



Section Officers

President

Max Stocker

Dept. Fisheries & Oceans
Nanaimo, B.C. V9R SK6
Canada
604/756-7200
stockerm@dfo-mpo.gc.ca

Past-President

John Boreman

NMFS-NEFSC
Woods Hole, MA
508/495-2365
John.Boreman@noaa.gov

President-Elect

Steve Berkeley

Hatfield Marine Sci. Center
Oregon State University
Newport, OR 97365
541/867-0135
berkeles@ccmail.orst.edu

Secretary/Treasurer

Anne-Marie Eklund

NMFS-SEFSC
75 Virginia Beach Drive
Miami, FL 33149
305/361-4533
anne.marie eklund@noaa.gov

President's Comments

The Monterey Meeting culminated in a busy year for many members of the Marine Fisheries Section. As your President, I want to take this opportunity to thank all of you who contributed to the MFS efforts over the past year.

At the annual meeting in Monterey, the Section cosponsored a series of successful symposia: Identifying and Monitoring Fish Habitats and Anthropogenic Impacts: Implications for Estuarine/Marine Fisheries Management; Ecology and Conservation of Long-Lived Animals; Alaska's Limited Entry Programs: Benchmark for Future U.S. Policy; and Biology and Fisheries for Sharks in the Mexus-Pacifico and Adjacent Areas of the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Many thanks to all of you who contributed to make these symposia a success.

As president of the Marine Fisheries Section of the AFS, I participated at the meetings of the Society's Governing Board. During the meeting the Board reviewed the reports of the subunits and special committees of the Society and made critical decisions about the future direction in which the Society is moving. Highlights of the meeting have been summarized in "The AFS Diary" in the October 1997 issue of Fisheries. Of note is that a motion to create a Book Editorial Advisory Board of members to advise staff on the acquisition of books was passed. During the meeting of the incoming Governing Board I was re-elected to be a member of the special management committee (SMC) of AFS. The SMC member is delegated by the Governing Board to be responsible for program delivery. The SMC ensures that emerging members needs and issues are considered.

At the MFS Business Meeting (minutes enclosed in the Newsletter) held in Monterey, a program of work was identified by the members in attendance. The goals of the MFS are: 1) to continue to be AFS member's primary resource of for development of marine professionals, 2) MFS will assist in developing public policy affecting marine fish and fisheries, 3) MFS will serve as a source of experts for evaluating research and monitoring programs that address marine fisheries issues in North America, and 4) MFS will increase the diversity of its membership and the marine fisheries profession.

Being a volunteer organization, we rely on you the members for ideas, support and action. We, the Excom, are looking forward to working with you in implementing the current annual program of work and developing future plans. If there is a burning issue in which you are interested in please let us know. Send a short description of the issue to one of us, including how other interested Section members can get in touch with you. These ideas will stimulate discussion and have the potential for future articles in our newsletter, or stimulate preparation of an AFS resolution or policy statement on marine fisheries issues.

To communicate more effectively among members the Section is establishing a web page for the Section. Russell Brown is taking the lead in this project. Russel has provided me with a web page outline, and we hope to have the page up and running by mid-winter or early spring. If there is a historian among MFS members please provide a brief history of the Section to Russell or me.

The 1997-98 MFS Oscar Elton Sette Award Committee has been put in place. Please consider deserving recipients of this prestigious award. If you like to nominate a candidate please contact Doug Vaughan, chair of the Committee.

MFS elections are held in even-numbered years, so 1998 is the year! During 1998 elections will be held for two positions, President-elect and Secretary-Treasurer. Both positions are two year terms. The Nominating Committee, chaired by John Boreman (Past-President), will prepare a slate of candidates to stand for election. Section members are encouraged to recommend nominations of prospective candidates for these positions.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of you a merry Christmas and a healthy and prosperous New Year.

