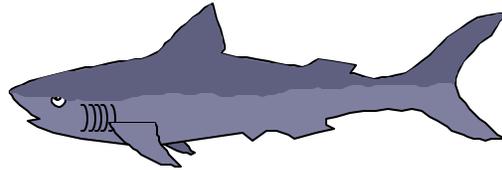


# FISH



# TALES

## Two Marine Reserves Will be Continued off Florida's Coast

Two areas off the coast of Florida will continue to be closed to bottom fishing for another 6 years, as a result of July's vote of the Gulf Council. There was contentious debate over whether to close the areas to all fishing, including recreational fishing for highly migratory species at the surface. The Coast Guard reported that banning all fishing improves enforceability, as no boats would be legitimately fishing in the two areas. Also, scientists stated that the scientific value of research within the reserves would be improved if the areas were truly "no impact" areas. The new sunset date will be June 16, 2010.

Texas congressmen Gene Green and Nick

Lampson, in a letter to the Council supporting this move, stated that continuing the reserves "will allow the Gulf Council to evaluate the benefits of expanding the use of marine reserves as a fishery management tool in the Gulf of Mexico."

The reserves were created in areas associated with gag grouper, and established in part because of serious concerns about the dwindling numbers of male gag. Initial study has shown that a number of other reef fish use the calcium carbonate pits and pinnacles in the reserves, including vermilion snapper, red snapper, red grouper and black grouper. All of these reef fish are depleted and will benefit from the "no-



fishing" relief these two reserve areas could provide. Unfortunately, just designating the areas as reserves is not enough. All fishermen now must commit to ensuring that the boundaries of these protected areas are respected, even when the Coast Guard is not there.

## FISH OF THE SEASON

By Ellen Addington



### Smalltooth Sawfish

*Pristis Pectinata*

The smalltooth sawfish, a member of the elasmobranch family along with sharks and rays, was added to the endangered species list April 1st of this year by the National Marine Fisheries Service. This means that it is now illegal to capture, injure, collect, or harass sawfishes in the United States, and those who do could face a \$25,000 fine and possible criminal

(Continued on page 4)

## Bycatch Still Plagues Gulf of Mexico

Bycatch is referred to as the unintended fish and other marine life caught "incidentally" in the pursuit of another species. It is usually thrown overboard dead or dying. Every commercial and recreational fishery in the Gulf of Mexico has some level of bycatch. Bycatch can include invertebrates, fish, birds, mammals and turtles (see photo next page). Fish are thrown overboard because they are out of season or not large enough to keep (a regulatory discard) or they are of no value (an economic discard). One example of

bycatch is the estimated 3-4 pounds of sea life thrown overboard for every one pound of shrimp taken by a fishery. The use of escape hatches in shrimp trawl nets has reduced turtle bycatch and allowed some smaller fish, such as red snapper, to escape. Overall, however, in the last twenty-five years fishery managers have done little to reduce bycatch in the nation's fisheries, in part because such steps were not specifically mandated.

(Continued on page 2)

## Bycatch Plans Overdue

*(Continued from page 1)*

In 1996 Congress reauthorized the main fisheries management legislation in the U.S. and required that the federal government report and reduce bycatch in United States fisheries by October 1998. Known as the Sustainable Fisheries Act of 1996 (SFA), this legislation requires that the regional Councils and NOAA Fisheries:



*Photo of turtle killed as bycatch, courtesy of NOAA Fisheries.*

- Establish a standardized reporting method to assess the amount and type of bycatch in managed fisheries
- Adopt conservation measures that minimize bycatch through avoidance
- Minimize the mortality of bycatch that cannot be avoided

Next month will mark five years since that October 1998 deadline. One would expect that wasteful bycatch in United States fisheries would be a thing of the past, but, sadly, that is not the case. Regional Councils and NOAA Fisheries have not systematically considered how to accurately report, avoid, or reduce bycatch. In our region, the Gulf Council has tried twice to come up with an approvable bycatch plan for all of its managed species, and both times the plan was rejected by NOAA Fisheries.

With frustration growing among those interested in conservation of our marine resources, and faced with threats of litigation over the delay, NOAA Fisheries (just this March) unveiled its national strategy to reduce bycatch through fishing gear improvements, standardized reporting, education and outreach. The first step was a series of “regional report cards” that assess progress toward reducing bycatch in each region of U.S. waters. These are completed but still under internal agency review. The second step was the establishment of a National Working Group on Bycatch (NWGB), which is currently developing a national approach to standardized bycatch reporting methodologies.



