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Net Loss: Overfishing Off the South Atlantic Coast



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Acknowledgements

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Summary

America's oceans are home to whales, dolphins, fish and an enormous variety of other sea life. But today our oceans are in trouble. Destructive overfishing, pollution, and habitat damage are putting important marine animals at risk. Many populations are in serious decline. The result of this poor management is a drastic reduction in fishing opportunities for commercial and recreational fishermen.

In the South Atlantic, approximately one in three (36% or 4 out of 11) of all federally managed fish stocks for which there is adequate information are depleted (i.e., overfished).¹ Roughly one third (31% or 10 out of 32) stocks with adequate information are experiencing overfishing and headed in that direction. Even these numbers do not tell the whole story.

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council has sole oversight of 86 fish stocks, but it has sufficient data on very few fish stocks to know whether they are overfished or not. For example, it can only determine whether 11 out of the 86 stocks are overfished or not. We do not know which of the other 75 stocks are overfished.

Many of these threatened fish are regionally popular such as the snappers and groupers that have always been a part of Low Country seafood culture. But years of overfishing and the fact that some species are slow growing and late maturing have led to substantial declines. The South Atlantic Council by and large has followed the advice of its independent scientists in setting target catch levels but refused to impose absolute limits on the amount of fish that could be caught and landed. Instead, the Council relied on managing fishing effort with limits on fish size, fishing seasons, trip limits and the like. Clearly these tactics have not worked, and fish stocks keep declining.

Recently, the Council has begun to make better decisions on catch levels and fishing controls. It decided to set aside modest Marine Protected Areas (MPA's) with the hope that some of these threatened species may begin to recover.

In an effort to improve fisheries management, Congress revised the primary law governing fishing in U.S. oceans, the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, at the end of 2006. The Act requires the National Marine Fisheries Service and the regional fishery management councils that devise and propose local plans to maintain healthy fish populations to follow new rules. These rules are now under development; and this report recommends that the new rules follow important conservation principles.

Status of Fish in the South Atlantic

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council manages fishing in federal waters (3-200 miles offshore) off four states: North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the east coast of Florida. According to the most recent government report from the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) about the health of our Nation's fish, the South Atlantic Council manages a total of 86 fish stocks.² Of these, four are overfished which typically means they are depleted to below 20-25% of historical abundance. Eleven stocks are subjected to overfishing which means that at the current rate of fishing the species will become overfished or never recover to healthy levels.

Counting only fish stocks where there is adequate information to know the status, over one third stocks are overfished. And one third of fish stocks with adequate information are headed in that direction.

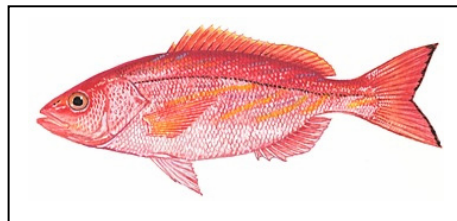
Status of South Atlantic Fish Stocks in 2006

Overfished	Overfishing
snowy grouper	snowy grouper*
black sea bass*	black sea bass*
red porgy*	vermillion snapper*
pink shrimp	red snapper*
	red grouper*
	gag grouper*
	speckled hind
	warsaw grouper*
	tilefish*
	black grouper*
	red drum*

Source: National Marine Fisheries Service, Report on the Status of US Fisheries for 2006, June 22, 2007 pg. 20. Available at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/SOSmain.htm

*Indicates fish stocks with same status on the 2001 Status of Fisheries report. Source: National Marine Fisheries Service, Annual Report to Congress on the Status of U.S. Fisheries – 2001, Table 3, pgs17-19. Available at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/reg_svcs/statusostocks/Stock_status01.htm

Vermilion Snapper



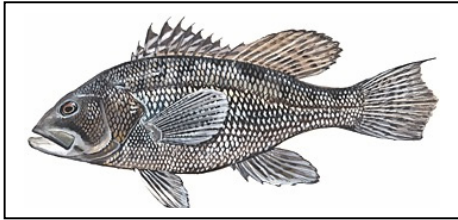
Source: www.landbigfish.com/fish/

Two things are particularly troublesome about this list of threatened stocks in the South Atlantic. The first is that two fish: snowy grouper and black sea bass are both overfished and being caught so fast that their populations can not rebound (ie. overfishing). When managers know that a fish is overfished, they should not allow continued overfishing. Second, almost all the stocks that are on the 2006 list as being overfished or headed in that direction were on the same list in 2001.³ In the past five years there simply hasn't been much progress on recovery.

Lack of progress in the South Atlantic is consistent with national data. Nationwide, the number of overfished stocks (47) in 2006 increased by 9% compared to 2005 when 43 were found to be overfished.⁴ Stocks which were experiencing overfishing increased from 45 to 48, an 8% increase. Obviously, this one year change does not give us a long term picture, but it is worrisome and it must be reversed in future years.

Why Healthy Fish Populations Are Important

Fishing has a substantial economic, cultural and community impact in the southeast. Fishing, the communities and the people it supported, and Low Country seafood have all shaped the culture of the southeastern U.S. for generations. Unfortunately, many of the most threatened fish in the South Atlantic like groupers, snappers, sea bass and red drum have been declining for a long time.



Black Sea Bass

Source: www.landbigfish.com/fish

The economic impact of fishing, especially recreational fishing, in the southeast is substantial. According to the American Sportfishing Association, recreational fishing generated \$4.7 billion dollars in 2001 (adjusting for inflation to 2006 dollars) including the economic multiplier effect of things like hotel rooms and restaurant meals, etc. This accounted for almost 45,000 jobs.⁵ Moreover, the impacts are often concentrated on small coastal communities which benefit from the expenditures.

