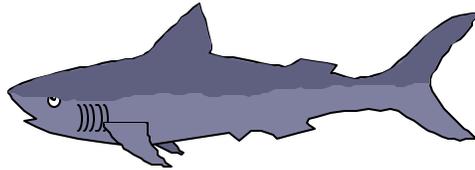


FISH



TALES

Latest Report to Congress Finds Increase in Number of Depleted Fish Species in the Gulf of Mexico

The latest National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Annual Report to Congress assessing the health of our nation's fisheries in 2001 reveals an increased number of Gulf of Mexico fish species in trouble. This report, issued annually pursuant to the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), inventories the health of managed marine fish species under U.S. control. While the Report indicates that

some conservation gains were made nationally over the past several years, the state of Gulf fish species declined from 2000 to 2001.

The Report separates its review of the Gulf's marine fish species into two categories: those species managed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) in cooperation with the NMFS, and those spe-

cies managed directly by the NMFS. The Gulf Council manages fifty-seven species. Of these fifty-seven, six species are considered depleted or "overfished", five are being taken at an unsustainable rate ("overfishing") one is approaching an overfished condition, and forty-seven species are considered "unknown".

At first glance the num-
(Continued on page 3)

Inside this issue:	
Gulf Council Takes Steps to Assess, Reduce Shrimp Bycatch	4

- Special points of interest:
- Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan Set for Final Action in July
 - NMFS 2001 Report to Congress reveals that number of overfished species, those undergoing overfishing up over 2000 levels
 - Five of Six reef fish species for which we have information are overfished in the Gulf; Four grouper species candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act
 - 78% of assessed shark, tuna and billfish species found overfished; three species of shark candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act
 - Gulf Council adopts bycatch reduction device requirement Gulfwide; bolsters bycatch inventory efforts

Plan to Rebuild Depleted Red Grouper Up for Adoption

After an almost three year process, the development of a plan to rebuild overfished red grouper in the Gulf of Mexico will finally come to an end at the July 2002 meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) in Sarasota, FL. Final approval of this plan will be contentious, prompting the need for a strong conservation voice at the decision table. The

following article provides everything you need to know to make your voice



Red Grouper. Courtesy of the FWCC.

heard on this incredibly important issue.

Background

Red grouper, identified as overfished in October 2000, is still awaiting protection from the federal government. The Gulf Council, the body responsible for developing a rebuilding plan, missed a legally required one year deadline to submit a plan for this species which placed responsibility in the hands of the National Marine

(Continued on page 2)

Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan....

(Continued from page 1)

Fisheries Service (NMFS) with a required completion date of July 2002.

Red grouper was initially identified as overfished in the fall of 1999 by the NMFS and the Gulf Council's Reef Fish Stock Assessment Panel (RFSAP), a group of scientists from around the Gulf that advises the Gulf Council on scientific matters. This identification was challenged by the Gulf Council's Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC), a review panel composed of biologists, economists, attorneys, etc., based on questions over the use of a new method to determine the health of red grouper. Based on their concerns, the Gulf Council requested that the NMFS address the SSC's contentions and report back to the RFSAP. The NMFS completed this task and had the assessment peer reviewed by independent experts. After the independent experts agreed with the NMFS about the status of red grouper, the GRN and our member groups the Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense, and Reekeeper International requested an immediate finding of an "overfished" status for this species to prevent any further delays in formulating a rebuilding plan. Accordingly, red grouper was formally declared overfished by the NMFS in October of 2000.

After recognizing the shortcomings of single species management and the condition of groupers in the Gulf, the Gulf Council moved to begin preparation of an amendment to the Reef Fish Fishery Management Plan

to comprehensively manage all groupers in the Gulf of Mexico in the summer of 1999. When red grouper was declared "overfished", the Gulf Council decided to utilize this plan amendment to also prepare a red grouper rebuilding plan. In addition based on a lawsuit filed by several GRN member groups challenging compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Gulf Council decided to utilize this plan amendment to complete a comprehensive environmental impact assessment for reef fish habitat in the Gulf of Mexico. Recognizing that this habitat assessment would require much longer than the time necessary to submit the red grouper rebuilding plan, the Gulf Council jettisoned the assessment and many other provi-



Warsaw grouper, a vulnerable deepwater grouper. Courtesy of the FL FWCC.

sions of the reef fish amendment, including protection for deepwater groupers. Fortunately, efforts by the GRN and its member groups led to the reintroduction of protections for deep water groupers. However, these provisions face opposition which jeopardize their final adoption. Furthermore, many of the necessary reductions in catch are opposed by a number of fishing organizations. Thus, it is critical that a strong conservation voice is evident when the Gulf Council selects its final rebuilding measures.

Getting Involved

The GRN and its member groups feel that it is critical that the red grouper rebuilding plan recognize that red grouper is just one species in an entire reef fish complex. Accordingly, we are supporting management measures that take a holistic approach by ensuring that any efforts to reduce catches of red grouper do not jeopardize other groupers. Considering the fact that four groupers are candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act and ten out of the fifteen managed groupers are identified as at risk of extinction by the American Fisheries Society, we can ill afford increased fishing pressure on these vulnerable species.

Here are three simple ways you can ensure that red, and other groupers are protected under this new plan:

1. Inside this edition of Fish Tales you will find a fact sheet and sign on letter which can be sent to the Gulf Council by June 30, 2002.
2. Contact the GRN for an electronic template of the sign on letter for your use. Send this letter to the address contained in the template. Contact the GRN utilizing our contact information found on page 4.
3. Attend the public hearing on Wednesday, July 10, 2002 at the Hyatt (1000 Blvd. Of the Arts) in Sarasota, FL. Representatives from the GRN will be there to help you participate.

