

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

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Dolphin Tagging Study Extends to Europe

The new European Dolphin Tagging study will attempt to start a tagging effort in the eastern Atlantic Ocean. The project will seek to have dolphin tagged in the Atlantic and Mediterranean off the coast of Spain, eventually including the Canary Islands. One of the goals of this study is to see if any dolphinfish tagged in Eastern Atlantic waters can be recaptured in the Western Atlantic or Caribbean Sea.

This great opportunity came about at the 5th World Recreational Fishing Conference held in 2008 in Dania Beach, Florida. Following the presentation on the finding of the Dolphin Tagging Study, Esteban Graupera and Oriol Ribalta, president and vicepresident of the Spanish Confederation of Responsible Recreational Anglers (see <http://www.pescaresponsable.es/>), asked if the fishermen in Spain could get involved with the program, since they catch large numbers of small dolphin. At the same time, Dr. Gorka Sancho, a fisheries scientist originally from Spain who is teaching at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, expressed an interest in the study.

Some things are just meant to be. Seeing as yours truly does not speak Spanish, the project would need someone who could converse with the fishermen to head up the Spain tagging effort. Dr. Sancho generously volunteered to head up the Eastern Atlantic tagging effort since he would be on sabbatical in Spain from January through June 2009. Dr. Sancho, who studies fish behavioral ecology, is intrigued by the movement behavior of dolphinfish between the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

Working with Esteban Graupera and Oriol Ribalta, Dr. Sancho hopes to speak to several of the offshore fishing

clubs in Spain to enlist as many boats as possible to tag dolphin for the study. Oriol Ribalta reports that anglers will be challenged to get tagged dolphin past commercial fishing vessels in certain areas. Commercial vessels directly target dolphin during the fish's peak fall season off Spain. Much of this fishery centers on the use of fish aggregating devices (FADs) to concentrate the juveniles which allows the use of small purse seines to harvest the entire school. Recreational anglers will have to focus their tagging in areas or at times when commercial fishermen are less likely to recover the fish.

The long-distance movements of dolphin in the eastern North Atlantic are as much a mystery as they are in the western North Atlantic. Thus any information gathered will be new but the real gem will be if a fish tagged in eastern waters is recovered in the western North Atlantic. This would close the last data gap in the hypothesis that dolphinfish will undergo a circum-Atlantic migration.

Beginning a New Year

The Dolphinfish Research Program has completed its third successful year as a private research program studying the dolphinfish's life history. While the high price of fuel and the economic downturn did impact the 2008 research effort, recreational anglers still managed

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to tag 1,367 dolphin for the program. Fishermen reported recovering 27 tagged dolphin in 2008. The recovered fish were tracked a total of 10,400 miles during their cumulative 792 days of liberty. A fish released off Elbow Cay, Bahamas was recovered 350 miles off Nantucket Island, Massachusetts, the northernmost recovery of a tagged dolphin. A fish tagged off South Carolina in 2007 was recovered off Venezuela becoming the southernmost recovery of a tagged dolphin. The 2008 program involved 239 anglers fishing aboard 120 boats who participated by tagging fish or reporting the recovery of a tagged fish. Additionally, 73 new boats were signed up to tag dolphin.

The outstanding accomplishments of the research program were possible only because of the generosity of conservation-minded foundations, recreational fishermen, their organizations, and members of the sport fishing industry. These benefactors contributed \$53,795 in 2008 through the Hilton Head Reef Foundation, a 501(c) (3) organization that receives tax-deductible donations to support the dolphin research.

The target budget for 2009 has been lowered from 2008 to \$51,000. This is possible because of the purchase of additional supplies in 2008 that should carry through 2009. This budget will provide funding to continue the intense tagging in the South Atlantic Bight and an attempt to expand tagging in the Gulf of Mexico and Mid-Atlantic Bight. The project will also strive to involve more vessels fishing in the Caribbean to tag dolphin thus helping to identify routes and origins of dolphin entering U.S. waters. This year's work will be focused on the central Bahamas, the Yucatan Strait and Puerto Rico. The project also plans to continue building the tagging data base to identify East Coast occurrence of dolphinfish, geographic areas of importance to the species and primary recreational fishing grounds. CSS personnel also hope to deploy three of the new miniaturized satellite tags on dolphin in the South Atlantic Bight as part of a study on the essential habitat of dolphinfish that began in 2006.

