and [Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas](#) (EBSAs). Note that this is also listed under the Assess section of these Guidelines as assessing each area against standard criteria is an important part of creating these tools. Once they are created, SGs also use these areas to advocate for concrete management and protection measures in them.

Highlighting SG and members' initiatives and successes

- **Highlighting IUCN or SG-supported activities:** Some Marine SGs feel that they can only 'claim' credit for actions that are undertaken directly as a result of SG planning and fund-raising. These activities can include implementation of research and conservation projects on the ground, or the hosting of workshops or symposia to raise awareness or capacity of conservation stakeholders, and are often driven by [thematic or regional working groups](#) within the SG. Examples include:
 - Shark and Ray SG [Working Groups](#) (e.g. [Bycatch](#))
 - Important Marine Mammal Area [Implementation Workshops](#);
 - Crocodile SG [Conservation Initiatives](#).
- **Highlighting members' projects and successes:** Many SGs consider certain members' activities, regardless of whether they are directly funded or catalysed by the SG, as activities that are in part made possible by the expertise and profile that the SG can provide. The lines often blur between members' SG roles and their roles in related NGOs and/or projects. As such, members' projects are sometimes included in quadrennial targets, and highlighted on SG websites, newsletters and social media accounts. In these 'win-win' cases, SGs benefit by being able to demonstrate active engagement in on-the-ground conservation, and members benefit by having their work highlighted on a potentially more globally visible platform. Examples include:
 - Sirenia SG newsletter - [Sirenews](#)
 - Cetacean SG website: [news](#) and [focal taxa](#)
 - Iguana Specialist Group [Newsletter](#)
 - [Sharknews](#) (which highlights stories from both members and non-members).

Stimulating conservation policy

- **Collaborating to regulate trade and/or change policy at national or international level:** Many SGs advise national governments on issues related to trade, sustainable harvest, or conservation management. Some Marine SGs consider their work with governments and other partners to propose and enforce Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) listings as essential to the conservation of their species. The Anguillid eel, Crocodile, Otter and Shark and Ray SGs have all been actively engaged in drafting, reviewing, or advising on CITES proposals. The importance of, and examples of this type of networking is highlighted in [this paper](#) on the importance of CITES for Seahorse Conservation, and [this paper](#) by several Marine SG Chairs focusing on how CITES can be used to conserve marine fishes. The [Otter SG](#) and [Crocodile SG](#), have also actively engaged in drafting CITES proposals and supporting range countries in preparing CITES documentation.
- **Including resource managers or industry representatives in SG work:** Resource managers employed by governments and/or representatives of the harvesting/trade industries can ensure that the SG provides realistic advice and input that is likely to result in policy change or implementation.
- **WCC Motions:** Many Marine SGs helped to initiate, or contributed to the drafting and ushering through of motions at the IUCN World Conservation Congress that can be turned into Resolutions. A list of Resolutions relevant to marine conservation can be found [here](#).

Responding to crises

- **Letters of intervention:** The majority of Marine SGs have issued letters of concern in response to situations that put their focal species (group) at great risk. When even greater emphasis is required, these letters are drafted by SG chairs in collaboration with members closest to the situation, and are then signed by the SSC Chair. See here some [guidelines on how to draft an intervention letter](#).

- Examples include:
 - Cetacean SG: [CSG Letters – IUCN – SSC Cetacean Specialist Group](#)
 - Iguana SG response to [crisis in the Dominican Republic](#)
 - A letter drafted by the Horseshoe Crab SG to various Federal and State Agencies in the U.S, that resulted in the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) adopting a resolution to ban the import and use of Asian horseshoe crabs as bait in state water fisheries along the Atlantic Coast, thus protecting both the Asian species that were being exported, and the American species at risk from harmful invasive parasites or pathogens that could be introduced through the Asian imports.



Dugong (*Dugong dugon*) VU
Photo © NOAA - Unsplash

COMPONENT 7: Communicate

The [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) is built on the Assess-Plan-Act cycle, with associated responsibilities to Communicate and Network. SSC Marine SGs should be addressing each element of this cycle. Communicating is a key element to all aspects of species conservation, both internally within SGs and project teams to ensure that work progresses smoothly, and externally to raise awareness and garner support for conservation action. Communication is also a vital element of fund-raising, as donors a) like to be able to see what a group is doing before they invest, and b) like to know that their funded projects will gain public recognition. At the same time, communicating is commonly not seen as a priority in many SGs.