With your help, we can ensure that groupers in the Gulf are given the protections they deserve!

2001 Report to Congress....

(Continued from page 1)

bers may not seem alarming: only six of fifty-seven species are overfished. However, a look at these numbers in context reveals alarming results. In reviewing these statistics, one must remember that only ten species have undergone a scientific evaluation to determine the health of the population. Accordingly, forty-seven of the fifty-seven species (82%) are considered of unknown status.

Viewed in this context, of the ten

species has been measured. Of these thirty-seven species, twenty-nine (78%) are considered depleted. The majority of these tunas, sharks, and billfish are found in Gulf waters.

While the 2001 Report paints a fairly grim picture of the state of our managed marine fish species, it unfortunately, does not capture the entire state of affairs. For example, four reef fish species in the Gulf region (Goliath grouper, Nassau grouper, speckled hind, and Warsaw grouper)

The latest Report to Congress makes clear that we must do a better job of managing the Gulf's marine fish populations. Fortunately, numerous opportunities exist this summer for GRN members to do just that. Not only are management measures being developed to rebuild depleted red grouper (see article on page 1), reauthorization of our nations fishery management laws will take place this summer and fall. Unfortunately, a reauthorization bill from the U.S. House of Representatives Resources

Management Body	Assessed Species/ Managed Species	Overfished (number/percentage) of assessed species)	Overfishing (number/percentage) of assessed species)	Unknown (number/percentage)
Gulf Council	10/57	6 / 60%	5/27%	47 (82% of managed species "unknown")
NMFS	37/83	29 /78%	29/78%	46 (55% of managed species "unknown")

assessed species, six (60%) are considered overfished. These six species include red snapper, red grouper, Nassau grouper, goliath grouper, greater amberjack, and red drum. Five of the six species considered overfished (all but red drum) are members of the incredibly important reef fish complex in the Gulf. Of the reef fish species for which we have information, 83% are considered depleted (five of six), with the remaining species, gag grouper considered approaching an overfished condition.

Furthermore, the NMFS directly manages a number of species in the Gulf including tunas, billfish (marlins and sailfish) and sharks. The 2001 Report shows that of the eighty-three species under management, the health of only thirty-seven

and three shark species (night shark, sand tiger shark, and dusky shark) are candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act! Two of these species are not even considered overfished in the Report, raising an important issue. The state of our assessed marine fish resources may only be the tip of the iceberg. When one considers that the two latest assessments of the health of unknown species (gray triggerfish and vermilion snapper) revealed both as overfished based on the best scientific information available, it is critical that we assess unknown species as quickly as possible and develop precautionary strategies for managing unknown species in the interim.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans will roll back many of the conservation gains made in 1996 by the SFA. To make matters worse, Gulf representatives, including Tauzin (R-LA) and Ortiz (D-TX) are proposing changes to weaken existing law even further.

Please get involved in this process by contacting the GRN and the Marine Fish Conservation Network (www.conservefish.org) to see how you can do your part in protecting the Gulf's marine fish species. We can provide a number of simple steps you can take to help ensure a successful reauthorization.



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“Working to Protect and Preserve the Gulf of Mexico”

Gulf Council Makes Progress in Shrimp Bycatch Assessment and Reduction

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) took two important steps last month in assessing and reducing “bycatch” in the Gulf of Mexico. Bycatch, a term used to refer to unwanted marine life caught and often times killed in the process of capturing a target fish species, is a major problem in the Gulf region because it unnecessarily kills large numbers of marine life, including those targeted by other fishermen.

Recognizing this, Congress passed the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), amendments made to the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, spelling out new obligations for federal fishery managers to address bycatch. Under the SFA, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Gulf Council must (1) develop and implement a standardized bycatch reporting methodology to assess the amount and type of bycatch in each fishery and (2) minimize that bycatch to the extent prac-

ticable. If bycatch could not be minimized than the mortality of such bycatch must be minimized. Thus, Congress established a two tier system to first, collect information on bycatch if it is not available and then reduce it to the extent practicable. These provisions were to be completed by October 1998.

Overall, much work is left to be done in the Gulf region, even in the light of recent legal decisions in other regions (see the last issue of *Fish Tales* for a full discussion of these decisions and bycatch issues facing our region). Yet, a glimmer of hope surfaced at the recent Gulf Council meeting when they voted overwhelmingly to reduce shrimp trawl bycatch in the eastern Gulf of Mexico and establish a system to keep better tabs on bycatch in the shrimp fishery. While neither method chosen by the Gulf Council may be perfect, it is a critical step towards honoring the SFA bycatch requirements.

The first action taken by the Gulf Council was an effort to utilize existing

sampling data to strengthen shrimp trawl bycatch information in the Gulf region. This survey, done annually, may provide better information about bycatch from trawling gear in the Gulf region. However, its lacking in many respects as the sampling trawls are much different than existing methods of catching shrimp in terms of times and locations of fishing effort.

The second action was a requirement that shrimp vessels fishing in federal waters of the Gulf east of Cape San Blas, FL (south of Tallahassee) use bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) in the nets of shrimp nets. This action now makes BRD use mandatory in all federal waters in the Gulf plus state waters in Florida and Texas.

The GRN would like to thank those member groups and individuals who helped make these actions possible.

