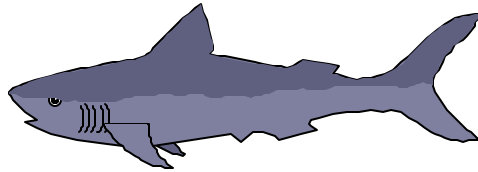


FISH



TALES

Gulf Council to Consider Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) is set to take final action the week of July 9-13, 2001 on proposals to rebuild depleted red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico. *This proposed rebuilding plan is critical in ensuring sustainable fisheries and ecosystems in the Gulf region.*

State of Groupers in the Gulf of Mexico

Groupers in the Gulf of Mexico are in trouble. Of the fifteen managed species in the Gulf, three spe-



Red Grouper. Courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

cies are depleted (red grouper, jewfish and Nassau grouper), one is nearly depleted (gag grouper), four species are candidates for protection under the Endangered Species Act (jewfish, Nassau grouper, speckled hind, and warsaw grouper) and ten are identified by the American Fisheries Society as "at risk of extinction".

(Continued on page 4)

Inside this issue:	
Gag Grouper Reserves Undercut by Lawsuit	2
Texas Shrimpers File Petition to Lower Red Snapper Catches	3
Gulf of Mexico Subject of Sustainable Seas Expedition	3
Gulf Council to Consider Bycatch Quota in the Shrimp Fishery	3

Gulf Council Reassessing Threats to Fisheries Habitat

As a result of a recent court decision, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will be re-examining its efforts to protect habitats essential to the continued well being of our fisheries. This will allow GRN members and friends a great opportunity to ensure that fish habitat in the Gulf of

Mexico receives the protection it deserves.

In a lawsuit filed by several GRN members against the NMFS last year, a federal court found that all of the environmental assessments regarding protecting and identifying habitats essential to our fisheries (EFH) completed by the NMFS violated the National Environmental Policy Act

(NEPA). NEPA requires that federal agencies analyze the impacts of their activities on the environment and adequately consider alternatives to their proposed action. The court found that the NEPA analysis conducted by the NMFS regarding the seven fishery management plans in the Gulf did not discuss how fishing gear may damage fish habitat

(Continued on page 2)

Special points of interest:	
• Gulf Council to consider ten year rebuilding plan for red grouper	
• Gulf Council addressing habitat protection deficiencies	
• NOAA and National Geographic partnership explores the Gulf of Mexico	
• Some fishing will be allowed in the two gag grouper reserves	

Gag Grouper Reserves Shortchanged by Recent Settlement

A lawsuit filed by the Coastal Conservation Association (CCA) against the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) on two areas closed to fishing in the Gulf of Mexico to protect male gag grouper was recently settled, compromising the integrity of these areas.

Based on a finding by the NMFS that gag grouper are “approaching an overfished condition”, meaning that gag will become overfished within two years if no action is taken, and disturbing findings by scientists that inbreeding may be occurring in the population due the low numbers of male gag grouper in the population, The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) voted in July of 1999 to close two areas in the Gulf of Mexico to all fishing to protect male gag groupers and their spawning sites. The Gulf Council voted to close the area to all

fishing, as opposed to only fishing for gag grouper or reef fish, after hearing concerns from the United States Coast Guard regarding the difficulty in enforcing closed areas if some vessels are allowed to fish



Gag Grouper. Courtesy of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

there. Consideration was also given to the situation on the east coast of Florida where an area closed to all fishing but “trolling” (a fishing method normally associated with the upper areas of the water column) damaged sensitive coral areas where fishermen rigged their gear to fish

lower in the water column.

Despite these concerns, a settlement reached between the NMFS and the CCA will allow fishing for species such as tuna, sharks and billfish to take place in the closed area, compromising enforcement efforts of the Coast Guard and potentially threatening grouper habitat. As part of the settlement agreement the NMFS will conduct a study on the impacts of trolling in the Gulf to determine what impacts this type of fishing has in closed areas.

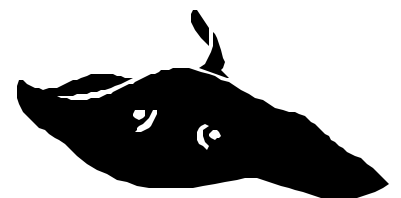
The GRN will be working with our member groups to ensure that this settlement does as little damage as possible to the integrity of the closed areas. Stay tuned to learn how you can help with these efforts.

Fisheries Habitat...

(Continued from page 1)
or provide possible alternatives which may reduce potential impacts on the environment.

Pursuant to this ruling the Gulf Council is now completing a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) to analyze the impacts of the threats posed by fishing gears to EFH and proposing alternatives to minimize these threats. The SEIS also contains alternatives for identifying EFH in the Gulf region. The Gulf Council is currently “scoping” these issues until early fall meaning that any input you have on fisheries

habitat in the Gulf will be accepted by the Council in production of the SEIS. Once the scoping process is concluded the Gulf Council will produce a draft SEIS with alternatives for minimizing the threats posed by fishing gears on essential fish habitat and for identifying EFH in the Gulf region. Contact the GRN if you would like further information on this process and ways to get involved.