*After sorting out the shrimp (see basket), the unwanted dead marine life piled beside it will be discarded.*

*Photo courtesy of NOAA Fisheries* guide regional teams in making fishery-specific bycatch recommendations to be implemented at the regional level. The GRN is working to ensure that conservation groups are included as stakeholders in the regional team process, and will update you on developments as this critical plan takes shape.

## NOAA, Council Pass on Fixing EFH/EIS

### Essential Fish Habitat Update

At its July meeting in Naples, Florida, the Gulf Council heard public comment on its draft environmental impact statement (EIS) on essential fish habitat (EFH) in the Gulf of Mexico.

Several members of the conservation community submitted detailed comments and spoke to the Council about the serious deficiencies in the document.

That was on Wednesday. On Thursday, making only a few changes to the document, the Gulf Council voted to recommend approval of the draft EFH EIS and forwarded the document to NOAA Fisheries.

“This process is supposed to help us protect habitat, and it just falls short,” says Alexander Stone, Director of Reefkeeper International.

The clock is now ticking: EPA announced the start of the public comment period on August 29, 2003. If you think that we should be properly protecting the habitats on which our Gulf fish depend, now is the time to speak up.

Please read the enclosed action alert for details, and visit our website to find the comments the GRN has submitted all along the way to improve this EIS.

It is crucial, however, that this national bycatch strategy process not be used as an excuse for more delay. The strategy itself will not save a single fish, sea turtle, bird, or marine mammal this year from being incidentally caught and killed. The regulations or guidelines that could count and reduce bycatch and minimize bycatch deaths as a result of this process are a long way off.

Yet this year our Gulf Council appears to be finalizing a management plan for red snapper that does not address bycatch, despite the clear requirement outlined by Congress in the Sustainable Fisheries Act. In addition, even though vermilion snapper is often caught as bycatch in the red snapper fishery, the upcoming regulatory actions on vermilion will not address bycatch.

## Bycatch . . .

The Council successfully urged NOAA Fisheries not to designate the stock as “overfished,” despite the conclusions of the stock assessment and the reviewing panels. Without this designation, a full plan for vermilion is not required, and efforts to address bycatch will remain beyond the regulatory horizon.



*Jill Jensen Albacore fishing on the Pacific*

## GRN's Jill Jensen Appointed to Shrimp Advisory Panel

This July, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council voted to appoint Jill Jensen, GRN's Assistant Director for Fisheries, to the Shrimp Advisory Panel. In addition to her degree in fisheries science from Oregon State University, Jill brings experience working in fisheries, including the west coast shrimp industry.

This appointment is another important step towards involving all stakeholders in the development management decisions affecting the fish species in the Gulf of Mexico. Environmental organizations working on fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico region bring an important—but too often overlooked—perspective to the process of evaluating the scientific basis for management. “It’s important that conservation organizations be a part of the process from the beginning,” says Jill. “I’m looking forward to working on the advisory panel.”

Congratulations are also in order for Marianne Cufone of the Ocean Conservancy, who was appointed to the Reef Fish Advisory Panel in March; to Pam Baker, who continues to serve on the Ad Hoc Red Snapper Advisory Panel; and to the GRN's own Cynthia Sarthou, who serves on the Habitat Protection Advisory Panel for Mississippi and Louisiana.

The role of advisory panels is to assist the Gulf Council in meeting the requirements of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, including development of and amendments to fishery management plans.

## Deep Corals

“Say ‘coral reef’ and we immediately think of warm, shallow tropical seas. But the fundamental components of coral reefs, the living stony hard corals and feathery soft corals, are not restricted to warm shallow seas or to tropical latitudes.” So says Dr. Kenneth J. Sulak, who recently explored a very different kind of hard coral by diving in a Johnson Sea-Link submersible to over 600 meters off the coast of North Carolina.

In October 2002, in a similar dive off the coast of Mississippi, Sandra Brooke of the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology documented “an expanse of coral thickets comprised of tangled, branching colonies of deep-water *Lophelia* coral.” She reported that “closer inspection revealed many creatures associated with the coral colonies: long-limbed fragile galatheid crabs scavenging amongst the coral polyps, urchins and feathery crinoids nestled amongst the branches, plus a varied assortment of fish.”

As you can see from the photo, *Lophelia pertusa* is pure white. Instead of associating with the photosynthesizing algae that give shallow corals their colors, these deep water corals filter feed off of nutrient-rich currents sweeping up the slopes of the Continental Shelf. Although *Lophelia* colonies have been reported in the deep Gulf of Mexico, the reef discovered in October 2002 is much more extensive than any deep reefs previously reported in this region.

