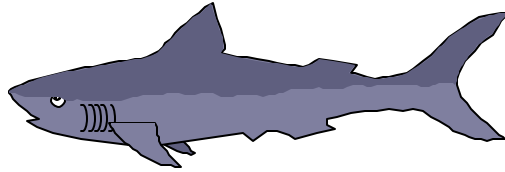


FISH



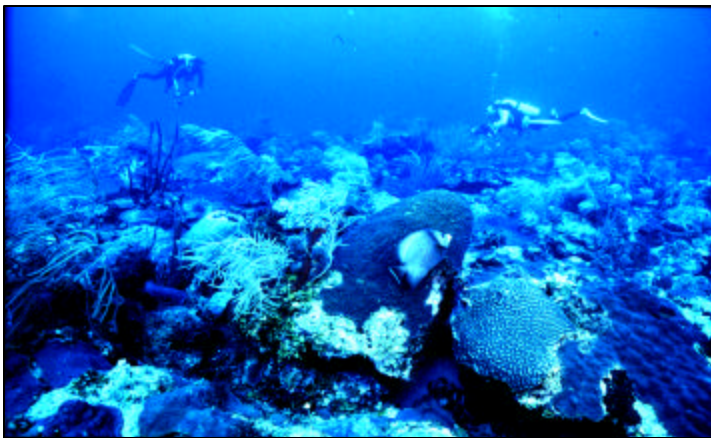
TALES

Marine Reserves: Are they the answer?

The Gulf of Mexico, with its mud flats, coral reefs, hard bottoms with diverse sponge communities, coastal marshes, estuaries and seagrass beds is one of the most productive fishing areas in United States waters. Sadly, because of the stresses of pollution, coastal development and overfishing, Gulf fish populations are nowhere near their potential abundance. In the cases of fish like the speckled hind, Warsaw grouper and Nassau grouper, the numbers have dropped so low that these species are considered by the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) as candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act. In other cases, such as red and vermilion snapper, NMFS is required by law to reduce fishing pressure on these depleted stocks to ensure there will be commercially viable snapper fishing for future generations.

But there is hope. Scientists are learning more and more about a tool that could help preserve the diversity and abundance of marine life in the Gulf of Mexico: marine reserves. Also called “no-take areas,” marine reserves are a special class of marine protected area (MPA) where no fishing, oil and gas

(Continued on page 2)



Divers photograph Sherwood Forest, a lush carpet of coral that covers miles of the Tortugas North Ecological Reserve. Courtesy of Don Kincaid for the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary.

SEDAR: A New Process to Assess the Health of Fish Stocks	2
Gulf Council’s March Meeting	3
Texas Diver Speaks Out on Red Snapper	4

FISH OF THE SEASON

Nassau grouper



Epinephelus striatus

In 1991 this extremely popular food and sport fish was added to the list of candidates for protection under the Endangered Species Act. In the Gulf of Mexico you are most likely to see this fish in the waters off Southern Florida and on the Campeche Bank off the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. Growing up to 3 feet and 55 pounds, this grouper is particularly vulnerable to fishing pressure because they gather together during spawning.

While possession of and fishing for Nassau grouper is prohibited in the Gulf of Mexico, we currently have no mechanism for counting how many of these fish are caught each year by fishermen targeting other reef fish. Counting this bycatch of Nassau grouper is required by law but has yet to be done.

Marine Reserves . . .

drilling, or other disturbance is allowed, except for what is necessary for research. Other types of MPAs may restrict the use of certain fishing gears to protect habitat or limit fishing during breeding season. Madison Swanson and Steamboat Lumps, two protected areas in the eastern Gulf that allow recreational surface fishing but prohibit bottom fishing, are another example of MPAs that are not marine reserves.

A study of over 80 no-take marine reserves around the world shows that animal and plant life within reserve boundaries can be more abundant and larger in size. Bigger body size is important because larger fish can produce significantly greater numbers of young, and this can create spillover benefits to areas outside the reserve boundaries.

