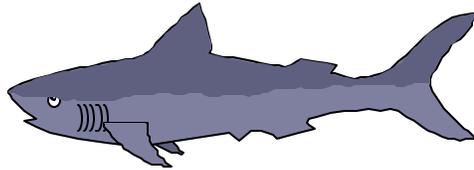


FISH



TALES

Looking Ahead to Key Fish Conservation Issues in 2003

Developing rebuilding plans for depleted reef fish, protecting gag grouper spawning aggregations, analyzing bycatch in Gulf fisheries and assessing the threats to the Gulf of Mexico's ability to support its marine life will be key issues federal regulators will be facing in the upcoming year. This issue of *Fish Tales* is dedicated to looking towards these issues and providing avenues for our member groups to get involved in

protecting the Gulf's fish species in 2003. Fortunately, a number of excellent opportunities exist to help shape policies affecting the Gulf of Mexico in the areas of sustainable fish management, biodiversity, water quality, and wetlands protection.

Rebuilding Depleted Reef Fish Species

Federal regulators will be faced with four key reef fish rebuilding plans and

ending the overexploitation of others in 2003. Accordingly, the upcoming year is crucial for the Gulf's reef fish complex, especially grouper and snapper species.

Issues will range from developing new plans to rebuild depleted groupers to revising plans for red snapper, a fish declared depleted in 1988. In addition crucial management decisions will be made on

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Key Reef Fish Rebuilding Plans Scheduled for 2003

The upcoming year will see the development of a number of plans to help rebuild depleted reef fish species and end the overexploitation of others. It will be up to GRN members to ensure that these necessary measures promote sustainability.

Pursuant to the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), federal regulators including the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Manage-

ment Council (Gulf Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), must establish updated parameters to determine the health of a fish species in the Gulf of



Red snapper. Courtesy of the FL FWCC.

Mexico. Once these pa-

rameters are set, scientists analyze the health of a species to determine if it falls below levels that are considered unhealthy (overfished) or above sustainable catch rates (overfishing). If overfishing is detected or a species is overfished, federal regulators must take steps to either stop the unsustainable catch rates, rebuild the species back to a healthy level, or both.

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- Special points of interest:
- Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan may be revised based on new information
 - Rebuilding Plans for depleted Nassau and Goliath groupers scheduled for summer of 2003
 - Will third time be the charm for red snapper?
 - Shrimp permits pave the way for better inventory of marine life killed or injured in the shrimp fishery
 - Gulf-wide environmental impacts assessment looks at the numerous assaults to the Gulf's ability to support its marine life

Reef Fish Rebuilding Plans....

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In the Gulf of Mexico, federal regulators have yet to formally adopt these new parameters for any reef fish species though some have been generated and proposed. Accordingly, work to establish these parameters will be a big effort in 2003.

Once these parameters are set, the Gulf Council must develop management measures to either ensure sustainable catch rates, rebuild depleted populations or maintain healthy levels. For 2003, it appears that ensuring sustainable catch rates and rebuilding depleted species will be the main focus of Gulf Council efforts.

For groupers in the Gulf, a number of key issues are on tap next year. First, the health of depleted red grouper, a species the Gulf Council recently crafted a plan to return to healthy levels, was reassessed by Gulf scientists. This review may require some modifications to the current rebuilding proposal. It will be imperative that GRN members voice their con-

cerns if proposed rollbacks to conservation measures are invoked.

In addition, four grouper species in the Gulf have been identified as candidates for listing under the Endangered Species Act, including Nassau, goliath (formerly jewfish) and Warsaw groupers and speckled hind. Establishment of parameters and rebuilding plans are scheduled to be completed by July of 2003 for Nassau and Goliath groupers. Warsaw grouper and speckled hind do not have an assessment of what the proper parameters should be but management measures may be proposed for these species. See the enclosed action alerts for information



Gag grouper. Courtesy of the FL FWCC.

on getting involved.

Gag grouper, a species identified as at risk of extinction by the American

Fisheries Society based on low numbers of males in the population, will also be subject to management changes this year. First, the Gulf Council is currently considering the fate of two areas that were established to protect male gag and gag grouper spawning sites. Second, parameters must be established to begin moving management of this fishery towards optimum yield.

The Gulf's two imperiled snapper species, red and vermilion, are also subject to management changes. Red snapper, the Gulf's most depleted reef fish species, is the subject of repeated federal efforts to develop a legally sufficient plan to return the population to a healthy level. It will take a strong showing of public support to ensure the third time is the charm. Vermilion snapper has been the victim of years of uncontrolled overexploitation, threatening the health of the species. Federal regulators must curtail unsustainable fishing rates this year so that this species does not become overfished.

Analyzing and Reducing Bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico

Bycatch, the incidental killing or injuring of marine life in the process of catching a target species, has long been a threat to marine life in the Gulf region. Well known examples of bycatch include sea turtles and other marine life in the nets of shrimp trawls which led to the required use of devices such as turtle excluder devices (TEDs) and bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) to reduce this problem. Less known, but still important is the other types of bycatch in the Gulf including reef fish

that are thrown back by fishermen due to things like their small sizes and the capture of marine life by other gears such as rod and reel, long-lines and fish traps.

A key change made in 1996 to federal fishery management laws is the requirement to assess bycatch in all fishing operations and reduce it to the extent possible. Unfortunately, over four years after these changes were supposed to be made, completion of these tasks is far from fin-

ished in the Gulf region, leaving the threats posed by bycatch as an issue that must be addressed. The key first step in accomplishing this goal is establishing an inventory of bycatch in Gulf fishing operations to determine the scope of the problem. To do this an accounting system which builds upon recently required permits for shrimp fishermen, must be established in the upcoming year.

