

FINAL
SUMMARY REPORT
HABITAT AND ECOSYSTEM COMMITTEE
SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERY MANAGEMENT COUNCIL
North Charleston, SC
September 15, 2026

The Habitat and Ecosystem Committee met in North Charleston, SC, on Tuesday, September 15, 2026. The Committee approved the meeting agenda.

Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP) Report

Stacie Crowe, SCDNR, outgoing Chair of the Habitat and Ecosystem Advisory Panel (HEAP), presented the July 2026 HEAP Report. The Committee reviewed and approved the Food Webs and Connectivity Policy and the Alterations to Riverine, Estuarine, and Nearshore Water Quality and Flows Policy. The Committee also discussed potential habitat impacts from the space industry and supported exploring a data-gathering tool. Members noted that naval training exercises and associated acoustic disturbances may affect fish abundance and suggested that HEAP consider further investigation. The Committee reviewed the recommended goals and objectives for the Integrated Ecosystem Assessment and approved the main goal but expressed concern that some subgoals may be overly ambitious. The Committee requested that staff work with HEAP and the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council to reevaluate the subgoals and identify achievable objectives. Members also discussed artificial reef mapping as a potential tool for improving habitat identification and noted that the SERFS video index could support lionfish monitoring, with other fishery-independent datasets potentially useful for monitoring additional invasive species. The Committee considered a joint Coral and Habitat Advisory Panel meeting to discuss a potential expansion of Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern onto the Blake Plateau but decided to bring the topic to Full Council in conjunction with the SAFMC workplan. Finally, the Committee approved desk reviews of the Artificial Reef, Aquaculture, and Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Policies.

Direction to staff:

- Explore development of a standardized data gathering tool for space-related information using existing reporting platforms.
- Return to the HEAP to ask for feedback on how to create realistic and achievable subgoals for the IEA
- Conduct desk reviews of the Artificial Reef, the Aquaculture, and Submerged Aquatic Vegetation policies with a follow-up during the HEAP January meeting if a more substantial change that requires a workgroup needs to occur.

MOTION 1: APPROVE THE FOOD WEBS AND CONNECTIVITY POLICY

Approved by Committee

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

MOTION 2: APPROVE THE ALTERATIONS TO RIVERINE, ESTUARINE, AND NEARSHORE WATER QUALITY AND FLOWS POLICY

Approved by Committee

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

Ecosystem Information Review

Dr. Sarah Gaichas, Hydra Scientific, reviewed the Ecosystem Information Review Project, which seeks to strengthen South Atlantic fisheries management by expanding the use of ecosystem information, indicators, and collaborative research. The project is part of the ongoing Resilient Fisheries Initiative and the report can be accessed here: [Report 1 \(pdf here\)](#). The first part of the report reviews how the regional fishery management councils use ecosystem data and decision-support tools and identifies opportunities for integrating these approaches into SAFMC management processes. The discussion emphasized that ecosystem information should include socioeconomic data, as well as ecological indicators, and noted opportunities to summarize indicators by stock to assess changes in risk and uncertainty. Members also discussed the potential use of risk assessments to identify management concerns and prioritize needs.

The second part of the report evaluates implementation options, cooperative data collection, and prototype ecosystem indicators for the South Atlantic. The project report can be accessed here: [Report 2 \(pdf here\)](#). Council members supported developing a structured process for ecosystem-based decision-making and recommended using the implementation plan to be presented at the December Council meeting to outline practical next steps for incorporating ecosystem information into Council decisions. The Committee discussed establishing a work group or subcommittee on ecosystem-based decision-making, which will be included for consideration in the Implementation Plan discussion for December. Members emphasized the need to prioritize the work, identify volunteers, and establish clear “on-ramps” so that the process leads to practical management applications and can be expanded as additional funding and research opportunities become available.

Other potential priorities included identifying management priorities, potential indicators such as bottom temperature, cooperative and citizen science data collection opportunities including study fleets, and management strategy evaluations for data-poor and multispecies fisheries. Members also supported expanding cooperative research and continuing collaboration with NOAA and The Nature Conservancy’s mapping and habitat identification projects.

Timing and Tasks

MOTION 3: ADOPT THE FOLLOWING TIMING AND TASKS:

- Hold the January HEAP meeting via webinar addressing the items listed in the workplan on slide 15 of [Attachment 1B](#).

APPROVED BY COUNCIL

DIRECTION TO STAFF: IDENTIFY MEMBERS TO INCLUDE IN THE SAFMC ECOSYSTEM SUB-COMMITTEE AND HOLD DISCUSSIONS AT THE DECEMBER MEETING ON THE CHARGE TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE AND WHERE THIS FITS IN NOAA PRIORITIES.