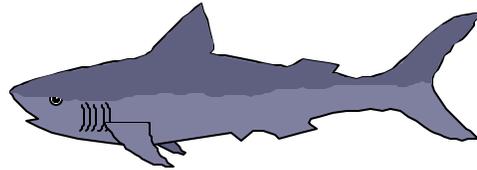


# FISH



# TALES

## Scientists Find Red Snapper Still in Trouble

The sobering status of red snapper stocks in the Gulf was recently reconfirmed by the recent report of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Gulf Council) Reef Fish Stock Assessment Panel. Red snapper, a species which has been considered overfished for over ten years, is still in poor shape. In fact, one scenario reviewed by the panel to meet rebuilding goals to healthy levels found that red snapper could not be rebuilt to target

goals in 2034 even if all fishing related mortality for the year 2000 was cut to zero—meaning no fish could be caught! All scientific signs point to the need for cuts in mortality for this species if conservation goals are to be reached.

This news will now travel to the Gulf Council's socioeconomic panel, advisory panel and science and statistic committee for review. These panels will present their find-

ings to the Council which will make a decision on catch levels and management measures in the year 2000 at its November meeting in Orlando, FL.

The Gulf Restoration Network, a member of the red snapper advisory panel, is again urging the Council to set catch levels that are consistent with the recommendations of its stock assessment panel composed of Gulf fish-

*(Continued on page 3)*

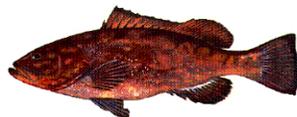
Inside this issue:	
Council takes no further action on marine reserves	2
Gulf Scientists, Council review the status of red drum	4
Implementation of the Sustainable Fisheries Act expected soon	4



## Red Grouper Joins List of "Overfished" Species

A recent stock assessment completed by the National Marine Fisheries Service, and reviewed by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council's (Gulf Council) reef fish stock assessment panel found that red grouper is both an overfished species and is undergoing overfishing by fishermen. This makes red grouper the sixth overfished species in the Gulf of Mexico, with the status of the majority of our managed stocks "unknown". Scien-

tists are still debating how long it will take to rebuild this



Red Grouper. From the SAFMC web

species to a healthy level, but preliminary estimates are 10 to 18 years.

Red grouper is the most com-

monly captured grouper species in the Gulf of Mexico. Since 1986, red grouper has comprised about two-thirds of the commercial grouper catch in the Gulf of Mexico. Combined commercial and recreational landings in the 1990s have averaged around 6.6 million pounds with declining catch levels in the later years. The fishery is predominantly prosecuted in the eastern Gulf of Mexico off of Florida.

*(Continued on page 2)*

Special points of interest:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Panel of scientists recommend cuts in red snapper catch; conservationists needed to ensure the Gulf Council sets sustainable catch levels</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Red Grouper become the sixth "overfished" species in the Gulf of Mexico</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conservationists needed to help implement two proposed marine reserves off of Florida</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New data may help Council set a rebuilding period for red drum</li> </ul>	

## Marine Reserve Workshops Conclude With Little Fanfare

At its September meeting, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (GMFMC) voted to hold off on any further discussions regarding the marine reserve scoping process at this time. After hearing a report from Dr. Steven Thomas, the facilitator of marine reserve workshops held throughout the Gulf in August, and reviewing hundreds of comments from the public supporting marine reserves, the Council decided to defer any action to a later time. Many members felt that the recent proposed gag grouper closed areas and the upcoming Tortugas 2000 process is sufficient for the time being.

The GRN is disappointed with this stance. The Gulf Council had the opportunity to take a proactive approach by researching potential uses for marine reserves in the Gulf to better manage Gulf fisheries, comply with new habitat provisions of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, protect biodiversity and set aside wilderness areas in the ocean similar to ones on land.

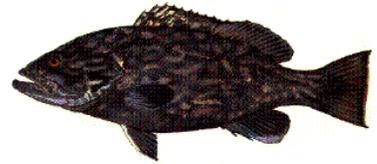
However, conservationists can still ensure that marine reserves are a part of Gulf fisheries management. First, interested members of the public can call or write to the National Marine Fisheries Service asking that they implement the proposed gag grouper regulatory amendment as soon as possible. As seen in the July issue of *Fish Tales*, this amendment contains two closure areas to help protect gag grouper. Write to:

Dr. William Hogarth  
National Marine Fisheries Service  
9721 Executive Center Drive N.  
Suite 201  
St. Petersburg, FL 33702

In addition, the Council will review a proposal by the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary program to create a 60 nautical mile closure adjacent to the dry tortugas in the Florida Keys.

