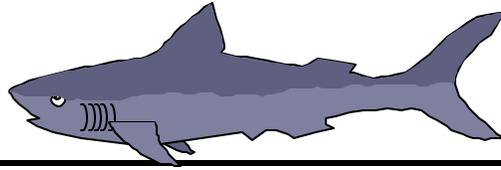


# FISH



# TALES

Dear Members and Friends,

Along with our best wishes for the holidays, I offer you a year of fish in review, and a look ahead to 2004.

**Warning bells have rung.** With the release of two national oceans reports, we will have the first comprehensive reviews of the status of our oceans and related coastlines since 1934. The solutions they offer will play an important role in fisheries law and policy in the coming years.

**At last!** Two Florida reserves were extended for six years, allowing research to continue on the benefits to spawning groupers and the other reef fish living along the ledges there. And finally, *finally*, after the coordinated work of all of the Gulf of Mexico marine conservation groups and the threat of litigation, NOAA Fisheries has taken two important steps toward proper management of two of our snappers. This November NOAA Fisheries released its draft plan for red snapper, and announced what scientists concluded two years ago: that vermilion snapper is indeed “overfished,” which means that this fish, too, gets a plan.

These steps, though not perfect, are a start. Look in this issue for how you can help red snapper.

## Red Grouper Plan Revealed

**A bit of red grouper history.** The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has, after three years of delays, revealed its plan to end overfishing of red grouper and begin rebuilding the stock. NMFS first found that the Gulf of Mexico red grouper stock was

“overfished” with “overfishing” occurring in October, 2000. This means



*Photo courtesy of USGS*

that red grouper have been too heavily fished for too

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**Help from our friends.** This has been an active year for our outreach and networking efforts as well. The GRN has brought information on the state of our fisheries and key policy issues to divers, conservationists, scientists and law students from Florida to Texas. We’ve had strong press coverage for our fisheries work from the New York Times to a multi-part series out of St. Petersburg, Florida, and a number of our member groups joined us in editorials throughout the Gulf urging Congress to address the problems facing our marine resources.

Many of you, as member groups were able to join us in voicing objection to a midnight attempt to end-run the protections for fish habitat enacted by Congress in 1996. The Earthshores Foundation, our Bay St. Louis member, attended the November Gulf Council meeting, providing valuable insights on red grouper from Captain Paul Busby.

**What’s next?** We expect NMFS to unveil their national bycatch plan in January, which we will follow closely. In April we will present a panel at Tulane’s Environment 2004 Conference on the law, science, and policy of creating marine reserves in the Gulf of Mexico. The GRN and our Gulf partners will have our own scientific expert to take part in this spring’s stock assessment for red snapper. We continue working to improve the fish habitat protections as the Council proceeds to add habitat components to each of its seven fishery management plans. New fact sheets and presentations, new members, and stronger ties with all of you complete our plans for 2004. And with that, we wish you a safe, peaceful, and happy holiday.

*Sallie E. Davis*

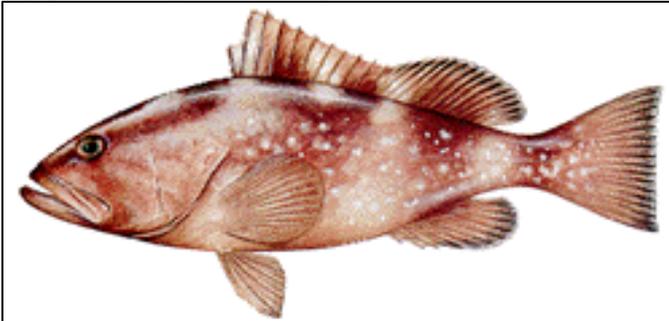
*(Continued on page 2)*

## Red Grouper . . .

(Continued from page 1)

long and need protections in order to rebuild the population. By law, because the Gulf Council missed its one year deadline to develop a plan with the needed protections for red grouper, NMFS had to step in. But even NMFS' plan to ease fishing pressure and provide for longterm restoration of red grouper is running late. The fisheries service had nine months after taking over to complete a plan, which means a red grouper plan was due in the Summer of 2002. Why then, at the end of 2003 are we only now seeing NMFS' plan for red grouper? One cause of delay was a lengthy pause while the plan was revised to reflect new scientific information.