Marine reserves have been established in 23 countries to protect biodiversity, manage fisheries, and restore populations of fish and plants. And there are other benefits. “We’re part of the environment, we’re part of the marine ecosystem. Our job is to maintain the integrity, beauty and stability of the system,” says marine scientist Dr. Jim Bohnsack, who is currently directing the Division of Protected Resources and Biodiversity for NOAA (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric

Administration). In addition, marine reserves can provide contrast to areas that are being altered. “The most important part of science is having control,” says Dr. Bohnsack, “Marine reserves are our control.”

The only no-take marine reserve in the Gulf of Mexico (and the largest one in the United States, at 150 square nautical miles) is the Tortugas Ecological Reserve. Located west of the Florida Keys in state and federal waters, the reserve was established in the summer of 2001 to expand protections for the region’s high-biodiversity coral reefs, productive spawning grounds, and lush seagrass beds. Even diving is regulated in the reserve to ensure that marine wildlife can grow, reproduce, and help replenish depleted populations throughout the region.

While marine reserves have been established worldwide with considerable evidence of success, their use as a management tool in the Gulf of Mexico is still the subject of much debate. Dr. Bohnsack and others will continue the discussion during a panel titled “Protecting Our Gulf Fish: Are Marine Reserves the Answer?” at the upcoming 9th Annual Tulane Environmental Conference.

For more information on recent work on marine reserves by the Partnership for Interdisciplinary Studies of Coastal Oceans, go to www.piscoweb.org.

SEDAR: A New Process to Assess the Health of Fish Stocks

The first step in managing any renewable natural resource is understanding how much of it there is and how much must be left to ensure a plentiful supply in the future. For economically valuable fish, like the groupers and snappers in the Gulf of Mexico, that means conducting an assessment of the stock.

Starting this spring, NMFS and the Gulf Council will use a new process called SEDAR for assessing the health of red snapper – one that is designed to ensure that assessments use the strongest data and analysis, are reviewed using independent panel, and involve all stakeholders along the way. SEDAR stands for Southeast Data Assessment and Review, and, as the name suggests, has three stages. Each stage is a week-long workshop that brings together technical specialists, biologists, staff from NMFS and the Council, plus other stakeholders, including conservation organizations and representatives of commercial and recreational fishing interests.

The Data Workshop is key because it identifies all relevant studies and data sets that the assessment group will need to determine whether the fish in question is at healthy levels. For example, at the data workshop for red snapper to be held in New Orleans this April, the group will be expected to identify how many red snapper have been taken over time due to fishing (fishing mortality), due to unintentional catch in other fisheries (bycatch), and due to natural causes (natural mortality). The data workshop will also estimate abundance, reproductive rate, the rate of discards, and how many of the red snapper discarded do not survive.

(Continued on page 3)

Gulf Council to Consider Red Snapper, Fish Habitat and Bycatch at March Meeting in Mobile

A plan to monitor and reduce bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico will be presented by NMFS at the March Gulf Council meeting. The plan addresses the needs for bycatch reporting and reduction and describes what is needed fishery by fishery. The plan could require that shrimpers keep logbooks of their time spent fishing as well as carry a government observer on their boats at times. The observer would document the species and number of fish thrown overboard. Vessels fishing for tuna using longlines (gear near the surface that has many hooks and can extend for miles) already have some observers and may be required to take them more often as a result of the regional plan. While these proposed plans for monitoring shrimp and longliners are certainly needed, the GRN will continue to call on NMFS to make equally strong efforts to count and reduce bycatch in the hook and line fisheries for grouper and snapper for both recreational and commercial vessels.

Red snapper is before the Council **yet again**, and given that the Council will be taking more public comment, there appears to be no end in sight. This endless delay in finishing a plan for red snapper only confirms the GRN's belief that NMFS feels it can simply wait on helping this depleted fish until the year-long stock assessment process is over.

Upcoming Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council Meetings:

March 8—12: Mobile, Alabama, Adam's Mark Hotel

May 17—21: Key Largo, Florida, Westin Beach Resort

**These meetings are free
and open to the public.**

Call the Gulf Council Toll Free for Details:
1-888-833-1844

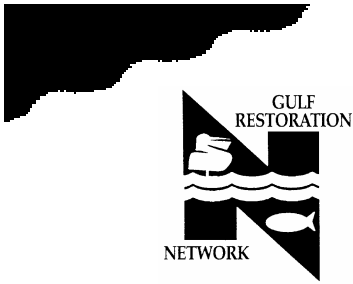
More on SEDAR . . .