THIS ISSUE

President's Comments 1
 1997 MFS Minutes 2
 MFS Treasurer's Report . 3
 Lamprey Control 3
 Northeast News 4-6
 Bluefin Tuna Statement ... 7
 Call for Awards 8

~Max Stocker

Minutes of the 1997 Marine Fisheries Section Business Meeting Monterey, California 24 August, 1997

prepared by Steven Berkeley, President Elect

The meeting was called to order by MFS President, Max Stocker at approximately 5:30 pm.

I. Introductions

Everyone present was asked to introduce him/herself and state their affiliation. After introductions, President Stocker presented the annual report.

II. President's Report

Reports of all divisions, chapters, sections and committees were presented at the Governing Board Meeting. The MFS report on this year's activities, as presented to the governing board, was discussed. The section was active in the following areas this year:

1. Bycatch - co-sponsored a symposium at the Dearborn meeting. The section is also working on a special issue of Fisheries devoted to the issue of bycatch. However, it was pointed out that there were some expected contributions that had not been received and the status of this special issue is now uncertain.
2. NW Atlantic groundfish - a book is being produced and is nearing completion.
3. Sharks - the section is developing a position statement. A document is expected soon.
4. Bluefin Tuna - a draft position statement has been prepared and is currently being reviewed by section members. Action on bluefin was delayed because of concern expressed by some section members. Section members present at this meeting felt that the statement should be finalized and released.
5. Oscar E. Sette Award - The winner of this year's award is Dr. William Ricker - a beautiful black walnut and brass miniature trawl door plaque was made by Stu Kennedy for presentation to Dr. Ricker.
6. Managing the Nations Bycatch - The MFS submitted comments to NMFS on behalf of the section.
7. AFS Sustainable Fisheries Strategy for the West Coast Salmon and Steelhead - A very successful conference addressing these issues was held in Victoria, BC April 26-30, 1996 (wasn't it 1997?).
8. Annual Meeting Symposia - The MFS is sponsoring a number of symposia at the 1997 AFS Meeting in Monterey
9. Newsletter - Newsletter editor, Jane DiCosimo, requested funds to mail the newsletter to other subunits and AFS officers. Expenditures for this purpose were approved.
10. Treasury/Membership - Account balance has increased significantly to over \$17,000, but membership in the section has declined to 401 members as of the end of June.

III. Secretary/Treasurer's Report

The secretary/treasurer was not present and President Stocker referred to the account balance sheet which is available on request. Following this presentation of section activities and finances, the question was raised about the declining membership. It was noted that overall AFS membership declined about the same percent as the MFS membership. It was suggested that we might institute a membership drive, but no formal action was taken on this suggestion.

Report of the Governing Board - President Stocker, who is a member of the special management committee of the governing board, explained how the special committee is formed and how it operates. The AFS budget for 1998 is \$2.6 million, which includes an increase of 3.3% from dues, 5% increase in anticipated membership, 6% increase in library subscriptions to publications, and a 2.5% decrease in journal subscriptions and an anticipated decrease in advertising.

Salaries and new positions were reviewed.

A motion to create a book editorial advisory board was approved by the governing board, as was a license to produce all AFS journals on the web.

An outline of the program of incoming AFS president, Bill Taylor was presented at the governing board meeting, and briefly discussed.

IV. Special Discussion Topics

- (a) Pam McClelland reported on a pending National Fish and Wildlife Foundation grant to work with the Seward Center, a marine mammal research center. She would like the MFS to compile a list of people willing to provide input on research proposals particularly those dealing with fishery interactions.
- (b) 1998 Symposia for the Hartford Meeting. Two symposia have been suggested by MFS member, Doug Vaughn:
 1. Overfishing
 2. Quantitative methods in fisheries assessmentClearly, these suggestions will have to be more focused. The section will solicit recommendations for symposia topics in the upcoming newsletter.
- (c) Program of Work
 1. Threatened and endangered species. Jack Musick has been working on a list of marine fish stocks at risk. The list will be published in "Fisheries" in the future. It was decided that specific criteria for inclusion in such a list should be developed and that perhaps a workshop should be convened to develop these criteria. Carl Safina and Steve Berkeley agreed to provide input into the appropriate criteria for inclusion on this list.
 2. Bluefin Tuna. It was agreed that the section should continue to develop statements and updates on bluefin tuna. The current statement that has been circulated should be revised and the circulated to an updated list of experts within the section.