The following are examples of ways that Marine SGs effectively communicate about their work:

Building the group to facilitate communication

- **Beyond email:** Almost every Marine SG uses email as their main means of communication between members – sometimes supported by email list-serve platforms like Google Groups. Some groups also have **members-only portions of their websites** with resources and documents for members, and others have **internal newsletters** intended to keep members informed of each other's work and initiatives.
- **Include members with communication expertise:** Many SGs are focusing more on communication by designating communications Focal Points or Working Groups, and adjusting membership criteria to be able to include members with the necessary skills to contribute to effective external communication: web designers, IT specialists, graphic designers, illustrators, etc. There are many examples of Marine SG members who excel both in communication methods and understanding of the conservation issues about which they are communicating.

External communication – Websites and Social Media

- **An independent and publicly accessible Website:** While the [IUCN SSC website](#) provides a page for each individual SSC SG and Task Force, many SGs have created their own websites hosted on independent platforms that allow them more space to share information about all aspects of their work, and more direct control over content management. This does have associated costs (annual hosting fees, initial website design if in-house expertise is not available), but often these can be covered through sponsorship or partnerships, and the benefits are many. Examples of SG/Task Force websites that showcase the full breadth of their activities include:

- [Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force](#)
- [Heron Specialist Group](#)
- [Cetacean Specialist Group](#)
- [Shark Specialist Group](#)
- [Iguana Specialist Group](#)
- [Crocodile Specialist Group](#)
- [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon Specialist Group](#)
- [Marine Turtle Specialist Group](#)
- **Social Media Accounts:** While websites can be an effective ‘one-stop-shop’ for information about an SG, they are somewhat static. Many SGs focus their attention on more dynamic social media platforms that are effective for wider dissemination of news and information. This is often an area where ‘younger’ SG members can take the lead, and where all members can play a role by ‘re-sharing/tweeting’ messages and translating them into local languages or platforms where needed. Examples of particularly active marine SG social media accounts include:
 - Twitter: [@IUCNSeahorse](#)
 - Facebook: [@IUCNShark](#)
 - Facebook: [@OtterSpecialistGroup](#)
 - Facebook: [@FlamingoSpecialistGroup](#)
 - Facebook: [Horseshoe Crab Specialist Group](#)

Newsletters and SG journals

- **Public-facing newsletters:** While some SGs create newsletters targeted at their own membership, others create newsletters designed to showcase their own and members’ activities and achievements to a wider public audience. Examples include:
 - [The Sirenia SG newsletter](#) (twice-yearly)
 - [The Crocodile SG newsletter](#) (quarterly)
 - [The Shark SG newsletter](#) (quarterly – highlighting news from both SG members and non-members)
- **Specialist Group journals:** A few SGs have created their own peer-reviewed journal to facilitate the publication of information that is relevant to the group’s target species. Examples include:
 - The Heron SG: <https://www.heronconservation.org/jhbc/>
 - The Otter SG Bulletin: <https://www.iucnosgbull.org/index.html>

Publications in peer-reviewed journals or other sources

- **Peer-reviewed publications:** A few SGs have submitted papers to peer-reviewed journals highlighting the work they undertook as an SG. These include papers that stand out about the conservation status of a species (group) based on recently completed assessments, or issues relevant to a collective group of species under their purview. Examples include:
 - The Mangrove SG: [*Mangroves give cause for conservation optimism, for now*](#) and [*Public Perceptions of Mangrove Forests Matter for Their Conservation*](#) (note how many authors on both papers list their SG affiliation)
 - The penguin SG: [*Applying science to pressing conservation needs for penguins*](#)
 - The Seasnake SG: [*Future Directions in the Research and Management of Marine Snakes*](#)
 - Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG: [*Global extinction risk for seahorses, pipefishes and their near relatives \(Syngnathiformes\)*](#)

- **Popular media:** Some SGs are consulted for comments or quotes in relation to sensational news items (e.g. shark attacks, or new species descriptions), but find it difficult to react in the immediate time scales news outlets demand, and to ensure that the final release accurately reflects the scientific and less sensational viewpoint the SG would want to convey. The Shark SG has been particularly pro-active in issuing press-releases to draw attention to papers with critical findings, regional or international workshops, etc. (see, for example, <https://www.iucnssg.org/press>). Having a dedicated Communications working group can help to ensure that messaging is consistent and effectively disseminated.