As you can see, the objectives for the 2009 Dolphinfish Research Program are very ambitious. Not only is the program ambitious . . . it is also a cost-effective research effort. No academic institution or government agency could carry out the same work for the same costs. This program represents a viable alternative that conservation-minded anglers and organizations have at their disposal in addressing important fisheries issues when government cannot or will not respond.

I hope that you will give positive consideration to supporting the CSS Dolphinfish Research Program to ensure this important work continues in 2009. Donations should be made out to the Hilton Head Reef Foundation (HHR Foundation)/Dolphin Study and sent to the address below. Donations are fully tax-deductible.

2008 Accomplishments

1. Involved 239 anglers and 120 sports fishing vessels in dolphinfish research
2. Registered and provided supplies to 73 new vessels to tag dolphin
3. Tagged 1,367 dolphin
4. 27 tagged fish reported recovered
 - a. South Carolina fish recovered off Venezuela more than 2,000 miles distance
 - b. Bahamas fish recovered 45 days later 1,200 miles away in the North Atlantic by Canadian longliner
 - c. A fish went from Marathon, FL to Ocean City, MD, 1,055 miles in 31 days
5. Deployed three Pop-off Archival Satellite Tags on dolphinfish off U.S. East Coast
6. Entered into a program with Duke University school of graduate studies for a masters degree candidate to conduct his research based on the dolphin tagging data base
7. Presented a paper at the 5th World Recreational Fisheries Conference with 23 nations attending
8. Established a dolphin tagging initiative in Puerto Rico
9. Collaborated with Smithsonian Tropical Research Station in Panama to set up Pacific dolphin tagging program
10. Public Relations:
 - a. Talks – Ten presentations made to fishing clubs, conservation organizations, and sport fishing functions
 - b. Printed Media – At least eleven articles appeared in major coastal newspaper reporting on the program with an additional nine articles appearing in regional and national saltwater sport fishing magazines
 - c. Electronic Media
 - i. May 29, Joe Albia – participated in filming a show for the Carolina Outdoor Adventures, North Carolina ETV
 - ii. December 5, Richard Christiansen – participated in live talk show for Live From Club Nautico San Juan, PR – a talk radio program

**Donations to the Dolphin Study are
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11. Produced promotional Dolphinfish Research Program decal for boats and cars
12. Updated Web Site
 - a. Updated "About the Program" and "How to Tag" pages
 - b. Authored a new report detailing recorded movements and migrations
 - c. Prepared report on changes in U.S. Atlantic and Gulf dolphin fisheries
13. Addressed South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council on changes in the U.S. recreational dolphin fishery

Send in Your Favorite Tagging Photos

The Dolphinfish Research Program would like to have your favorite photo of tagging dolphin or trophy dolphin that you have caught, especially those caught by women and children. These photos will be used in the newsletter and other publications of the program. High resolution digital images in at least 1MB file size should be e-mailed to the program at the e-mail address shown below. Please provide the names of all people in the pictures and a narrative about the scene.

Taggers Needed

Recreational anglers fishing the North Atlantic, Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico for dolphinfish are always welcome to join in the tagging effort. This study learned early that fishermen are continuously entering and dropping out of the highly demanding sport of offshore big game fishing. For this reason new taggers are always needed, even in the South Atlantic Bight region where most of the active taggers currently fish.

This study has a real shortage of recreational fishermen tagging dolphinfish in the **Mid-Atlantic Bight**, North Carolina to Massachusetts, **Gulf of Mexico** and throughout the **Caribbean Sea**. If you know of someone who fishes these waters and is genuinely interested in helping to further fisheries conservation, speak to them about participating in this study and learning how they can help provide valuable information on this great game fish. This study has already shown that dolphinfish behavior varies from region to region, and this is one way that fishermen can learn more about fish in their specific area.

Tagging fish for science is not for everyone. Not only does it require that you throw back some of your hard-earned fish but there is follow-up paperwork that is just as important as tagging and releasing the fish. Many anglers get very limited time on the water and do not want to give up any relaxation time to doing paperwork.



A young dolphin, approximately 1.5 inches long, displays its iridescent brilliance under the transom lights of the sports fishing vessel Summer Girl during a nighttime swordfish trip off Charleston, South Carolina.

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