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3. Communications.

It was agreed that the MFS should establish a web page, and Max will try to locate someone to host such a web page. Max will look into setting up an email network that will allow review of position statements and other section business to be conducted electronically, more quickly and efficiently.

4. Bycatch special issue of "Fisheries." The lead off essay has not been written, and no volunteer has come forward. Mac Rawson will be contacted to determine how this will be handled, but the section is still interested in continuing with this project.

V. Adjournment The meeting was adjourned at 7:15 pm

Attendance at the annual business meeting in Monterey:

- Jack Musick, VA
- Carl Safina, NY
- Max Stocker, BC
- Steve Berkeley, OR
- Jane DiCosimo, AK
- Dana Winkelman, FL
- Dick Stone, VA
- Andrew Loftus, MD
- Ed Conklin, FL
- Carolyn Griswold, RI
- Charles Cole, OH
- Dick Schaefer, MD
- Pam McClelland, DC
- Kenneth Beal, MA
- Chuck Wilson, LA
- Chuck Adams, FL
- Gene Huntsman, NC
- Beth Staehle, MD
- Karen Foote, LA
- Russel Brown, MA
- Ed Irby, FL

**Marine Fisheries Section Treasurer's Report
1 August 1996 - 16 August 1997**

Balance on 1 August 1996	\$15,224.96
Receipts	
Members' Dues	
1996	1,530.00
1997	870.00
Bank Interest	96.33
Sales:	
1996 Annual Meeting Sales	60.00
Beverton Notes	115.00
On the Dynamics of Exploited Fishes	1,552.50
Total Receipts/Credits	\$4,223.83
Disbursements	
Newsletter: 2 issues	\$1,075.61
Contribution towards Bycatch Video	500.00
AFS 2000	500.00
Reception expenses and Sette award dinner	365.64
Total Disbursements	\$2,441.25
Balance on 16 August 1997	\$17,007.54

As of June 30, 1997 there were 401 members of Marine Fisheries Section.

*Anne-Marie Eklund, Secretary/Treasurer
Marine Fisheries Section*

**Michigan's Governor Proposes Funding
for Hatcheries and Lamprey Control**

Governor Engler announced on June 24 a funding package that would rebuild Michigan's ailing hatchery system and facilitate a fully integrated sea lamprey treatment program for the St. Marys River. This package included \$18.2 million for hatchery renovations and at least \$1 million per year (for three years, beginning in 1998) for sea lamprey control on the St. Marys River. If approved by the Michigan legislature, the proposal would especially benefit fisheries of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan, lakes where damages from St. Marys River sea lamprey are greatest and which are particularly dependant upon stocking. Sea lamprey are a chief impediment to reproduction and the lamprey funding proposal is a step toward weaning the lakes from their dependance on the hatcheries.

There are a number of factors contributing to lack of reproduction in lakes Michigan and Huron, including barrier dams on tributaries, overfishing, sea lamprey, and effects of other nonnative species. The DNR has argued that maintaining its hatchery system is essential to maintaining functionally viable fish communities and associated economic values while problems with reproduction are addressed. The hatchery proposal bridges this gap, while the lamprey funding proposal does something about one underlying problem with reproduction.

In addition, the Governor decided not to pursue privatization of any of the state's hatchery facilities. A proponent of privatization in general, the Governor in this instance weighed in on the side "of keeping DNR resource professionals in charge."

What the proposal means (and does not mean): (1) Michigan's hatchery system production capacity will be maintained; (2) improvements in facilities will target quality of the product; (3) there will not be an increase in quantity of fish produced; (4) Oden hatchery will be completely rebuilt (without which it would have ceased production); (5) effluent management of the hatcheries will be improved; (6) public education centers will be provided for each of Michigan's 6 hatcheries; (7) treatment of lamprey "hot spots" with bottom-release toxicant in the St. Marys River can begin in 1998, complementing enhanced trapping and sterile-male release; (8) the state has made a good faith effort to leverage investment in sea lamprey control from federal (U.S. and Canada), state/provincial, and private sources (The state did NOT replace federal with state funds) and; (9) the hatchery proposal is intended to bridge the gap between today's troubled fisheries and tomorrow's opportunities to restore self-sustaining stocks (it did NOT propose replacing self-regulating, wild fisheries with hatchery supported ones).