The value for recreational fishing is not directly comparable to the value from commercial landings because the recreational figure includes multiplier effects while the commercial value does not include secondary impacts like shore processing, wholesaling and retailing jobs. What is obvious is that fishing in the South Atlantic has gotten much less productive over time. In 2006, commercial fishing brought in about \$150 million dollars from ex vessel sales (i.e., value of fish sold by fishermen). This is only about half as much as commercial fishing brought in 1996, \$276 million dollars after adjustment for inflation into 2006 dollars.⁶ Clearly, commercial fishing has been hurt by declining fish stocks.

Council History

The South Atlantic Council has failed for a long time to prevent overfishing in the snapper-grouper complex of fish and to rebuild these species after decades of abuse. For many years the Council imposed ineffective fishing rules such as trip limits, size limits, closed areas, and gear restrictions. Catch levels were by and large based on targets suggested by their scientific committee, but the rules which were supposed to limit fishing did not work, and populations of these fish continued to decline.

Recent fishery management plans adopted by the Council and NMFS in October 2006 drastically cut the commercial and recreation take of some of the most threatened species: snowy grouper, golden tilefish, vermilion snapper, and black sea bass.⁷ Some of these reductions were not enough, and scientists are now telling the Council to reduce catch of vermilion snapper and gag grouper even more.

Recent Decisions

Pushed by new data on declining populations, the Council is now considering another substantial catch reduction for vermilion snapper by 60% and gag grouper by 30%.⁸ These additional reductions will eventually help rebuild these two species, but the Council has more work to do to rebuild other overfished fish populations and rein in overfishing.

Another noteworthy decision by the Council includes the one to set aside eight MPA's in deeper waters. Unfortunately, the MPA's do not appear to overlap known spawning areas or even higher densities of threatened species. Further, MPA's can help with recovery efforts only if new fishing regulations inside them are enforced. Only research will show whether the MPA's are really helping the fish stocks.

Recommendations

For the National Marine Fisheries Service

In December 2006, Congress unanimously approved changes to federal laws governing U.S. fisheries by reauthorizing the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation Act. Currently, the federal government is preparing and revising regulations to implement the new law. The administration should enact strong, clear rules that implement Congress' intention for overfishing to end. The regulations should follow these principles:

- **There must be strong conservation minded rules that sustain healthy fish populations, including numerical annual catch limits for the amount of fish that can be caught.** The catch limits should be set to minimize the potential for overfishing.
- **Decisions about annual catch should be based on science, not self interest.** Independent science advisors must set limits on the amount of fish caught. In the past, fishery managers often ignored the advice of independent scientists and the limits were set at unsustainable levels.
- **The rules need to be enforced.** If the limits on amount of fish caught are exceeded, there must be consequences. Fishing should be stopped or catch limits lowered for the next fishing season. Fishery managers and fishermen should be held accountable .

For the South Atlantic Fishery Council

The changes to the new Magnuson-Stevens Act were in direct response to the failure of the South Atlantic Council and other councils to prevent overfishing and act in accord with scientific advice. The new law requires the South Atlantic Council to prevent overfishing by setting precautionary catch levels based on scientific advice. The council may not set the catch level higher than the safe level recommended by its scientific advisors. When overfishing does occur there should be some accountability measure or consequence for the fishery such as closure for the remainder of the season or lower annual catch limits next season to make up for the overage. The council must stop gaming the system and looking for loopholes.

Endnotes:

1. National Marine Fisheries Service Office of Sustainable Fisheries, *Report on the Status of U.S. Fisheries for 2006*, June 2007. Tables 2 & 4. Accessed at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/domes_fish/StatusofFisheries/2006/2006RTCFinal_Report.pdf
2. Ibid, pg. 15
3. National Marine Fisheries Service Office of Sustainable Fisheries, *Annual Report to Congress on the Status of U.S. Fisheries – 2001*, April 2002. Table 3, pgs. 17-19
Accessed at: www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/reg_svcs/statusostocks/Status02.pdf, October 1, 2007
4. National Marine Fisheries Service, *Report on the Status of U.S. Fisheries for 2006*, pg. 1
5. Table: State Overview – Saltwater Fishing. Accessed September 20, 2007
http://www.asafishing.org/asa/statistics/saleco_trends/state_reports_saltwater.html
Calculation uses ‘Output’ as measure of value and assumes that Florida’s recreational fishing value is divided in half: one half allocated to the east coast and South Atlantic region, one half to the west coast and the Gulf region. To adjust for inflation with the consumer price index, calculation at www.bls.gov/cpi/ using the inflation calculator on Bureau of Labor Statistics website.
6. Based on data from query of all South Atlantic state landings in 2006 and 1996. Query at: www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/commercial/landings/annual_landings.html. Accessed September 20, 2007. To adjust for inflation with the consumer price index, calculation at www.bls.gov/cpi/ using the inflation calculator on Bureau of Labor Statistics website.
7. South Atlantic Fishery Management Council,
Accessed: www.safmc.net/Portals/6/Library/FMP/SnapGroup/SGAmend13Cfinalrule.pdf on October 1, 2007.
8. Susan West, Outerbanks Sentinel, “South Atlantic Council Eyeing Long List of Actions”, June 21, 2007 and press release from the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council at: www.safmc.net/News/NewsReleases/NewsReleaseSeptember242007/tabid/536/Default.aspx accessed October 1, 2007.