Steller Sea Lion (*Eumetopias jubatus*) NT
Photo © Bill Pernel - Unsplash

COMPONENT 8: Network

The [IUCN SSC Species Strategic Plan](#) is built on the Assess-Plan-Act cycle, with associated responsibilities to Communicate and Network. SSC Marine SGs should be addressing each element of this cycle. Networking with different organisations at multiple levels ensures that SGs are not duplicating the work of others, and that their assessments and planning can be put to practical use by stakeholders who can change policy or conduct work on the ground to improve the conservation status of target species (or groups of species).

Here are a few examples of ways that Marine SGs have used networking to enhance their effectiveness:

Relationships within the IUCN

- **Synergy among SSC SGs, RLAs and Task Forces:** A number of SGs are tightly bound by common interests and overlapping membership – for example, the Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force ([MMPATF](#)), and the Cetacean, Pinniped, and Sirenia SGs. The MMPATF has also worked closely with the Shark SG to support the development of [Important Shark and Ray Areas](#). Many of the fish SGs also have overlapping members that help to create synergy, and many marine SGs' focal species face common threats, like fisheries bycatch, creating incentives for cross-group discussion and collaboration. Some SGs with species that are exploited work closely with the Sustainable Use and Livelihoods SG ([SULI](#)), while others connect with the [Climate Change SG](#). The Horseshoe Crab SG has worked with the Invasive Species Group in halting the use of Asian Horseshoe crab species as bait in US fisheries. Many SGs are also contributing to the emerging Green Status of Species process.
- **Synergies across Commissions:** Efforts are underway within the [IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management](#) (CEM) to assess ecosystems for the SSC Red List of Ecosystems. Many SGs are making valuable connections and collaborations in relation to ecosystems relevant to their respective taxa. In another example of cross-commission collaboration, the [Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force](#) is a joint Task Force established by the SSC and the [IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas](#) (WCPA). The Marine Conservation Committee is currently forming a Fisheries Specialist Group to deal with species effects of fisheries, in consultation with the CEM Fisheries Expert Group.
- **Synergy with the SSC Chair's Office and Global Center for Species Survival (GCSS):** Many Marine SGs rely heavily on support from the SSC Chair's Office team and the GCSS to assist them with technical issues (especially the new SSC Data portal and membership renewal/inscription), and in some cases fund-raising and partnerships. New SGs have found this support particularly valuable.

Relationships with Inter-Governmental Organizations (IGOs)

- **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES):** Marine SGs that have sensitive issues surrounding international trade (e.g. sharks, turtles, seahorses, crocodiles, otters, etc.), have found it essential to develop expertise within their SG to 1) know how CITES appendices can be used to protect species of concern; 2) provide advice to governments and/or NGOs who are considering submission or promotion of CITES proposals; 3) support implementation of Appendix listings; and 4) help hold Parties accountable for their CITES responsibilities. The importance of, and examples of this type of networking is highlighted in [this paper](#) on the importance of CITES for Seahorse Conservation, and [this paper](#) by several marine SG Chairs focusing on how CITES can be used to conserve marine fishes. The [Otter SG](#) and [Crocodile SG](#), have also actively engaged in drafting CITES proposals and supporting range countries in preparing CITES documentation.
- **Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS):** Many Marine SGs collaborate closely with the CMS and its various 'daughter' agreements, which include the [Dugong MoU](#), the [IOSEA Marine Turtle MOU](#), the [Sharks MoU](#), and various [Concerted Actions](#) for shark, ray and cetacean species.
- **Other IGOs regulating exploitation or trade:** The Cetacean SG regularly contributes to the Scientific Committee of the International Whaling Commission, and multiple marine SGs work with various branches of the FAO and its subsidiary Fisheries Management Organisations (FMOs). The Shark SG is also consulted by national governments and organisations like TRAFFIC or CITES to provide advice or reviews of proposals for new policies or changes to species' trade status. Specialist Group expertise on the conservation status of species managed by these IGOs plays a critical role in developing sustainable exploitation and/or trade policies.