The Chapter's response to this proposal will be to help inform the Michigan legislature of the importance to this funding package to Michigan's fisheries.



*~Jim Johnson Co-chair
Michigan Lamprey Control Funding Task Force*

Federal Plan Announced to Reduce Large Whale Entanglements in Atlantic Lobster and Gillnet Gear

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) officials announced details of a four-year plan to reduce entanglement of four large whale species, particularly the rare northern right whale, in lobster and gillnet gear off the U.S. Atlantic Coast. In many areas, the gear will have to be rigged to reduce risk to the whales. However, fishers can select from among a list of options (fact sheet available from contact upon request) for meeting the standards.

In addition to measures that directly affect fishing, the plan also emphasizes several activities that are intended to decrease entanglements over the long term. These include improved monitoring of whale populations, routine public involvement in developing take reduction measures, use of a take reduction team to evaluate progress and a gear advisory group to evaluate gear improvements, and support for gear research.

NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) also plans to expand its present disentanglement "first response" team. Recently, the New England team, including the Provincetown-based Center for Coastal studies, NMFS, and the U.S. Coast Guard, assisted by two fishing vessels, freed a right whale off Cape Cod from gear entangled around its head and mouth.

The rule is a revision of a controversial take reduction plan proposed by the National Marine Fisheries Service in April. After making the proposal, the agency conducted 12 hearings on the plan in five states attended by more than 2500 persons, and received written comment and petitions from more than 13,000 persons and organizations. The plan announced today is substantially revised from the initial proposal, based on the constructive advice received by the agency.

"We made a proposal, we asked knowledgeable people how to improve it, we listened to what the public had to say, and altered the plan accordingly," Garcia said. "I would like to thank all the people who took the time to help us find a better way to protect right whales. I hope people will feel that it was worthwhile to get involved."

Because the final plan differs enough from the proposed plan, the regulations are interim and the agency will accept comment on them through October 15, 1997. The interim regulations are effective November 15, 1997. The gear modifications will be required beginning next January.

The rule requires that all lobster and sink gillnet gear will now have to be rigged so that the buoy line does not float at the surface of the water at anytime. The rule prohibits "wet storage" of lobster gear, which is the practice of leaving unbaited traps in the water rather than storing them on land. In addition, the gear must have some characteristics that reduce the risks associated with entanglement. Modifications are not required for gear deployed in coves and harbors. At least one modification from a list of acceptable options must be used if the gear is set in areas whales rarely use. At least two of the modifications are required if the gear is set in areas whales use more often. There are more specific requirements for gear when it is allowed in areas that have

previously been declared "critical habitat" for right whales.

Critical habitat areas off Massachusetts and Georgia/Florida will be closed to some gear during times when whales are known to aggregate. There are no other closures specified, however, some kind of closure may eventually be required to protect whales if the entanglements continue to exceed legal limits.

To learn more about entanglements, gear marking will eventually be required on lobster and sink gillnet buoy lines. The plan does not require marking of groundlines at this time. Progress under the plan will be monitored by comparing how the known rate of serious injury and mortalities attributed these fishing gears changes over the next five years.

The plan is required by 1994 amendments to the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. The federal Marine Mammal Protection Act requires NMFS to develop, with public participation, take reduction plans. A plan is required for all fisheries that are known to occasionally or frequently entangle marine mammals in populations that are of biological concern.

This plan affects operations of Atlantic lobster pots and traps, anchored gillnets in New England and the Mid-Atlantic, coastal driftnets in the Mid-Atlantic, and the shark drift gillnet fishery in the southeastern U.S.