The Assessment Workshop is phase two. This group also involves scientists (including fisheries scientists representing stakeholders) each armed with a laptop and modeling software, whose job is to produce the assessment of the stock. This group is charged with figuring out which models best fit the data available and how to handle gaps data in ways that are in keeping with the Sustainable Fisheries Act and its National Standards. Conservation groups working in the Gulf have endorsed a highly qualified fisheries biologist, Dr. Murdoch McAllister, who will participate in the red snapper SEDAR process and who will be taking part in the stock's assessment this coming August.

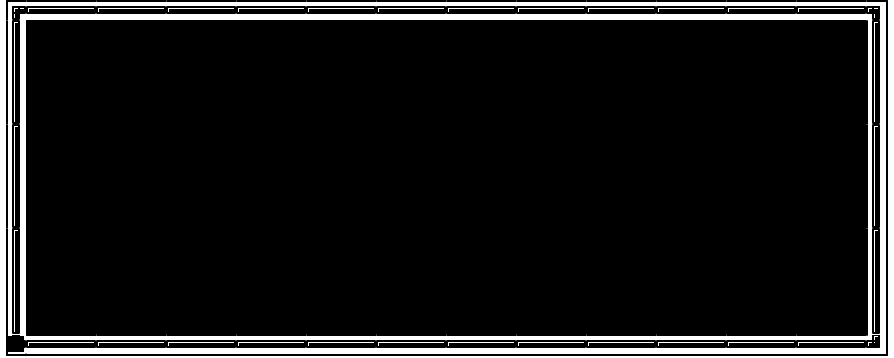
The Review Workshop, (in October for red snapper) is the final stage. This is the panel who must review the assessment to ensure it is complete, correct, and meets the requirements of the law. The key here is independence, because a stamp of approval from the Review Panel means that the assessment represents the best available scientific data and techniques, and can be relied upon in making changes, if necessary, to the fishing rules for a particular stock.

As with any new process, SEDAR has its share of skeptics, ranging from members of the fishing community concerned about the accuracy of the science, to conservationists apprehensive about the potential for unequal influence of competing interest groups. Time will tell, but until then the GRN will keep a close watch but an open mind.

To learn more about the SEDAR process or get details on the assessments planned for 2004, contact John Carmichael at the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council offices: TOLL FREE: 1-866-SAFMC-10.



Gulf Restoration Network
338 Baronne St., Suite 200
New Orleans , LA 70112



Divers Have a Stake Too: A Texas diver speaks out on red snapper management

January 13, 2004

Ms. Bobbi Walker, Chair
Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council

Dear Ms. Walker,

I have asked Ms. Davis to present my comments to you regarding red snapper fishing regulations in the Gulf of Mexico. My interest in this issue began when, as a scuba diver, I was environmental chair of Houston Underwater Club as well as secretary of the Texas Gulf Coast Council of Diving Clubs. I currently serve on the boards of the Lone Star Sierra Chapter, Gulf Restoration Network, Galveston Bay Foundation and Scenic Galveston, which is actually a wetlands restoration group.

My friends who use and love the Gulf are distressed by the overfishing and the lack of productive measures to protect both quantity and diversity of marine life. Please enact some positive measures now for the red snapper fishery, which I believe would include:

- 1) Lowering the catch limit immediately, so recovery can begin now.
- 2) Improving collection of red snapper bycatch data to include all fisheries, including headboats and recreational fishermen, not just the red snapper and shrimp fisheries. Provide trained observers to enhance data from electronic logbooks.
- 3) Addressing the waste of discard mortality by changing regulations to address this reality and dealing with the problem more creatively.

These steps would be a good beginning for solving a longstanding problem, and you are the ones with the power to solve the problem. Please do not delay further.

Thank you,

Page S. Williams

(Ms.) Page S. Williams
Houston, TX

