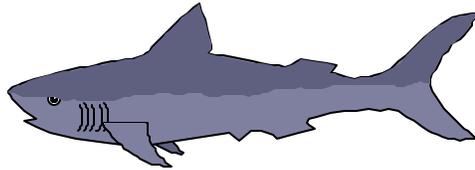


FISH



TALES

American Fisheries Society Identifies Gulf Species At Risk of Extinction

The American Fisheries Society (AFS), the oldest and largest professional society representing fisheries scientists, recently produced an article on marine species at risk of extinction in North America. This article presents some alarming findings on the status of fish species in the Gulf, including some species managed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

The AFS article conducts a comprehensive review of fish species that live in ocean and coastal environments in North America to determine which species may be at risk of extinction based on a number of criteria. These criteria, or categories of risk, include how rare the species is, the range in which it occurs, specialized habitat requirements, and finally a decline in the population.

Based on these criteria, the following species in the Gulf

were identified. Where a species is specific to a certain state, I have done my best to note it. In addition, an (*) represents management of this species by either the Gulf Council or NMFS.

Sharks and Rays

- Whale Shark*
- Sand Tiger Shark*
- White Shark*
- Dusky Shark*
- Smalltooth sawfish

Sturgeon

Gulf sturgeon (LA-FL)

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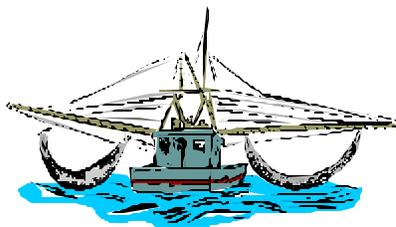
- Special points of interest:
- Permits for shrimp vessels again considered by the Council to help gather better data
 - Council to recommend a rebuilding plan for red snapper
 - Red Grouper officially declared "overfished"; amberjack identified as overfished
 - Three of five "hot spots" for marine fisheries at risk of extinction are in the Gulf of Mexico
 - Ten out of the fifteen managed grouper species in the Gulf recognized as "at risk of extinction" by the AFS

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Shrimp Permits Decision On Hold Until January

A decision by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) to implement a permit system in the shrimp fishery through Shrimp Amendment 11 has been put on hold until January 2001. The reason for the delay is to clarify Amendment 11 to allow the public a better opportunity to comment on this important issue. After these revisions are made, public hearings will again be held throughout the Gulf of Mexico in early Janu-

ary. A final decision is then scheduled at the January



Gulf Council meeting in Galveston, TX.

As originally presented by the Gulf Council, Amendment

11 proposed a licensing system for the shrimp fishery offering a choice of either a permit or registration system to acquire the necessary data from the fishery. The difference espoused in Amendment 11 between these two systems is that permits can be revoked if regulations are violated while a registration cannot. The Gulf Council was advised that, by law, a registration system has the same

(Continued on page 2)

Red Snapper Rebuilding Plan

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) is set to take a historic step in the red snapper management saga by proposing an action plan to return red snapper to a healthy level. At stake is the most important, and controversial reef fish fishery in the Gulf of Mexico. At its January meeting in Galveston, TX, the Gulf Council will reveal how it expects to return red snapper to a healthy level by the year 2031.

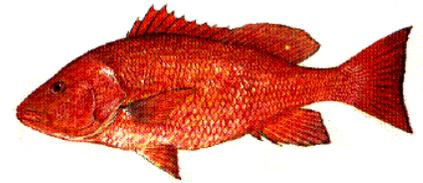
In proposing a rebuilding plan the Gulf Council will review stock restoration scenarios to determine which course of action they intend to take. All of the proposed rebuilding plans break the thirty one year time frame into five year intervals with decision points at the end of every five years. This, in theory, will allow the Gulf Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service to track the progress of the rebuilding plans at five year intervals and provide information on what additional steps are needed for the following five years.