The four whales protected in this plan are the Northern right, humpback, fin, and minke. All but the latter are listed under the Endangered Species Act. The plan is intended to reduce serious and fatal entanglements of Northern right whales by two-thirds by January of 1998. It also aims to reduce takes of all four large whales to insignificant levels by April of 2001.

~Russell Brown

O.E. SETTE AWARD NOMINATIONS REQUESTED

The O.E. Sette Award Committee is soliciting nominees for this important award for an outstanding marine fishery scientist (to be presented at the annual AFS meeting in Hartford, CT). The most recent award winner was Dr. William E. Ricker for 1997. Please provide a brief biographic writeup for your nominee by June 15, 1998, to one of the committee members listed below. The committee's recommendation is made to the Marine Fisheries Section President no later than July 15, 1998.

Chair:

Doug Vaughan (Phone: 919-728-8761; FAX: 919-728-8784;
E-mail: dvaughan@hatteras.bea.nmfs.gov)

Members:

Ken Able (Phone: 415-492-7921; FAX: 609-296-1024;
E-mail: able@arctic.rutgers.edu)
Patricia Gerrior (Phone: 508-495-2264; FAX: 508-495-2393;
E-mail: Pat.Gerrior@noaa.gov)
Gary Sakagawa (Phone: 619-546-7177; FAX: 619-546-5653;
E-mail: Gary.Sakagawa@noaa.gov)
Dick Stone (Phone: 703-242-0082; FAX: 703-242-8382)

Fisheries Service Implements Federal Weakfish Regulations to Complement Coastal Stock Rebuilding Efforts

The fisheries service, an agency of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, has developed weakfish regulations for federal waters that complement state fisheries management rules for that species already in place and cooperatively managed by the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

According to fisheries service officials, biological indicators show that the weakfish stock is severely overfished. Therefore, the fisheries service has implemented the following measures in federal waters: 12 inch minimum size limit; mesh sizes compatible with the size limit; bycatch possession limit of 150 pounds for smaller mesh sizes; no flynetting in a closed area south of Cape Hatteras to the South Carolina state line; no possession of weakfish while using shrimp trawls or crab trawls when fishing in the area closed to flynetting; commercial landings of weakfish, taken in federal waters (from state waters out to 200 miles from shore) may be landed only in certain states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina).



Commercial and recreational fishermen target weakfish in East Coast waters from Massachusetts to Florida. Fishermen catch about eight million pounds of weakfish annually, but marine fisheries scientists believe millions more could be taken if weakfish stocks are managed to a healthy state.

These regulations are expected to begin the process of rebuilding the stock in coordination with other measures implemented under the Atlantic commission's Weakfish Fishery Management Plan. The National Marine Fisheries Service is responsible for managing Atlantic coast weakfish in federal waters, while the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, consisting of 15 East Coast states, is responsible for managing weakfish in state waters. The fisheries service developed the weakfish regulations in close cooperation with the Atlantic commission and its member states.

The Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council has the lead role in developing a federal weakfish fishery management plan, but has been unable to do so because of workload constraints. In the absence of a federal fishery management plan, the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act allows the Secretary of Commerce to implement regulations in federal waters that complement the Atlantic commission's weakfish plan in state waters. The commission's fishery management plan already requires Atlantic coast states to implement measures similar to those proposed for federal waters, and requests supportive action by the Department of Commerce in federal waters.

~Russell Brown

Georges Bank Groundfish Stocks Show Initial Signs of Recovery

Scientists responsible for assessing stocks of cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder reported that some stocks are responding favorably to fishing restrictions in New England. NMFS presented assessment results of the 24th meeting of the Stock Assessment Review Committee (SARC), the regional scientific body convened regularly since 1985 by the serve to review fishery stock assessments and produce scientific advice used by the region's fishery managers. The 24th SARC met in May 1997 to review the status of five primary New England groundfish stocks and the scientific methods used to assess them. The SARC reported that fishing mortality has been reduce to or below rebuilding targets established by the New England Fisheries Management Council for the Georges Bank stocks of cod, haddock, and yellowtail flounder, and the Southern New England stock of yellowtail flounder. Some stocks appear to be exhibiting either a stabilization or slight increases in spawning stock biomass; however, incoming year classes continue to be weak for all stocks.