Hot Topics in Fisheries Around the Gulf of Mexico

TEXAS SHRIMP ASSOCIATION PETITIONS NMFS TO REDUCE CATCH LEVELS OF RED SNAPPER IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

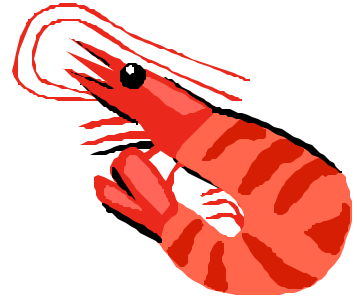
The Texas Shrimp Association, an industry group comprised of shrimpers in Texas, recently filed a legal request with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to immediately reduce landings of overfished red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico. This request cites the severely overfished status of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico and the inconsistency between current allowable catch levels and those recommended by scientists that advise the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council).

While the GRN supports many of the points raised in the TSA request, we do not support immediate action at this time. The GRN is instead focusing on the red snapper rebuilding plan completed this month by the Gulf Council. This document, available at www.gulfcouncil.org/downloads/Regamend-redsnap-2001b.pdf, will now be submitted to the NMFS for review and possible implementation. The GRN is confident that the NMFS will ensure that the new rebuilding plan is consistent with the best available scientific information and applicable law and will be working with the NMFS to ensure that this is the case. Stay tuned on how you can help make a difference on this very important issue.

GULF COUNCIL TO CONSIDER BYCATCH QUOTAS IN THE SHRIMP FISHERY

At its May 2001 meeting, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) voted to begin development of an amendment to the shrimp fishery management plan assessing the efficacy of a bycatch quota in the shrimp fishery to end overfishing of red snapper. While no details are available yet, a bycatch quota would most likely end shrimp fishing in the Gulf of Mexico for the year once a certain number of juvenile red snapper is caught by shrimpers in the Gulf.

Fishermen targeting red snapper and those targeting shrimp are intertwined in the efforts to rebuild red snapper to a healthy level in the Gulf. Commercial and recreational fishermen catch over nine million pounds of fish per year while shrimp fishermen incidentally catch (bycatch) juvenile red snapper in nets while fishing for shrimp. Accordingly, fishery managers are looking at ways to reduce catch in both fisheries to meet requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. One method currently in use by shrimpers is the bycatch reduction device (BRD), a device used in shrimp trawl nets to reduce the taking of juvenile red snapper. BRDs are currently not as effective in reducing red snapper bycatch as the Council had hoped, spurring the Gulf Council to look at alternative ways to help rebuild red snapper populations. A decision on pursuing bycatch quotas is expected later this year.



SUSTAINABLE SEAS EXPEDITION FOCUSES ON THE GULF

The Sustainable Seas Expedition (SSE), a joint project between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the National Geographic Society, is concentrating its underwater exploration efforts on the Gulf of Mexico this summer.

The "Islands in the Stream" expedition is the third year of the Sustainable Seas Expeditions. This expedition will explore protected and non-protected coral reef and hard bottom communities -- the "islands" -- of Belize, Mexico and the United States, as well as the currents -- the gulf "stream" -- that connect the different habitats. The expedition began in Belize, is currently in the Gulf and will conclude in North Carolina.

The Gulf portion of the expedition will concentrate on the Flower Gardens National Marine Sanctuary and the West Florida shelf including the newly established protected areas for gag grouper. Please visit <http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/> for pictures, information and a trip log.



Gulf Restoration Network
839 St. Charles Ave., Suite 309
New Orleans, LA 70130

Cynthia Sarthou, Executive Director
Chris Dorsett, Director for Fisheries
Cynthia Goldberg, Director of LA/MS Grassroots Programs
Editor: Chris Dorsett

Phone: (504) 525-1528
Fax: (504) 525-0833
Email: : cdorsett@gulfrestorationnetwork.org

“Working to Protect and Preserve the Gulf of Mexico”

Red Grouper...

(Continued from page 1)

Reef Fish Amendment 18

Red Grouper was identified as “overfished” by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) in October of 2000. Under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the Gulf Council has one year to propose a rebuilding plan for this species. Accordingly, the Gulf Council produced Reef Fish Amendment 18, a collection of management measures intended to reduce the mortality of red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico.

Options in Amendment 18 include phasing out long line fishing gear or moving this gear into deeper waters, closed seasons to help protect spawning groupers, caps on landings for both commercial and recreational fishermen, and finally closed areas to protect groupers

and their habitats.

Profiling Red Grouper

Red grouper are found primarily off the west coast of Florida out to depths of about 300 feet. Red grouper are protogynous hermaphrodites meaning that all fish begin life as females with the older larger fish transitioning to males over time. Younger fish mature in inshore waters before moving off-shore to low relief rock and reef sites.

Unlike many groupers, red grouper do not form spawning aggregations for breeding but do form smaller “harems” containing one male and several females. Spawning occurs between the months of January and May.

Red grouper are primarily targeted by commercial fishing vessels. The commercial fishery takes about 4.8 million pounds of red grouper per year. Long line gear, miles of lines with baited hooks, account for 59% of these land-

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, and the Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, for making our work possible.

ings. Hook and line fishing gear, a single line fished vertically with one or more hooks, accounts for about 24% of the landings. Fish traps, baited cages used for catching reef fish, are the third most popular method for taking red grouper, accounting for about 16% of landings.

The recreational fishery takes about 860,000 pounds of fish per year. Almost 90% of fish caught in the recreational sector are thrown back as bycatch due to the small size of groupers taken.

The GRN recently circulated an action alert to our members and friends asking them to help support strong action by the Gulf Council to rebuild red grouper to a healthy level, protect other grouper species, and protect habitats groupers depend on. Thanks to everyone who supported these efforts.