Relationships with NGOs

- **Providing advice and tools:** Many NGOs that engage in fund-raising, awareness-raising, and conservation action on the ground look to IUCN SSC Specialist groups for advice and tools to guide their efforts. Examples are provided in the '[Plan](#)' and '[Act](#)' sections of this guide. Many SG members are also affiliated with the NGOs who in turn benefit from SG expertise and advice. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and [SG Conservation Action Plans](#)/strategies play an important role in this, especially when supported by direct communications and good relationships between key individuals in the SG and the NGO in question. The Shark SG has also collectively provided advice on CMS guidelines for safe interactions with Marine Wildlife.
- **Amplifying messaging:** Many NGOs specialize in outreach, awareness raising and education, and some have entire departments dedicated to communication and public relations. Collaborating between SGs and NGOs can help to effectively disseminate information about species conservation status and needs. For example, members of the Cetacean SG have worked with WWF on a large-scale initiative to promote awareness and conservation of river dolphins (see www.riverdolphins.org).
- **Synergy and hosting:** Because SGs are not legal entities in their own right, it is often difficult to raise and administer funds. Some SGs have partnered with existing NGOs whose objectives align well with the SG, or created their own 'mirror' NGOs to host funds and contracts. In some cases the relationship is limited to 'fiscal sponsorship' – with the NGO effectively offering a 'parking place' for the SG's funds. In other cases, the synergy is much deeper and the NGO becomes something like the 'working arm' of the SG (see for example the [Seahorse, Pipefish & Seadragon SG](#) and [Project Seahorse](#), and the [Penguin SG](#) and the [Global Penguin Society](#)).

Partnerships with zoos, aquaria, universities and other supporting organisations

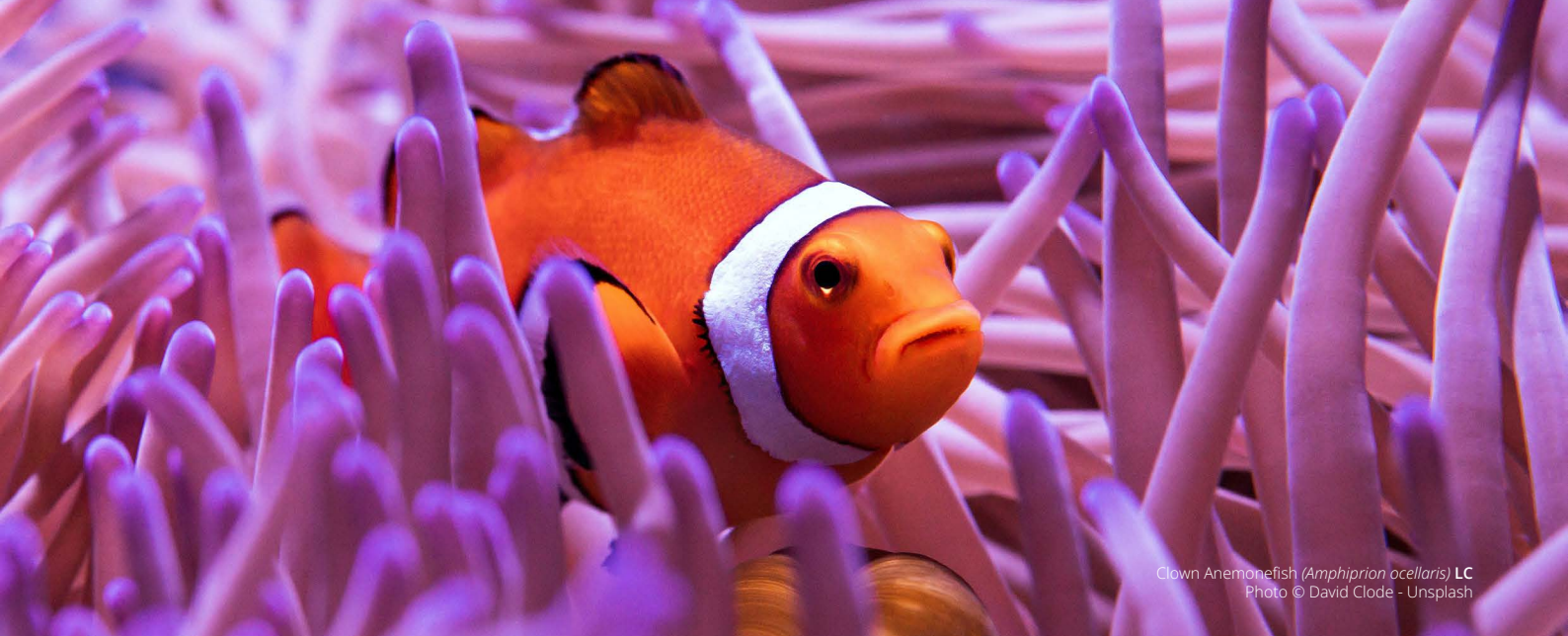
- **Synergy and hosting:** As with NGOs, zoos, aquaria, universities, or other supporting organisations can host SG funds and/or paid positions. Many Marine SGs have (had) Programme Officers or Red List Authority Coordinator positions hosted by zoos or aquaria, and many universities underwrite the time that their employees spend on SG work. For example, The US Marine Mammal Commission underwrites time for the Cetacean SG Chair, the Zoological Society London (ZSL) underwrites the time of several Marine SG Chairs (including the Anguillid Eel SG) and has