In contrast to the Georges Bank and Southern New England stocks, scientists reported that fishing mortality on the Gulf of Maine cod stock remains in excess of 1.0 (60% exploitation rate) and that the stock is on the verge of biological collapse. The Stock Assessment Review Committee report advised managers to act quickly to reduce fishing effort on Gulf of Maine Cod. If fishing mortality rates remain at the 1996 level in 1997 and 1998, projections indicate that by 1999 the spawning stock will fall to a new low and landings will likely decline by 45 percent. The SARC advised that, "An immediate reduction in fishing mortality to levels approaching zero is required to halt the declining trend in spawning stock biomass and to rebuild at the maximum rate possible. Measures should be enacted immediately to minimize all directed fishing and bycatch on this stock."

The SARC results have also been reported to a panel of scientist named by the National Academy of Science's National Research Council (NRC). The NRC panel was mandated by Congress to conduct a review of both the fishery assessment methods used and the results obtained by the SARC. The report resulting in the NRC review of these assessments is due to be released in the Fall of 1997.

~Russell Brown

Bycatch Symposium

At the 1998 AFS meeting in Hartford, CT, the American Institute for Fishery Research Biologists will sponsor a Symposium of interest to the Marine Fisheries Section, AFS. The topic will be related to Bycatch. Anyone interested in participating should contact:

Clark Hubbs, Pres, AIFRB at hubbs@mail.utexas.edu
Vaughn Anthony, Past Pres at anthony@wiscasset.net
Barbara Warkentine, 1998 coord. at bewlc@cunyvm.cuny.edu

~Dora Passino-Reader

Endangered Marine Fishes: Criteria and Identification of North American Stocks at Risk

There are two major causes of fish species loss in marine ecosystems: habitat disturbance and excessive mortality to species with life history limitations. The most diverse groups of marine fishes tend to be those with low vagility. Small size, benthic habit, and demersal eggs are especially conducive to restricting gene flow, maintaining isolation, and promoting speciation. Many coral reef fishes exhibit low vagility and in addition live in habitats with great structural and species diversity. These same habitats are among the most vulnerable in the marine realm. Reefs and their resident biota are vulnerable to excessive turbidity, siltation, pollution, and physical destruction. Whereas some coral reef fishes (particularly those with pelagic eggs and larvae) have wide geographic distributions, those with low vagility tend to have restricted ranges and local habitat destruction can lead to extinction. The Florida Keys off the southern USA have an extensive but rapidly declining coral reef system, and a diverse marine fish fauna. These small islands have been under undergoing rapid development (tourism, housing, marinas, etc.) for the past 40 years. Water quality has declined because of the increased eutrophication associated with inadequate sewage facilities, and excessive recreational vessel discharges. In addition, much of the nearshore reef and mangrove habitats have been physically destroyed by construction of marinas and other boating facilities. One small species of blenny, *Starksia starki* may have been extirpated and several other small marine fishes with restricted ranges in the USA are faced with the threat of extinction in the next few years.

Another group of fishes which is particularly vulnerable to habitat degradation are the anadromous fishes. These animals occupy marine or estuarine habitats for most of their lives but must ascend rivers into freshwater to spawn. Because lotic habitats are extremely vulnerable to destruction through dam construction, logging and road-induced sedimentation, eutrophication, and other anthropogenic effects, many anadromous fishes are faced with severe population decline and the threat of extinction. In the Pacific northwest of North America 106 stocks of anadromous salmonids have become extinct and 214 more have recently been recognized to be at risk. Most species of another anadromous group, the sturgeons, have been classified in the I.U.C.N. Red List to be at extreme risk of extinction. Sturgeons are not only vulnerable because of their anadromous behavior, but also because they are long-lived and take a decade or more to mature. Thus, they are also vulnerable because of their life-history limitations.