This area was selected by a panel of scientists, fishermen and conservationists

who serve on the Totugas 2000 working group. The working group selected this area based on the need to protect its relatively pristine condition, high marine wildlife values, and its capacity to serve as a fishery replenishment source for other parts of the Florida Keys.



Gag grouper. From the SAFMC web page.

We will keep you posted on how to make this proposal a reality.

---

## Red Grouper....

*(Continued from page 1)*

Red grouper spend their first four to five years near shore and then move into deeper offshore waters upon reaching sexual maturity. Red grouper, like gag grouper are sequential hermaphrodites. All fish begin their lives as females with the larger fish becoming males over time.

Based on the recent scientific assessment, the Gulf Council will consider management measures to reduce fishing mortality levels of red grouper at its November meeting in Orlando. The GRN urges members of the conservation community

to send written comments to the Gulf Council supporting measures which will ensure a healthy red grouper population.

Please look for a GRN action alert in the near future detailing ways to get involved. You can also send a letter or email to the Council now demanding that red grouper be managed in a way which ensures a healthy population. Please include your name, address, and interest in the fishery (fishermen, diver, seafood consumer, etc.) in any correspondence. Send your letter to:

Dr. Robert Shipp, Chariman  
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council  
3018 U.S. Hwy. 301 North, Suite 1000  
Tampa, FL 33619

Feel free to email your concerns to the Council at [gulf.council@noaa.gov](mailto:gulf.council@noaa.gov)

## Red Snapper....

(Continued from page 1)

ery scientists. We are asking members of the conservation community to join in by contacting the Gulf Council demanding that catch levels be based on science rather than short term economic gains.

### A Brief History of the Fishery

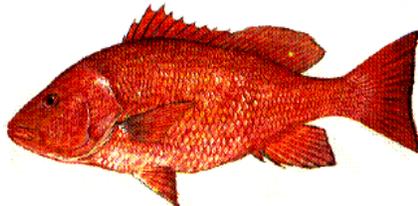
Arguably the most controversial fishery under U.S. management, red snapper has a storied history of management in the Gulf of Mexico. The first scientific assessment of red snapper, completed in 1988, indicated that this species is "significantly overfished" and that fishing mortality rates would need to be reduced by 60 to 70 percent in order to rebuild the stock to a healthy level. The Council responded by setting a total allowable catch or "TAC" of five million pounds split between the commercial and recreational fishery. This TAC would be implemented by a quota on the commercial fishery and size and bag limits (limiting the number and size of fish taken on a fishing trip) for the recreational sector. The Council also created a target date of the year 2000 to rebuild this fishery to a healthy level.

The five million pound TAC was lowered to 4 million pounds then raised to 6, and eventually set at the current level of 9.12 million pounds in 1995. Bag and size limits were also modified during this time. The target date for recovery was moved from 2000 to 2007, 2009, and finally 2019 based on new biological information.

The 1996 passage of the Sustainable Fisheries Act significantly altered the management of this species. The majority of these changes have been completed. One of the first steps taken was a Congressionally mandated peer review of the science behind the management. While the peer review was critical of data collection methods, the report found that the science provided a sound basis for

management of this fishery. The Act also required that the recreational sector, historically held to its share of the quota by size and bag limits, be closed if it met its share of the quota. This provision was passed in response to significant and consistent exceedances of the recreational quota. Under the new rules, recreational fishermen have been forced to quit fishing in federal waters in about September of each year. Finally, in 1998 bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) were required to be used on all shrimp trawl vessels fishing in federal waters. These devices are designed to reduce the number of juvenile red snapper captured incidentally in the nets of Gulf shrimpers.

In addition to these completed actions,



Red snapper. From the South Atlantic Fishery Manage-

two steps still remain in achieving the requirements of the Act. First, more conservative levels must be established for the management of this fishery. Second, the red snapper rebuilding period will be reevaluated. The proposed rebuilding target date is now 2033. For an update on the implementation of these provisions, see pg. 4.