The scientific information appeared to paint a more rosy picture of the health of red grouper stocks. But the Gulf Council's own scientists warned that that apparent "recovery" may not be reliable and could have been the result of a couple of good spawning years. NMFS re-draft of the plan was based on that new data and lightened up considerably on landing limits. Where the first version called for a 45% reduction in landings, the current one only requires a drop of 9.5%. On the other hand, there are some very positive aspects of this plan.



*Red Grouper, or Epinephelus Morio*

### RED GROUPE FACTS

<p><b>Range:</b></p> <p>North Carolina to Brazil, but virtually gone in the Caribbean</p>	<p><b>Size:</b></p> <p>Commonly up to 15 lbs. 1-2 feet in length</p>	<p><b>Favorite Food:</b></p> <p>Squid, crustaceans, and fish</p>
<p><b>Status:</b></p> <p>Overfished with overfishing occurring</p> <p>66% commercially caught 33% recreationally caught</p>	<p><b>Habitat:</b></p> <p>Bottom-dwellers. Prefer rocky and muddy bottoms, at the margins of sea grass beds, ledges, crevices, and caverns of rocky limestone reefs</p>	<p><b>Did you know?</b></p> <p>Red Groupers are habitat engineers. By moving sand off of the hardbottom, they create habitat for young red and vermilion snappers.</p>

**The new plan, "Secretarial 1":** NMFS has taken a fairly comprehensive approach to some very complex issues. The proposed options would cut back landings of red grouper, protect gag grouper, deepwater grouper and tilefish from increased catch, avoid bycatch, close fishing for one month, and lay out a long-term plan for recovery.

**GRN supports the "quota closure."** Red and gag groupers (shallow water groupers) as well as the deep water groupers like yellow-edge, Warsaw grouper and speckled hind would be protected through what is called a "quota closure." A quota is a set amount of fish that can be taken by commercial and recreational fishing. In the shallow water grouper complex there would be two quotas: one for just red grouper and one for all shallow water groupers. NMFS proposes that reaching either of the quotas is enough to trigger shutting down the other fishery — so if red grouper's limits are reached, the shallow water fishery will be closed. This helps prevent fishermen from shifting effort to other groupers such as gag grouper just because red grouper has reached its limit.

**Quota closure means less bycatch.** Bycatch is the catch of species that were not targeted or must be thrown back due to regulations. If the red grouper fishery closed but fishing was allowed for other groupers in the same areas, then red grouper would be caught but thrown back as bycatch. Much of what is thrown overboard would die. The quota closure idea will solve this problem. And, the plan applies this same principle to deep-water groupers.

The proposed plan is a step in the right direction as long as NMFS sticks to their guns. Watch for opportunities to have your voice for conservation heard.

## Flowers Under the Sea

Picture yourself over 100 miles from land, in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. At times, the seas can be very unforgiving, and the weather can turn foul in an instant. But here, in the midst of this unpredictable Gulf, lie three of the most beautiful and wild places in all the world. Manta rays, whale sharks, coral heads that are bigger than cars, hundreds of species of fish and invertebrates...

About 115 miles (185 km) off the coast of Texas and Louisiana, underwater "gardens" of astounding natural beauty rise from the depths of the Gulf of Mexico. At the turn of the century, snapper and grouper fishermen named these productive fishing banks after the brightly colored sponges, plants and other marine life they sometimes snagged and brought to the surface. This area became known as the Flower Garden Banks.

The East and West Flower Garden Banks boast the northernmost living coral reefs on the continental shelf of the United States. The biological diversity and breathtaking beauty of the reefs prompted researchers and recreational divers to seek protection for them, and they were designated a National Marine Sanctuary in 1992. A third topographic formation, Stetson Bank, was added to the Sanctuary in 1996. It features a coral-sponge community. The biological communities of the three banks are perched atop underwater geologic features, called salt domes. They are geographically separate entities, each with its own set of boundaries, and are surrounded by miles of open ocean at depths ranging from approximately 200 to 400 feet (61 to 122 meters)



*Coral: M. cavernosa*  
photographer Dr. Steve Gittings

The mission of the National Marine Sanctuaries Program is to serve as the trustee for the nation's system of marine protected areas to conserve, protect, and enhance their biodiversity, ecological integrity, and cultural legacy. The National Marine Sanctuary Program works cooperatively with others to balance enjoyment of the marine environment and inland lakes with long-term conservation. Increasing public awareness and appreciation of our marine heritage, scientific research, monitoring, educational programs and outreach are only a few of the efforts the national marine sanctuary system uses to fulfill its mission to the American people.

