

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

Made possible by a grant from Marine Ventures Foundation

March 2009



Origin of Mahi Mahi Eaten in U.S.

Where did your last meal of dolphinfish originate? Ever think about it?

If you are one of the recreational fishermen who harvest part of the 13.5 million pounds harvested by sport fishermen in 2007, then you know precisely the origin of your 2007 seafood. But if you are one of the millions of non-offshore anglers who enjoyed dining on dolphinfish in 2007, the odds are you have no idea where the fish was caught. In 2007 the U.S. imported frozen dolphin fillets from 23 nations around the world.

More than 36.4 million pounds of dolphin fillets entered the U.S. commercial market in 2007. U.S. commercial fishermen contributed only 0.84 million pounds of drawn fish (gutted) or about 0.29 million pounds of fillets which represents only 0.8% of the total pounds sold. The remaining 36.1 million pounds were imported from counties as far away as China and Vietnam to as close as Mexico and Canada. An important fact in this commercial market is that the vast majority were harvested from the Pacific Ocean.

The top five nations exporting dolphin fillets into the U.S. in 2007 accounted for 94% of all imports, 34.2 million pounds. The top five exporters in descending order were China, Ecuador, Peru, Vietnam and Panama. Only Panama has a possible link to harvesting Atlantic stock dolphin but its commercial fisheries are overwhelmingly centered on their Pacific coast.

Several other countries in Central and South America also sold dolphin to the U.S. with some located solely or primarily on the Atlantic/Caribbean coast. These include Costa Rico, Mexico, Chile, Honduras, Nicaragua and Brazil. Nicaragua and Brazil only border the

Atlantic/Caribbean while Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica have coasts on both Atlantic/Caribbean and Pacific sides.

Several points should be noted. The first is the popularity of dolphinfish within the U.S. seafood market. This large demand would indicate that the U.S. commercial market would most likely support, if not welcome, an increased domestic harvest. There is growing concern over the health issues of methyl mercury in fish, which has been shown to be more of a problem in long lived-fish. The short-lived mahi may grow in popularity in the marketplace because of this issue. However, the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council placed an annual cap of 1.5 million pounds or 13% of the total (recreational plus commercial) harvest for the commercial sector for the U.S. domestic Atlantic coast fishery in the management plan. In recent years the Atlantic commercial landings have been 40 to 80% of the allowed harvest. So while there is room for the Atlantic domestic commercial fishery to grow, there is a cap in place to limit its impact. Understand that just because the dolphin are not being sold to the U.S. does not mean that there is not an active commercial industry in the Caribbean and other parts of the Western North Atlantic.

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The second point is that the vast majority (95% or more) of all mahi sold in the U.S. is from the Pacific stock(s). This may be a saving grace for the Atlantic stock, but its impact on the Pacific population is unknown. In particular the growing commercial fishery along the west coast of Central and South America from Costa Rica to Peru is attracting more attention from both the commercial fishing industry and fishery conservationists. The growing commercial interest in dolphin is a subject that should be watched closely.



Amanda Carpenter displays one of several pompano dolphin that she and her husband caught March 10, 2009, in the Gulf of Mexico.

Pompano Dolphin Caught in the Gulf

During a recent March fishing trip 27 miles south of Destin, Florida, Amanda Carpenter and her husband got in to a school of peanut dolphin. After catching a few of the small dolphin and with several lying on the deck they realized that some fish appeared to be different from the others.

Mrs. Carpenter remembered reading about pompano dolphin on the Dolphinfish Research Program Web site. So she wisely took some good photographs of the dolphin showing full broadside profiles. Checking the Web site's information about how to identify the pompano, Mrs. Carpenter still was not 100% convinced so she contacted the Dolphinfish Research Program.

Because of her good photos, it was easy to confirm that the fish featured in two of them were definitely pompano dolphin. The clear view of the anal fin showed the absence of elongated rays at its origin and the typical white border along its edge possessed by pompanos. These fish are the first confirmation of pompano dolphin in the Gulf of Mexico received by the Dolphinfish Research Program.

Anglers who think that they may have caught a pompano dolphin are encouraged to report their catch. However, these reports need to be accompanied by good quality photos showing a full side profile that gives a clear view of the anal fin. These digital photos should be at least 1MB in size. Please provide the date, location

(GPS position preferred) where the fish was caught and a fork length of the fish. For information on how to identify pompano dolphin, visit the program's Web page on dolphinfish identification.

Dolphin Tagging Progress by Zones, February 28, 2009.

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22N	28N	14
2	FL Straits	23N	25N	
3	South Florida	25N	27N	5
4	Central Florida	27N	30N	2
5	North FL & GA	30N	32N	
6	Southern SC	32N	33N	
7	N. SC - S. NC	33N	35N	
8	Northern NC	35N	36.5N	
9	Virginia	36.5N	38N	
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38N		
11	Gulf of Mexico			
12	W Central Atlantic			12
13	Caribbean Sea			5
	Total			38

Donations Lag Behind

There is no question that the economy is having a major effect on the Dolphinfish Research Program. In 2008 the number of fish tagged dropped below the annual average largely because the high price of fuel reduced the number of fishing trips made. Now the sluggish economy is affecting the financial support of the research program.

Financial contributions in the first three months of this year have fallen off more than 50% from the same period last year. Last year more than \$18,000 was received during this time, while a little more than \$8,000 has been received this year.

The most notable absences in donations have been the long-term contributors of \$1,000. These donors have carried a large portion of the program in past years. However, I am fully aware that some people and businesses may not be able to donate as much this year as in years past. It is important to donate what you are able. If every regular dolphin fishermen contributed \$25 to the study, I could expand the scope of the research.

The outstanding accomplishments of the research program have been possible only because of the generosity of conservation-minded foundations, recreational fishermen, their organizations, and members of the sport fishing industry. The future of this research program rests with the recreational fishermen.

**Donations to the Dolphin Study are
Fully Tax-Deductible
Make checks out to:
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Juvenile Dolphin Photos and Sightings

The Dolphinfish Research Program (DRP) is seeking information on the occurrence of juvenile dolphin, fish up to 12 inches fork length. Fishermen are asked to report their sightings of schools of small dolphinfish to the DRP. Anglers should report the size of the fish, GPS location of the fish, date, and whether Sargassum or other floating objects were present. (Small dolphin are suckers for sabiki rigs.) A high-resolution digital image of the fish of at least 1MB file size should be e-mailed to the program to confirm the species identification. The photo should show a full side profile of the fish.

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.



The crew of Tim Heiser's boat, Irish Wake, displays a juvenile dolphin they caught during an August 2008 fishing trip off Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Note the blue spots at the base of the dorsal fin. These are a key to identifying young dolphin.

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