### Recent Developments

Last year the Gulf Council set catch levels for the 1999 season at 9.12 million pounds, well above the recommendations of its scientific panels. Conservation groups, including the GRN urged the Council to set a lower catch level in order to ensure the rebuilding of the stock.

Even with this inflated catch level, the recreational fishery was scheduled to close on August 4th, 1999, the earliest in the history of the recreational fishery. As seen in our July 1999 edition of *Fish Tales*, the NMFS implemented an emergency rule establishing an 18 inch size limit so that the season would remain open until August 29, 1999. Unfortunately, preliminary reports by fishermen are that large numbers of undersized fish are being thrown back in order to catch 18 inch fish. Many of these fish are dead or dying when released.

To make matters worse, the states of Alabama and Florida will not close their state waters to red snapper fishing until October 31. Texas will keep their state waters open year round. These actions will almost guarantee that the recreational red snapper quota is exceeded yet again.

Finally, changes to regulations governing bycatch reduction devices in the Gulf are expected to improve on the 24 percent effectiveness rate demonstrated by BRDs in their first year of operation. However, the projected increase is still expected to fall well below the 60 percent effectiveness rate the Council has been depending on to set 9.12 million pound catch levels.

### Upcoming events

Next month, the Gulf Council will decide what catch levels will apply for the 2000 fishing year. The GRN is asking conservationists in the Gulf to call, write, or email the Gulf Council expressing your concern over past and previous red snapper management and the need to set sustainable catch levels consistent with achieving rebuilding goals.

Please look for an action alert in the near future providing details on how you can help ensure this valuable public resource is managed in a sustainable manner.



Gulf Restoration Network  
P.O. 2245  
New Orleans, LA 70176

Cynthia Sarthou, Executive Director  
Chris Dorsett, Program Director for Fisheries  
Editor: Chris Dorsett

Phone: (504) 525-1528  
Fax: (504) 566-7242  
Email: : cdgrn@igc.org

“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.*

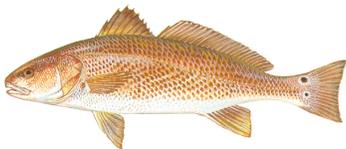
*The GRN would like to thank Pew Charitable Trusts, Rockefeller Brothers, Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the Trull Foundation, and the Margaret Cullinan Wray Lead Annuity Trust for making our work possible.*

## Current Hot Topics in Gulf Fisheries

### Council Reviews New Red Drum Data

During the month of October, various scientific and advisory panels will be reviewing the latest stock assessment of red drum in the Gulf of Mexico. Their findings will be presented to the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council at its November meeting in Orlando, FL.

Red drum is considered an “overfished” species in the Gulf. As a result, the Council and NMFS prohibit the catch of these fish in federal waters. In addition, the states in the Gulf must ensure that at least 30% of fish escape from fishing in state waters to join the breeding popula-



Red drum. From the SAFMC web page.

tion in federal waters of the Gulf.

At the current time, no rebuilding time frame has been established by the Council for this species due to a lack of data. Hopefully, the new assessment will provide the necessary data to formulate a rebuilding plan so that the Council can comply with the requirements of the Sustainable Fisheries Act. For further information please contact Peter Hood of the Gulf Council at (888) 833-1844.

### Gulf Council to Review Proposed Changes to Habitat Protection Procedures and Policies

The Gulf Council will review a proposal in November to significantly upgrade habitat policies and procedures to protect fishery habitat in the Gulf of Mexico. These new procedures and policies will ensure greater Council coverage of projects that affect habitat essential to the well being of our fisheries and consis-

tency with the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996.

The GRN is pleased with these new habitat procedures and will push the Council to adopt them. If you know of any federal agency projects that will affect the Gulf coast, please contact the GRN so that we may bring them to the attention of the Gulf Council.

### Implementation of Overfishing and Bycatch Requirements Nears

New overfishing definitions and bycatch minimization and data collection measures should soon be implemented in the Gulf of Mexico. These new requirements, mandated by the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA) of 1996, will significantly change the way in which fisheries in the Gulf are managed.

The SFA contained three major components to better manage Gulf fisheries. These include identification and protection of habitat essential to our fisheries, a methodology to assess bycatch and minimize it to the extent practicable, and