hosted Programme Officers and websites for others (including the Mangrove SG). Old Dominion University and Arizona State University collaborate to support the [Marine Biodiversity Unit](#) that acts as the Marine Fishes Red List Authority. SGs interested in such partnerships are suggested to contact their respective GCSS focal points and the SSC Director of Partnerships, Kira Mileham <kira.mileham@ssc.iucn.org>, for insight and support before reaching out to such institutions.

- **Ex-situ conservation:** Zoos and aquaria can also provide valuable technical support, facilities, funding and expertise in relation to ex-situ conservation efforts and the IUCN [One Plan Approach](#) to conservation. In recognition of this potential, relevant SGs are encouraged to establish Focal Points for ex-situ conservation. This role can have varying titles, including 'Aquarium' or 'Husbandry' Focal Point/Working Group convenor, or 'Integrated Conservation Planning' Coordinator. Some examples of marine SGs with Ex-Situ Focal Points and/or similar positions/initiatives to promote the One Plan Approach include the [Cetacean SG](#), the [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG](#), the [Shark SG](#), and the [Iguana SG](#).

Networking and support for National governments

- **Advice in response to crises:** Many Marine SGs provide advice and support to national governments responding to crises that can arise – for example, oil spills, mass die-offs, illegal trade, etc. For example, in May 2021, when the cargo ship M/V X-Press Pearl caught fire while anchored off the coast of Sri Lanka, multiple marine SGs helped local NGO, OceansWell prepare briefs on the possible impacts of the resulting pollution on various habitats and species groups: [Resources on MV Xpress Pearl](#).
- **Support for national Red Listing or conservation policy:** SGs are also often involved and/or consulted during national Red Listing efforts.



Clown Anemonefish (*Amphiprion ocellaris*) LC
Photo © David Clode - Unsplash

COMPONENT 9: Partnership and fundraising

While the vast majority of SSC SG work is conducted on a volunteer basis, most SGs require some level of funding in order to adequately address the full Assess-Plan-Act cycle supported by a framework of communication and networking. Even if funding is not used to compensate the time of key figures in the SG (e.g. a Programme Officer or RLA Coordinator), it is often needed to cover costs of websites, meetings, preparation and dissemination of conservation plans or other materials, and 'on the ground' conservation initiatives. Fundraising is seen by some as one of the most challenging aspects of SG work. However, there are some good examples of how Marine SGs have secured funding and support for their activities:

Holding and managing funds

Because SGs do not have any formal legal status, one of the greatest challenges is not only raising funds for work, but setting up mechanisms to responsibly and transparently hold and manage any funds that are received. SGs follow a number of different models – each with its pros and cons:

- **Chair's institution acts as financial host:** SG Chairs may be able to set up sub-accounts within their affiliated university, zoo, aquarium, etc. This may not be a long-term solution for SGs, as the arrangement would need to be reconfigured when Chairs change.
- **Partnering with a fiscal sponsor (NGO, zoo, aquarium) to manage funds:** Some SGs have been able to establish partnerships with entities who are willing to hold and manage accounts on their behalf on a longer term basis (see more details under 'partnerships and hosting' below).
- **Creating a separate legal entity to hold and manage funds specifically for the SG:** For example, the Crocodile SG has created the International Association of Crocodile Specialists Inc. (IACS), along with a not-for-profit structure to manage donations and funds in the USA (IACS-USA).
- **Informal arrangement with a separate entity to raise and disburse funds in consultation with the SG:** In this case, the SG may simply advise and consult on how a separate entity uses their funds to help advance SG conservation priorities. An example is the [CrocFest](#), which collaborates closely with the Crocodile SG.