While the GRN applauds the Gulf Council's efforts in putting together a comprehensive rebuilding plan, complete with interim goals to adequately monitor progress, we are concerned that the Gulf Council will delay short term corrective action thereby compromising long term rebuilding goals. It appears from early indications, that the Gulf Council will vote for the "status quo" of the inflated 9.12 million pound catch level for the first five years. This decision would first run afoul of recommendations of the Gulf Council's reef fish stock assessment panel, an advisory panel of scientists, and may violate a recent court decision regarding summer flounder on the east coast. Second, it will most likely require the Gulf Council to "pay" with more restrictive measures later for buying time with the status quo for now. The political will to make this decision in the future is still very much in question.

Interestingly, the red snapper rebuilding plan also has major implications for the shrimp fishery. If rebuilding goals are

not being met, reductions in the unintended catch, or bycatch, of red snapper will need to be reduced in the nets of shrimp trawls. The NMFS currently estimates that the use of bycatch reduction devices or BRDs is approximately forty percent effective in reducing the catch of juvenile red snapper in shrimp trawl nets. This reduction rate may need to be raised if conservation gains are not being made.

The GRN is asking our members and friends to refer to the attached "Getting Involved" insert provided which has all the information you need to have your voice heard on this matter.



Red Snapper. From the SAFMC web site.

Shrimp Permits....

(Continued from page 1)
enforcement implications as a permit. Based on this information, the GRN asked that the Gulf Council seriously consider delaying action to ensure that the public is afforded a fair public comment opportunity. The GRN feels that this will make the Council decision stronger in the long term.

The rationale behind a licensing system for the shrimp fishery is simple: better data on fishing effort and enforcement against bad actors in the fishery. The NMFS currently estimates, utilizing current information sources, that there are between 3,000 and 7,000 shrimp fishery

vessels operating in the federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico. This uncertainty has significant repercussions on many aspects of fishery management and resource protection in the Gulf of Mexico. An accurate number generated through a permit system is crucial to fisheries management in the Gulf as it will provide managers with information used to determine shrimp fishing effort, catch, bycatch, and other important parameters needed to properly manage shrimp and other species.

For example, scientists believe the recovery of red snapper in the Gulf is tied to reducing bycatch in the shrimp fishery.

Therefore, better data on the amount of red snapper caught incidentally in shrimp trawls will provide managers with a better estimate as to the status of red snapper and what reductions in bycatch, if any, are needed in the shrimp fishery (see the Red Snapper story above on how this information will help management).

If you were unable to attend a public hearing or submit comments, this delay creates another important opportunity to do so. Please see the "Getting Involved" insert for public hearing times, dates and locations as well as information for sending written comments.

Red Grouper, Amberjack Recognized as "Overfished"

Red Grouper officially recognized as "overfished"

Red grouper, the most economically important grouper species in the Gulf of Mexico was officially designated by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as "overfished" on November 24, 2000. Red Grouper becomes the sixth overfished species in the Gulf of Mexico joining red snapper, red drum, king mackerel, Nassau grouper, and Jewfish. Other Gulf species are expected to be identified in the near future, as the 2000 Report to Congress on the Status of our Nations Fisheries, an annual report produced by the NMFS, is due out shortly.

The official designation as "overfished" is significant as it triggers a requirement of the Sustainable Fisheries Act that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council), within one year,



Red Grouper. Courtesy of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

make recommendations to NMFS on what actions to take to return red grouper to a healthy level.

The first step in the Gulf Council process has recently been completed. The Reef Fish Stock Assessment Panel (RFSAP), an advisory panel composed of scientists who provide advice to the Gulf Council, concurred with the decision of the NMFS that red grouper is overfished earlier this month in Miami. It also determined that red grouper can be rebuilt within ten years if reductions in the number of fish caught is cut from a current

high of nine million pounds to about four and one-half million pounds.

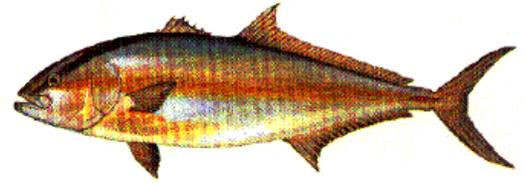
The GRN is urging the Gulf Council to begin work aimed to address the red grouper fishery in conjunction with other groupers in the Gulf by utilizing a comprehensive, ecosystem based approach to management. An ecosystem based approach recognizes not only the catch of red grouper but also its habitat, prey species it depends on, and other species that are caught in conjunction with this fishery.