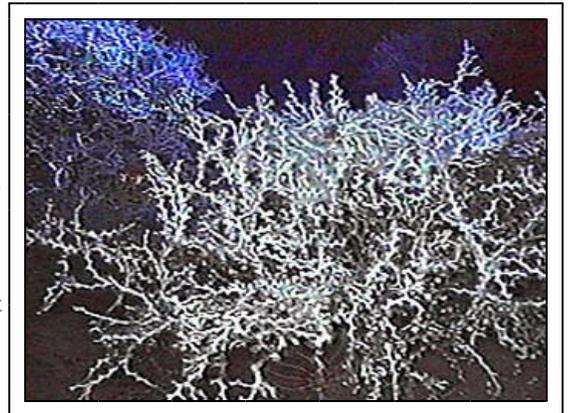
If studies of *Lophelia* reefs discovered off the coasts of South

Carolina and Georgia are any guide, the Gulf of Mexico could be home to reef structures that are 50 to 150 meters high.

These colonies could be growing on dead coral rubble that started forming more than 40,000 years ago.

Because they are slow-growing, and can be easily damaged by oil and gas exploration and deep water trawling, it is essential that the Gulf of Mexico's deep corals be studied and mapped. Fortunately, the Minerals Management Service is embarking on a three-year study that will result in a map of the deeper reaches of the Gulf of Mexico.

As yet there are still many questions to be answered about *Lophelia* in the Gulf of Mexico. Aside from their distribution and formation, scientists are still learning about the diversity of invertebrates, soft corals and fish that are associated with deep reefs in the Gulf. With only a few exploratory dives completed, scientists



*Extensive reefs of the deepwater coral Lophelia near oil platforms off the Mississippi coast.*

*Photo courtesy of NOAA Fisheries*



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



## Smalltooth Sawfish . . .

(Continued from page 1)

charges. Although both Florida and Louisiana prohibited the taking of sawfish years ago to prevent decline, these steps were not enough. In April the sawfish became the first saltwater fish ever to reach endangered status.

The sawfish has a long bill lined with jagged “teeth,” which can get caught in fishing lines and nets and attracts some fishermen who prize the saws as trophies. These fish once ranged in the Atlantic Ocean from New York to Brazil.



Now the U.S. population is found almost exclusively off the coast of Florida, in a small area near the Everglades. Recovery will be a particularly long process and most scientists do not expect quick results. These fish are slow to mature, their numbers are few, and they have low reproduction rates. In addition, there are other hurdles to overcome if the species is to rebound. While gillnets that can easily snag sawfish have been banned in Florida since 1993, nets from commercial trawlers in the Gulf still harm sawfish today. Florida is also considering allowing permits for the incidental take of sawfish by recreational fishermen, which critics say could encourage fishermen to actually target the endangered fish penalty-free.

Mote Marine Laboratories of Florida is doing research to learn more about this sawfish and help NOAA Fisheries develop its recovery plan. If you encounter a sawfish, report it to Mote’s Sawfish Research Team at 1-800-691-6683 or e-mail them at [sawfish@mote.org](mailto:sawfish@mote.org). Include the location, habitat, and size, as well as date of the encounter. If you catch a sawfish, you should do your best to return the animal to the water unharmed.

## Deep Corals in the Gulf . . .

have noted the presence of snowy grouper associated with the *Lophelia* colonies discovered off the coast of Mississippi. Snowy groupers tend to go deeper with maturity and have been found in deep waters off of South Florida. According to NOAA Fisheries, deepwater reef communities form important feeding and spawning habitat for large predators such as snowy grouper.

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[www.oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/02mex-ico/logs/oct08/oct08.html](http://www.oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/02mex-ico/logs/oct08/oct08.html)

Schroeder, W.W. 2002. Observations of *Lophelia pertusa* and the surficial geology at a deep-water site in the northeastern Gulf of Mexico.

### Gulf Council to Meet in Baton Rouge, LA and YOU ARE INVITED!

If you haven’t been to a meeting of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, consider attending. Showing interest in how our public resources are being managed is not only important, but is guaranteed to be informative as well.

**September 8-11, 2003**  
**Baton Rouge Marriott**  
**5500 Hilton Avenue**  
**Baton Rouge, LA**  
**70808**

*For More Information,  
 Call Toll Free  
 888-833-1844*

### Management issues will include:

- ?Rebuilding red snapper populations**
- ?Managing groupers in the Gulf of Mexico**
- ?Assessing bycatch in the shrimp fishery**
- ?Stopping overfishing of vermilion snapper**

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