Fundraising

- **Grant applications:** Many SGs rely on grant applications to support their work. Chairs keep their ears to the ground for calls for proposals relevant to their taxa, including opportunities like the [SSC Internal grants](#) and [SSC EDGE grants](#). Most SG members are familiar with grant-writing for research and conservation projects, but admit that this is a time-consuming and competitive way to obtain funds.
- **Appeals to private donors:** Several Marine SGs also have developed tools and strategies to appeal to private donors – a funding source that some Chairs find can be more generous, and less restrictive than funding raised through grant applications. Although in some cases personal contacts or previous collaboration will convince donors that an SG's activities are worthwhile, good communication tools can be critical to support donor appeals. An attractive website that showcases the breadth and context of an SG's activities, and/or concise funding 'flyers', like these developed by Project Seahorse: [Partner with Project Seahorse](#) and specifically [Partner with Project Seahorse to save seahorses and the seas](#) for the Seahorse Pipefish and Seadragon SG (now funded) can be very effective. A website or active social media accounts also provide SGs an opportunity to publicly acknowledge donors.
- **Corporate sponsors:** In some cases, corporate sponsors with a possible link to the focal taxa, but without a conflict of interest in the species' conservation can be approached for support. One example includes support from Guylian Chocolates (who have trademark chocolates in the shape of many sea creatures, including seahorses) for staff positions in the Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG.
- **Government sponsors:** A number of Marine SGs provide regular advice and support to government agencies that rely on SG expertise to formulate effective conservation management policies. In exchange, and/or as part of an ongoing relationship, these government agencies can offer funding and support for some of the SG activities that are required to allow the SG to provide up-to-date and accurate advice. The Polar Bear SG was originally entirely supported by the five Polar Bear range countries, and is still regularly 'contracted' by range country governments to provide specific advice.

In-kind support

- **Partnerships and hosting:** Many SGs are supported through in-kind donations from NGOs, aquaria, zoos, universities, and government agencies. These donations can include full- or part-time RLA Coordinators and/or Programme Officers to assist with administration and fund-raising. Furthermore, because SGs are not legal entities in their own right, some SGs have partnered with existing NGOs whose objectives align well with the SG, or created their own 'mirror' NGOs to host funds and contracts. In some cases the relationship is limited to 'fiscal sponsorship' – with the NGO effectively offering a 'parking place' for the SG's funds. In other cases the synergy is much deeper and the NGO becomes something like the 'working arm' of the SG (see for example the [Seahorse, Pipefish and Seadragon SG](#) and [Project Seahorse](#) or the [Penguin SG](#) and the [Global Penguin Society](#)).
- **SG tasks formally recognized as part of a 'day' job:** As employers of SG Chairs or members, NGOs, aquaria, zoos, universities or government agencies can offer more subtle in-kind support by including SG tasks as part of a formal job description, making it possible to spend normal office hours on SG work. Such relationships also can help with financial management, facilities, and equipment. See the ['Network'](#) page for some more concrete examples.
- **Hosting websites and assisting with communication and Public Relations:** Other forms of in-kind support include the hosting of websites and/or assistance with the development of outreach and communication and/or fund-raising materials. See the ['Network'](#) page for some more concrete examples.