This approach is important for two primary reasons. First, red grouper are a part of a multi-species fishery, meaning that other species of fish such as grouper and tilefish are also caught in the act of fishing for red grouper. In addition, fishermen who must reduce their catch of red grouper under a rebuilding plan may target other species in the area to make up the difference. This is of major concern when one considers the recent report of the American Fisheries Society which found that ten of the fifteen *managed* grouper species in the Gulf of Mexico are at risk of extinction.

Accordingly, we will be asking the Gulf Council to move ahead with Amendment 18 to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan which will comprehensively address the entire grouper fishery. To help support this course of action, please refer to the "Getting Involved" insert for simple ways of influencing the Gulf Council's decision on this very important matter.

Greater Amberjack identified as "overfished"

Greater amberjack was preliminarily identified as "overfished" by the RFSAP after reviewing available NMFS data. The findings of the RFSAP will now be presented to the Gulf Council for their review at the Council meeting in January.



Greater Amberjack. Courtesy of the South Atlantic Fishery

Greater amberjack, a large "jack" species in the Gulf of Mexico, is managed under the Gulf Council's reef fish fishery management plan. The "jack" family includes other well known species such as Florida pompano, crevalle, and blue runner (hardtail). Greater amberjack are known to reach weights in excess of 140 pounds. They are found throughout the entire Gulf of Mexico, normally associated with structures such as rocky reefs or wrecks.

Greater amberjack are currently protected by size limits, a bag limit of one fish per person in the recreational fishery, and a three month seasonal closure in the commercial fishery.

The Gulf Council will review the effects of current regulations and determine what additional steps are necessary to improve the health of this fishery at its upcoming meeting in Galveston, TX. For further information contact the Gulf Council at (888) 833-1844.



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“Working to Protect and Preserve the Gulf of Mexico”

This publication is the product of the GRN working on the following issues of concern: overfishing, essential fish habitat, full implementation of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, and public education on the importance of sustainable fisheries management.

The GRN would like to thank Pew Charitable Trusts, Rockefeller Brothers, Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, and the Trull Foundation for making our work possible.

Gulf Species at Risk of Extinction...

Shad

Alabama Shad (MS-FL)

Mosquitofish

Mangrove gambusia (FL)

Killifish

Saltmarsh topminnow

Silversides

Key Silverside (FL)

Pipefish and Seahorses

Fringed pipefish
Longsnout seahorse (FL)
Dwarf seahorse
Opossum pipefish
Texas pipefish (TX, LA)

Snook

Fat Snook (FL)
Tarpon Snook (FL)

Groupers

Marbled grouper
Speckled hind*
Yellowedge grouper*
Jewfish*
Warsaw grouper*

Snowy grouper*

Nassau grouper*

Blue hamlet (FL)

Black grouper*

Yellowmouth grouper*

Gag*

Scamp*

Croakers

Blue Croaker (FL)

Blennies

Key Blenny (FL)

Sleepers

Bigmouth Sleeper

Gobies

Blackfin goby (TX)
Spottail goby (FL)
Orangespotted goby (FL)

Tangs

Gulf surgeonfish (FL)

The article also identified geographic “hot spots” where several species are at risk. These include three spots in Florida (Indian River, Florida Bay and the Florida Keys),

the Puget Sound and adjacent Canadian waters, the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico, and the Gulf of California. As you can see, three of the five hot spots are in the Gulf of Mexico.

This AFS list serves as a wake up call to all residents in the Gulf, and across the nation as to the situation our marine fisheries face. With the compilation of this list and identification of the three “hotspots” identified in the Gulf of Mexico region, we hope that everyone will commit themselves to the fight for sustainable fisheries. As the asterisk indicates, most of the grouper and shark species identified by the AFS are under active government management! Clearly, in light of the groundbreaking legal requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, our region can do better than the current state we find ourselves in.

Over the next year, the Gulf Council will be considering major changes to grouper management in the Gulf. We urge all of our members and friends to stay involved in this process to ensure that our fisheries are managed properly.