Fortunately, opportunities exist for

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Bycatch....

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GRN members to make sure this happens. In 2003 two key events will help shape this issue. First, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will respond to a request by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) proposing measures to collect bycatch information. Once the formal review process begins, the public will have an opportunity to comment on the plan, thereby ensuring the job

gets done right.

Second, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC), an interstate fishery management entity which fosters cooperation between Gulf states on fishery management issues, is currently developing an accounting system to collect bycatch information. This move offers promise in developing a comprehensive accounting system to track bycatch in all Gulf fishing operations. The

GRN will keep everyone posted on making sure this accounting system sets the stage for federal regulators to begin collecting this information and ultimately reducing bycatch.



Shrimp and other marine life caught in the shrimp fishery.

Assessing and Reducing Threats to the Gulf a Key Issue in 2003

Critical decisions are on tap next year that affect the Gulf's marine environment. As a result of a recent court decision, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) will be re-examining their efforts to protect habitats essential to the well being of our marine life. This will allow GRN members and friends a great opportunity to ensure that fish habitat in the Gulf of Mexico receives the protection it deserves.

In a lawsuit filed by several GRN members against the NMFS, a federal court found that all of the environmental assessments regarding protecting and identifying habitats essential to our fisheries (EFH) completed by the NMFS violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA requires that federal agencies analyze the impacts of their activities on the environment and adequately consider alternatives to their proposed actions. The court found that the NEPA analysis conducted by the NMFS regarding the seven fishery management plans in

the Gulf did not discuss how fishing gear may damage fish habitat or provide possible alternatives which may reduce potential impacts on the environment.

Pursuant to this ruling the Gulf Council is now completing a supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) to analyze the impacts of the threats posed by fishing gears to EFH and proposing alternatives to minimize these threats. The SEIS is also looking at environmental threats that impact the Gulf's fish species and contains alternatives for identifying EFH in the Gulf region. The document is now in draft form with an expected completion date of the summer of 2003. The latest draft of this document provides a start in assessing the various impacts to the Gulf's environment including wetlands loss, water pollution, the dead zone, the lack of freshwater inflows into the Gulf's bays and estuaries, and the impacts gear used in fishing have on marine habitats.

While this EIS is off to a good start, much work is left to be done. Con-

sidering the fact that the Environmental Protection Agency's recently released report on the health of our nation's coastal areas ranked the Gulf as "poor", it's critical that the federal government properly acknowledge the threats facing the Gulf as a platform for protecting the habitats essential to the ability of the Gulf of Mexico to support its diverse assemblage of marine life.

Getting involved in this issue is simple. Contact the GRN and let us know what reports, comments, etc. you would like to submit for the record. Any materials submitted must be considered by the federal government in completing the EIS. With the help of all forty of our member groups we can ensure that all threats are included in the document. Contact Jill Jensen at jill@gulfrestorationnetwork.org or 504.525.1528 ext. 206 on getting involved.





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

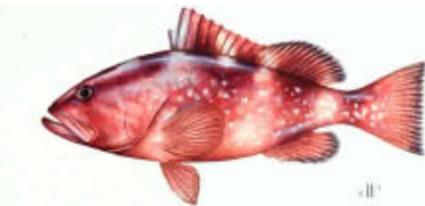
Cynthia Sarthou, Executive Director
Chris Dorsett, Director for Fisheries
Jill Jensen, Fisheries Education and Outreach
Vicki Luden, Director of LA/MS Grassroots Programs
Jen Brock, Director of Organizational Development
Amy Gill, Office Administrator
Editor: Chris Dorsett

Phone: (504) 525-1528
Fax: (504) 525-0833
Email: : cdorsett@gulfrestorationnetwork.org

Red Grouper Rebuilding Plan...

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ending the overexploitation of species such as vermilion snapper and providing safeguards for gag grouper spawning aggregations.



Red Grouper. Courtesy of the FL FWCC.

The article beginning on page 1 provides all the particulars of species under consideration and ways to get involved.

Assessing and Reducing Bycatch

Another key initiative for 2003 is the assessment of bycatch, the incidental capture of marine life which is oftentimes injured or killed in the process of catching a target species. Federal law requires that

fishery managers assess the amount and type of bycatch occurring in all Gulf fisheries. Unfortunately, little work has been done in this area. Accordingly, efforts by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, an interstate fishery management entity, to develop a plan to acquire this type of information will be critical in forward progress on this issue. Once this plan is in place it will be up to federal regulators to collect the information and ultimately reduce bycatch levels in the Gulf. See page 2 for further information on this important issue.

Identifying and Protecting Fish Habitats

Pursuant to a court case brought by GRN member groups, federal regulators are in the process of developing an environmental impact statement to analyze the myriad threats to the Gulf's productivity. This assessment will analyze a number of key issues that GRN member groups work on includ-

ing wetlands loss, water pollution, oil and gas development, the dead zone, freshwater inflows and fishing gear impacts. Thus, this EIS presents a great opportunity to ensure that federal regulators adequately assess these threats and fully explore their impacts on the Gulf's productivity. See page 3 for information on helping to make sure this task is completed properly to build a strong record of the threats, thereby making the case for changes in government policies that adversely affect the Gulf's ability to sustain its marine life.



Mangroves in Florida Bay, essential habitat to marine fish species.