For more information contact the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary office at 1200 Briarcrest Dr., Suite 4000, Bryan, TX 77802, (979) 846-5942, [flowergarden@noaa.gov](mailto:flowergarden@noaa.gov), or visit <http://flowergarden.noaa.gov> or <http://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/>



*Photo courtesy of Flower Garden Banks Marine Sanctuary*  
A squirrelfish, one of many fishes found on the Flower Garden Banks and Stetson Bank year round.

### The Flower Garden Banks Management Plan Review

The Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary (Flower Gardens) will begin a multi-year management plan review process in the next few years. The process will begin with the creation of a Sanctuary Advisory Council (SAC) to serve as a conduit for public input to the sanctuary manager on issues relevant to the sanctuary, including the management plan revision. In the spring of 2004 Flower Gardens will issue a request for nominations of people to serve on the SAC as representatives of the constituent groups interested in the Flower Gardens. The SAC's first job will be to assist the sanctuary staff in developing workable processes to insure that the public has a strong voice in the management plan review. SAC members may also be asked to help compile information for a State of the Sanctuary report and to review and comment on drafts of the report. The sanctuary encourages all interested groups, agencies and stakeholders to nominate members of the SAC and participate in the management plan review process.



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## Vermilion Snapper and Red Snapper Update

### Vermilion Snapper Designated as Overfished by National Marine Fisheries Service

On November 5<sup>th</sup> the National Marine Fisheries Service formally determined Vermilion snapper to be overfished. The GRN, as well as several member groups, have pursued this determination since 2000 when scientists first warned that Vermilion were in trouble. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council has one year from notification to develop a long-term plan that will rebuild the vermilion stock and end overfishing. The GRN will continue to bring you details on the plan and any other actions taking place on vermilion.

### Gulf Council to Hold Public Hearings on the Red Snapper Rebuilding Plan Next Month

If you do only one thing for fisheries in January, attend the red snapper public hearings. Your efforts will not go unnoticed. It has been years since red snapper was first identified as overfished, and now, NMFS has released a "public hearing" draft of their plan to rebuild depleted red snapper populations. While we are pleased that things are finally taking shape, the actual measures to improve the health of our red snapper stock presented in the plan *fall far short of the mark*. We have a draft plan that bases all of its management options on an assumption about a drop in shrimp fishing that is tied to the wrong data, offers two options that would illegally delay rebuilding until 2045 and 2046, and offers nothing to end unsustainable rates of fishing.

To those who enjoy red snapper, fish for it, or value the cultural diversity of our fishing communities, we urge you to speak out for red snapper.

### SEE OUR ACTION ALERT (THIS ISSUE) FOR DETAILS.

These hearings are for you, the public, to give your input on NMFS management plans for red snapper.

## Red Snapper Hearings

<p><b><u>Monday, January 5, 2003</u></b>            Laguna Madre Learning Center            Port Isabel High School            Highway 100            Port Isabel, TX 78578            956-943-0052</p>	<p><b><u>Monday, January 5, 2003</u></b>            MS Dept. of Marine Resources            1141 Bayview Drive            Biloxi, Mississippi 39530            228-374-5000</p>
<p><b><u>Tuesday, January 6, 2003</u></b>            Port Aransas Comm. Center            408 North Allister            Port Aransas, TX 78373            361-749-4111</p>	<p><b><u>Tuesday, January 6, 2003</u></b>            Hilton Beachfront Garden Inn            23092 Perdido Beach Blvd.            Orange Beach, Alabama 36561            334-974-1600</p>
<p><b><u>Wednesday, January 7, 2003</u></b>            San Luis Resort            5222 Seawall Boulevard            Galveston Island, TX 77551            409-744-1500</p>	<p><b><u>Wednesday, January 7, 2003</u></b>            Destin Community Center            101 Stahlman Avenue            Destin, Florida 32541            850-654-5184</p>
<p><b><u>Thursday, January 8, 2003</u></b>            New Orleans Airport Hilton            901 Airline Drive            Kenner, Louisiana 70062            504-469-5000</p>	<p><b><u>Thursday, January 8, 2003</u></b>            Holiday Inn            15208 Gulf Boulevard            Madeira Beach, Florida 33708            727-392-2257</p>

### **Jan. 12-15 Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council**

**Meets in Austin, Texas  
 At the Omni Downtown**

Call Toll Free for Details:  
**1-888-833-1844**

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