

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

February 2014



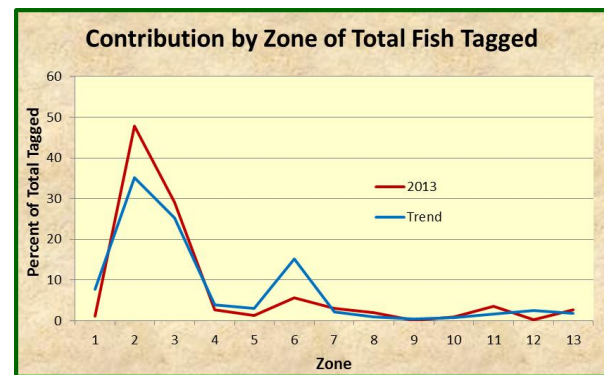
2013 Tagging Effort

For a year that got off to a very slow start, 2013 wound up finishing strong. With 1,369 dolphin marked, the year's tagging activity was higher than in the previous two years, falling in the middle among all of the years of the dolphin study. A majority of charter boat captains responding to a survey indicated that the dolphin showed up one to two months later than normal, which goes along with the two-month lag shown in the tagging activity in 2013.

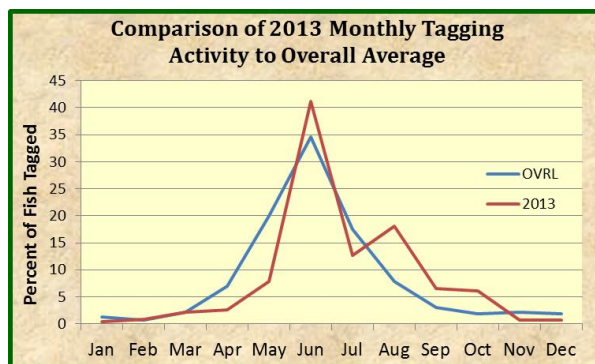
Tagging got off to a slow start with activity in April and May, falling far below the average tagging level seen over the course of this study (see figure below). Over the years, 31 percent of the dolphin tagged in a year are tagged by the end of May, but in 2013 only 14 percent of the tagging occurred in the first five months. Fortunately, the fish showed up strong in June, with the tagging level reflecting

this by rising to the fourth-highest number tagged during June. This surge was led by anglers in the Florida Keys, who released more than 450 fish in June. While tagging in July slipped to below average, the activity in August, September and October was above average helping to make up for the shortfall in the spring.

The number of fish tagged in each zone during 2013 roughly followed the proportional contribution established over the course of this study (see following figure). Taggers in the Florida Keys and south Florida continue to provide the majority of the fish tagged in 2013, in this case 77 percent. This is 10 percent more than they normally provide which offset the 10 percent decline in the fish tagged in Zone 6 off South Carolina. Tagging in the Bahamas was well below the average for this important area with declines also seen off Florida's northeastern coast, Georgia, southern South Carolina, Virginia, and the northern coast of Puerto Rico. Modest gains were seen in the number of fish being tagged off North Carolina, the northern section of the Mid-Atlantic Bight, Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. While small, these gains are in areas of high importance where very little movement information has been gathered on dolphinfish.



The three zones, 2, 3, and 6, that have historically seen the most fish tagged, continued to maintain their roles in 2013.



A comparison of the percent of the fish tagged in 2013 by month (red line) to the overall average contribution (blue line) shows a two-month lag in the level of tagging activity.

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The late arrival of the school dolphin indicated by the majority of the responses to the survey conducted by the DRP would account for the low tagging levels seen in April and May. After all, few anglers are willing to tag and release large dolphin, making the availability of small, sub-legal dolphin essential to getting dolphin tagged. Similarly, the very low abundance of all sizes of dolphin off Puerto Rico's north coast from October through December 2013 resulted in fewer than five fish being tagged. This follows on the heels of the January through April 2013 period when only large dolphin were present off Puerto Rico's north coast.