Among marine fishes, the sharks and their relatives may be the most limited by conservative life history characteristics and thus vulnerable to excessive mortalities. Typically most common requiem sharks such as the sandbar shark may require 15 years to mature, attain an age of 30-40 years, and produce 8-10 young every 2-3 years. Such demographic parameters result in intrinsic rates of annual increase of 2-6%. These rates are similar to those in the great whales, sea turtles, and some terrestrial animals such

as the African elephant. With such severe life-history limitations, it is no wonder that shark stocks are quickly overfished, and that population recovery requires decades. Other long-lived late-maturing marine fishes include wreckfish, some of the Pacific rockfishes, and groupers. Among the Atlantic groupers, jewfish and warsaw grouper populations have been locally extirpated by overfishing and several other species may be threatened.

Although many North American marine fish stocks have been identified to be at risk, quantitative criteria defining the degree of endangerment have been equivocal. The American Fisheries Society, through its Marine Fisheries Section and Endangered Species Committee, has begun an initiative to identify marine fish stocks at risk in North America with the following objectives:

1. To determine what major factors contribute to the loss of marine fish biodiversity.
2. To identify marine fish stocks at risk of extinction in the North American waters.
3. To develop quantitative criteria to classify stocks into risk categories that reflect probability of extinction.
4. To classify North American Marine fish stocks at risk into the above categories.
5. To develop an official American Fisheries Society Policy Statement concerning conservation of Marine Fish Stocks at Risk.
6. To develop ancillary policy statements concerning conservation of specific groups at risk (i.e., sharks, groupers, etc.).

The AFS is planning a workshop in late spring or early summer of 1998 to discuss and resolve these issues. For further information contact:

Dr. J.A. Musick
Co-chair AFS Endangered Marine Fishes Committee
Virginia Institute of Marine Science
Gloucester Point, VA 23062
(jmusick@vims.edu)

~Jack Musick

Florida State University's Second International William R. and Lenore Mote Symposium November 4-6, 1998

Location: Sarasota, FL

Topic: Essential Fish Habitat and Marine Reserves

Contact: Felicia Coleman, Institute for Fishery
Resource Ecology, Department of Biological
Science, Florida State University,
Tallahassee, FL 32306-1100;
coleman@bio.fsu.edu; phone (850) 644-3700

Marine Fisheries Section 1997 Statement on Bluefin Tuna - Draft 4



Background

The Marine Fisheries Section (MFS) of the American Fisheries Society has been monitoring the stock condition and management of Atlantic bluefin tuna closely since at least 1991. Several statements have been issued over this time period by the MFS, which have expressed our concern over the status of the western Atlantic stock and in which we have suggested what we, as professional fishery scientists, believe is appropriate action to rebuild the stock.

In our first statement, released in May 1992, we recommended, among other things, that a recovery plan and timetable be implemented immediately. In a subsequent statement released in July 1995, we again stated that “the immediate priority is to define a biologically acceptable recovery target and establish and implement a stringent timetable for rebuilding the stock to this target level. Until such time as the rebuilding plan is implemented by ICCAT and the question of spawning site fidelity is resolved, the MFS believes that quota increases are inappropriate and that the current quota should be maintained or reduced.”

At the 1995 meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the commission approved the following resolution: “That the SCRS develop, at its 1996 meeting, separate and distinct recovery options for each of the western and eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna management stocks, taking into account the possible effects of mixing that may occur; and the SCRS should calculate a series of annual total allowable catches (TACs) based on stock projections that are needed for rebuilding the western and eastern management stocks, respectively, to levels which would support MSY, within selected alternative recovery time periods and with intermediate goals and milestones along the path to rebuilding. The recovery options shall be based on the 1996 stock assessments for each management stock. The selected alternative recovery time periods shall be 10, 15 and 20 years, with a 50% probability.”

The MFS viewed this action by the commission as a positive and decisive step towards the ultimate recovery of the western Atlantic stock of bluefin tuna. This action, combined with recent ICCAT resolutions authorizing aggressive trade restrictive measures to ensure compliance by both member and non-member nations, was generally recognized as a turning point in the responsiveness and effectiveness of ICCAT.