Making do

- **Working overtime:** Only a handful of SGs have fundraising working groups or focal points. In the vast majority of cases, fundraising falls almost entirely to the Chairs. When Chairs don't even have their own time covered to work on SG tasks, the prospect of fund-raising can seem daunting indeed. Many SG Chairs/leaders conduct almost all of their SG business in evenings and weekends, but see this as an inescapable part of working in the field of conservation.
- **Virtual meetings:** The pandemic has forced many Marine SGs to shift from regular in-person meetings to virtual meetings using online tools like Zoom, Teams, or Google Meet. These meetings incur almost no costs, and can be effective to maintain the momentum of SG activities. However, almost all Chairs agree that at least some face-to-face meetings are essential for establishing more personal working relationships and building a sense of trust and belonging in groups.
- **Operating on a shoestring:** Many SGs are accustomed to 'making do' with whatever means and volunteer efforts they can muster. In some cases, this results in a scaling back of their objectives and targets, or accepting that projects will take longer than anticipated because they rely entirely on volunteer efforts conducted on top of full time 'day jobs'. Chairs often have to accept that work will take place in a cycle of fits and starts as members become available and/or are preoccupied with (paid) fieldwork and other obligations.



Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) EN
Photo © Jeremy Bishop - Unsplash

COMPONENT 10: Chairs' golden nuggets of advice

Twenty-three Marine SG and Task Force Chairs were interviewed to learn about how their groups function and what has worked well for them. Most of what was conveyed in these interviews is captured in Modules 1 through 9 focusing on different aspects of SG structure, organisation, and activities. Each interview concluded with an open-ended question: 'If you were approached by someone responsible for setting up a new Specialist Group or Task Force, or someone who was stepping into a new SG leadership role, what would be your single most important piece of advice based on your experience over the past several years?'. Here are a few of the responses:

- There is no 'right' way to be an SG, but learning from other SGs can be helpful.
- There is no one-size-fits all way to run an SG. The strategy and structure has to be tailored to the species, including how many species are in the group, their geographical range, and how many people are working with the species.
- As a Chair you need to be prepared to be a manager as well as a scientist. It is all about bringing people together from different backgrounds and motivating them to work together for your cause. Different stakeholders/individuals may need different approaches.
- Do not feel that you have to know or do everything or be 'territorial' about your role. An SG can act as 'conduit for expertise' rather than the sole source of expertise. It is just as valuable to connect people, as it is to provide the expertise yourself.
- Be careful of early overextension. The conservation needs are so vast at all scales, that it is easy to bite off more than you can chew.
- Build the group to play on the Chairs' strengths, and the strengths and interests of members who can lead on initiatives about which they are passionate and motivated.
- To best harness the power of your SG members, find out what their interests/passions are and let them run with them - this can lead to active Working Groups and the creation of useful SG resources (e.g. a website, conservation strategy, etc.).
- 'You can't do it alone'. Surround yourself with a team of passionate people and give them rein to fly with their own regional or thematic groups or projects. Don't micromanage, but keep in touch and show them regularly how much you appreciate their efforts.
- Be inclusive and transparent. Make sure you set things up in a manner that can easily be handed over to the next Chair/team to ensure continuity and transparency.

- You have to really WANT to be an SG Chair/member, and do it for that reason - not to gain professional glory or positive feedback, as demands will often seem high with little recognition/reward. At the same time, if you are feeling 'put upon' and not enjoying it, you shouldn't do it anymore. Always remember that you chose to take the role.
- Work with the right people. 'You can go to the moon if you have the right team, but you need to look for team members who act as sails, not anchors'.
- Take great care in choice of membership. It is essential to convene a core group that is active, committed and dependable. Don't choose members based only on their (academic) name or reputation. Choose members who will dig in and contribute.
- Create a sense of family in the SG. Make sure all members know each other, care about each other, and are actively involved.
- Do what you can. Start small with concrete achievable goals that will help team members see progress and obtain a sense of achievement.
- Don't feel guilty about what you can't do.
- Get your salary paid somehow. As a Chair or leader in an SG, you will be more effective if you are not scrambling to survive and relying entirely on evenings and weekends to get SG work done. 'Put on your own oxygen mask before you try to help others'.
- Communicate often and hold regular meetings in order to keep members engaged and informed.
- Rely on people with a lot of experience and a corporate memory/history with the group.
- Listen to younger members who have energy and vision and fresh perspectives, and give them projects they can sink their teeth into.
- Don't shy away from 'sustainable use'/hunting/harvesting issues. Involve relevant industries/users in the work to find conservation solutions - either as SG members or as partners at the discussion table.
- Recognise volunteer efforts. Write letters of support and appreciation whenever possible, especially if it will make it easier for employers to make time for members to work on SG.



IUCN SSC Best Practices Guidelines