Now the question is whether a surge of dolphin will show up later than usual off Puerto Rico's north coast and what kind of dolphin season will Puerto Rico's south coast experience? If both of these areas end up experiencing a poor year for dolphin fishing, then what will the U.S. East Coast fishery be like in 2014?

2013 Tagging Participation

A total of 93 boats participated in tagging dolphin during 2013. More anglers than the 160 that were indicated as providing fish for tagging participated, since many of the charter captains did not record the anglers catching the fish on their vessels.

Out of the 93 boats actively tagging in 2013, 49 percent (46 vessels) were first-time taggers, an unusually high number. These first-timers provided 25 percent of the fish tagged, 347. Five of these first-time vessels tagged ten or more fish with the top vessel, Capt. Jack Conroy's *Its A Keeper*, based in the Florida Keys marking 128 fish. This is an unusually strong showing for boats participating their first year. The steady recruitment of new participants in this scientific program shows the broad appeal that dolphinfish have among offshore anglers and their concern for the future of the stock.

There were 28 boats whose crews tagged ten or more fish, earning their captains free DRP T-shirt. These vessels marked and released 86 percent, 1,150 fish, of the fish tagged in 2013. Two of these boats fished in the Gulf of Mexico, one off South Carolina, two off North Carolina, one off Puerto Rico, with the remaining boats fishing off the east coast of Florida.

A total 51 anglers provided five or more fish for tagging, qualifying them for free DRP T-shirts. Twenty-six of these anglers provided ten or more fish with the top angler producing 103 fish for tagging. These top anglers provided 51 percent, 703, of the total fish tagged in 2013. This shows that a few anglers can make a major contribution to a scientific study.

Tagging Progress by Zones, December 31, 2013.

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22° N	28° N	16
2	FL Straits	23° N	25° N	655
3	South Florida	25° N	27° N	398
4	Central Florida	27° N	30° N	36
5	North FL & GA	30° N	32° N	18
6	Southern SC	32° N	33° N	77
7	N. SC - S. NC	33° N	35° N	42
8	Northern NC	35° N	36.5° N	26
9	Virginia	36.5° N	38° N	0
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38° N		13
11	Gulf of Mexico			48
12	W Central Atlantic			4
13	Caribbean Sea			36
	Total			1369

Year-End Awards Provided By:



2013 Top Taggers

Thanks to the generous donations by **Haddrell's Point Tackle Shop** of Mt. Pleasant and Charleston, South Carolina, **Star Rods** a division of BRS Sea Striker Tackle of Morehead City, North Carolina, and **Costa Del Mar** based in Daytona Beach, Florida, the Dolphinfish Research Program is able to reward the year's top taggers with some top quality prizes. The winners of the top overall taggers in the private and charter divisions will receive a Star Handcrafted standup rod with a TLD50 2 speed reel. The top boat in the four regional divisions (Mid-Atlantic Bight, South Atlantic Bight, Gulf of Mexico and the Bahamas/Caribbean) will receive a Star Handcrafted standup rod with a TLD30 2 speed reel. Second place taggers in the regional divisions will receive a special Costa Del Mar gift package that will include the recipient's choice of a pair of Costa's famous sunglasses.

A total of 18 boat crews tagged the necessary 20 fish to qualify to receive the year-end awards. All but one of these

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boat crews fished in the South Atlantic Bight or the Gulf of Mexico. The one exception was a crew that fished in the Caribbean off Puerto Rico headed by Wessley Merten, a PhD student at the University of Puerto Rico who is working with the DRP as part of his studies, which makes him ineligible for the awards (sorry, Wess). Unfortunately, no other boats tagged enough dolphin to qualify for the year-end merchandise in the Bahamas/Caribbean or in the Mid-Atlantic Bight, resulting in four awards being left on the table for 2013.

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For More Information, Contact

Don Hammond
Dolphinfish Research Program
Cooperative Science Services, LLC
961 Anchor Rd., Charleston, SC 29412
Telephone – FAX (843) 795-7524
Email CSSLLC@bellsouth.net
Web site www.dolphintagging.com



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