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Call for joint action on overfishing in S. China Sea

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Scientists and experts from five Asian countries have called on their governments to work together to address depleting stocks of skipjack tuna in the South China Sea – a joint effort some say could also help ease tensions in the disputed waters.

Government-affiliated experts from the Philippines, China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam – nations with conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea – jointly released their landmark analysis of the region's shared fisheries resources in a conference in Manila on Sept 2.

The conference was organised by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Manila and the Beijing-based China-Southeast Asia Research Centre on the South China Sea.

Fishery resources are aquatic species that can be legally caught.

Dubbed the first Common Fisheries Resource Analysis (CFRA), the study promotes strategies for regional cooperation in the sustainable management of shared fisheries resources.

More than 100 regional scientists and policymakers participated in the study, meeting eight times since 2018 to establish their approach to scientific cooperation.

Among their ground rules was one about avoiding territorial disputes and other political sensitivities in their discussions.

The working group decided to study stock levels of skipjack tuna, the smallest and most abundant commercial tuna species that is fished by all five countries participating in the CFRA.

International law dictates that

coastal states and countries that fish for highly migratory species like skipjack have a special responsibility to cooperatively ensure protection of their numbers.

Overall fish stocks in the region are down 70 per cent to 95 per cent, compared with 1950s levels.

The CFRA found that while "the current fishing levels of adult skipjack tuna are probably sustainable in most parts of the South China Sea", overfishing of younger tuna put the fish's population at risk.

If too many young fish are caught before they can breed, the study said, this could potentially result in a rapid decline of the population.

Speaking at the CFRA conference, Dr Mudjekeewis Santos of the Philippines' National Fisheries Research and Development Institute said: "A single fish can breed in the waters of one country, feed in a second country, and be caught

in a third country.

"This joint analysis shows that regional scientists can work together to develop the scientific evidence that is essential for an effective regional response."

He added that scientists working on initiatives such as the CFRA can help forge peace in the South China Sea.

Tensions remain high in the region as Beijing continues to insist on its sweeping claim over the entire South China Sea. This is being challenged by other claimants, such as the Philippines, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan.

The South China Sea is one of the world's top fishing grounds, accounting for about 12 per cent of the global wild catch, the CFRA said.

It is also the source of 20 per cent of East Asia's seafood production

and provides food and other benefits to millions of people.

The Philippines secured a victory at an international tribunal, which ruled in 2016 that China's claim of historic rights to the sea was invalid. However, China has refused to recognise this ruling.

Dr Clarita Carlos, the Philippines' national security adviser, said during the conference that the proposed fishing agreement among the five nations would not only conserve marine resources but could also be a non-traditional way of settling the maritime dispute in the South China Sea.

"Why do I want the scientists to take the front line here, to be the major actors in resolving the issue? Because it is the scientists who will have a different mind frame about the sea," she said.

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