Recent ICCAT Actions

The results of the 1996 SCRS stock assessment and recovery projections indicate that a 50% probability of recovery to the MSY biomass level within even the most distant time horizon that the commission wanted to consider (20 years) would require a constant quota of no more than 500 mt. Despite this, the commission approved a quota increase of 150 mt to 2,354 mt (2,500 mt including discards), with the justification that this catch level is sustainable and that the spawning stock will show a gradual increase over a period of 20 years. However, the projections also indicate that, while there is virtually no chance that the stock will rebuild to MSY in 20 years, there is a significant chance that the spawning stock will continue to decline. While we recognize that these projections have a great deal of uncertainty associated with them, we believe that quota increases are risk prone and inappropriate considering our current understanding of the stock condition.

Conclusions

Bluefin tuna have been under some form of active management by ICCAT since 1974 when a minimum size was imposed. Thus, ICCAT has been managing bluefin for 23 years and the spawning stock is currently at or near its lowest level ever. With the current quota, the spawning stock is projected to increase slightly over the next 20 years, but only to about 25% of the target level after 43 years of management. The MFS believes that allowing the spawning stock to remain at such low levels for such a protracted period of time places the stock in serious danger of collapse. Therefore we conclude that the most recent action taken by ICCAT, increasing the quota and failing to define and implement a recovery target and timetable, is inconsistent with our previous recommendations and inappropriate considering the current understanding of the status of the stock.

Furthermore, the MFS notes that the question of spawning site fidelity remains unresolved, and again cautions that if bluefin tuna exhibit spawning site fidelity, then current spawning biomass estimates for the western Atlantic could substantially overestimate the true spawning biomass. The MFS stresses that transatlantic movement of fish in either direction reveals little information about spawning site fidelity unless the natal area of the tagged fish is known or can be inferred. Indices of abundance for the Gulf of Mexico, the principal west Atlantic spawning area, remain at very low levels, suggesting that the true west Atlantic spawning stock may be at substantially lower levels than indicated by the stock assessment.

The MFS again urges the ICCAT commission to maintain or reduce the quota until such time as a rebuilding plan is implemented and the question of spawning site fidelity is resolved.

~Steve Berkeley

SEND YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MFS EDITOR OR YOUR REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE

Western

Grant Thompson
NMFS/AFSC
7600 Sand Point Way NE
Seattle, WA 98115-0070
206/526-4232
Grant.Thompson@noaa.gov

Central

Daniel Hayes
Dept Fish & Wildlife
13 Natural Resources Bldg
East Lansing, MI 48824
517/432-3781
dhayes@perm.fw.msu.edu

Northeast

Russell Brown
NMFS
Northeast Fish. Sci Center
Woods Hole, MA 02543
508/495-2380
rbrown@whsun1.wh.who.edu

Southeast

Charlie Wenner
SCWMRD
P.O. Box 12559
Charleston, SC 29412
803/795-6350
wennerc@mrd.dnr.state.sc.us

1997-1998 Call for Awards Nominations

Marilyn Brown, AFS unit services coordinator, has requested publication of the 1997-98 Call for Awards Nomination in unit newsletters.

The nomination deadline for all Society level awards is now April 5, 1998. The new deadline for these awards is standardized to streamline administrative details of the awards recognition program. Contact information for each award is included on the listing. Note that the only exceptions to this new deadline are the Distinguished Service Award and the J. Frances Allen Scholarship.

See page 29 of the December 1997 *Fisheries* for the list of 1998 Award Nominations. If you have any questions at all, please contact Marilyn at (301) 897-8616 ext.201 or send an email to: mbrown@fisheries.org.



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Marine Fisheries Section Newsletter

Jane DiCosimo, Editor

*North Pacific Fishery Management Council
605 West 4th Avenue, Suite 306
Anchorage Alaska 99501
907/271-2809
907/271-2817 FAX
Jane.DiCosimo@noaa.gov*

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