

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

Made possible by a grant from Marine Ventures Foundation

November 2008



Dolphin Tagging Study Shines

Anglers taking part in the Dolphinfish Research Program deserve a pat on the back for the job that they have done. Fishery managers and researchers from all over the world are impressed by the extensive documentation of dolphin movements in the North Atlantic Ocean achieved by this program.

I presented a talk on the findings of the study to attendees of the 5th World Recreational Fisheries Conference hosted by the International Game Fish Association in Dania Beach, Florida during November. It was one of just a few research reports that demonstrated the great accomplishments science can make when it partners with recreational fishermen. Researchers and managers alike were impressed by the number of anglers volunteering to tag fish and the wide regional and international support the program has received.

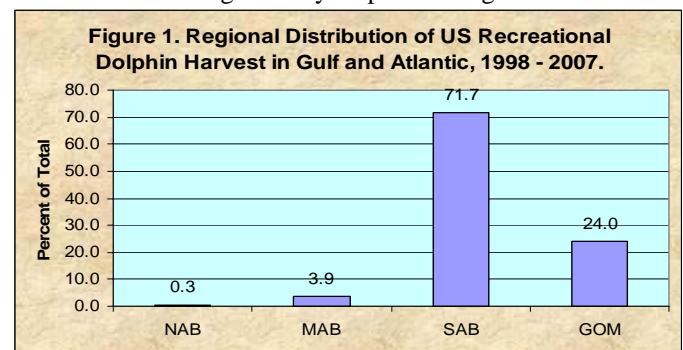
With representatives from 22 nations attending the conference, it was one of the largest gatherings of recreational fisheries researchers ever held. New contacts made at this meeting may lead to extensive expansion of the Dolphinfish Research Program along with the addition of new research dimensions.

Players in the U.S. Dolphinfish Fishery

It has come to my attention that most U. S. recreational anglers who pursue dolphin in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic coast know very little about who in the U.S. also chases the same fish. So, to answer this question I am once again turning to the national recreational fishing survey, the Marine Recreational Fishing Statistical Survey. This National Marine Fisheries Service' program indicates that dolphinfish are

caught by anglers from Massachusetts to Louisiana. Data from Texas recreational fisheries do not exist in the MRFSS data base, but I can tell you that dolphin have been tagged off Texas for this study. The last 10 years of data will be examined to make this information as relevant as possible to today's fishing.

The first question concerns the U.S. recreational landings from each major coastal region. Figure 1 shows that the North Atlantic Bight (NAB), Rhode Island northward harvests the least, contributing only 0.3%. The Mid-Atlantic Bight (MAB) was responsible for only 3.9% of the total harvest. It was the South Atlantic Bight (SAB) that grabbed the lion's share, producing 71.7% of the total catch during the 10-year period. Anglers in the



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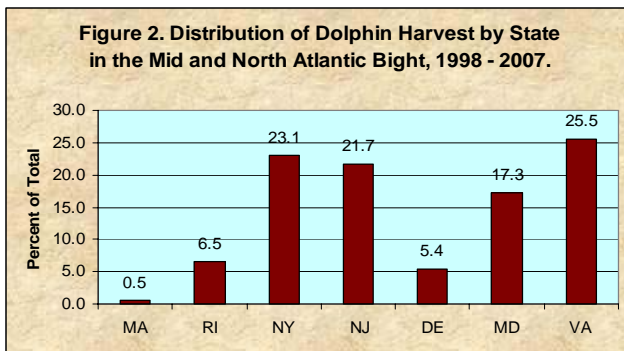
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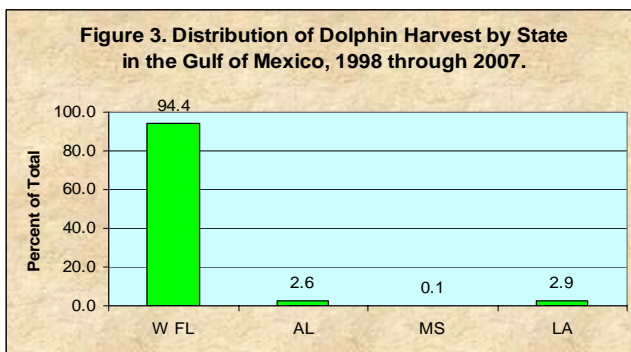
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Gulf of Mexico (GOM) accounted for the second highest proportion of the harvest with 24% of the catch. This means that the anglers in those states and comprising the SAB and the GOM have the most to gain or lose, depending on the health of the dolphinfish stock. However, the harvest is not spread equally among states.

Since only two states, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, recorded the only catches of dolphinfish in the NAB, they will be included with the MAB for closer examination (Figure 2). The graph shows that Virginia, New York, New Jersey and Maryland are the big players in the northern range for the East Coast dolphinfishery, accounting for 93% of the fish landed in the region. Remember, this area only produces 4.2% of the total catch.

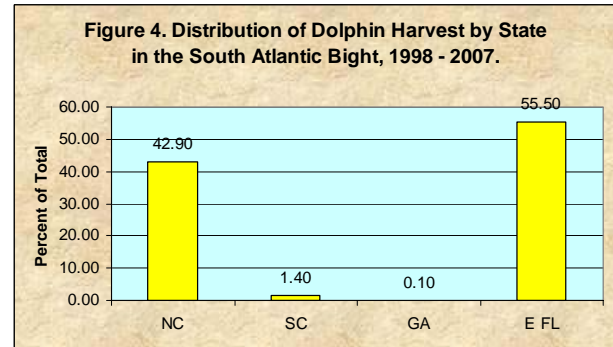


A good quantitative look at the recreational harvest in the Gulf of Mexico is not possible from the MRFSS because of the absence of Texas from the data base. However, the picture that we do have, figure 3, shows Florida's west coast harvesting the greatest share of the Gulf's dolphinfish, producing more than 94% of the total landings. The meager leftover catch is roughly evenly divided between Alabama and Louisiana with Mississippi barely registering on the graph.



As stated many times by this program, the states making up the SAB receive the most benefit of a healthy dolphin stock, harvesting more than 71% of all dolphin landed in U.S. Gulf and Atlantic waters. Anglers on the east coast of Florida edged out North Carolina fishermen

to claim the largest share of the harvest during this 10-year period at 55%, with Tar Heel anglers close behind, accounting for 43% of the dolphin harvest (Figure 4). While South Carolina and Georgia offshore recreational anglers will argue that they have a good dolphin fishery, the fact is these fishers are responsible for a meager 1.4 and 0.1 % of the total SAB harvest, respectively.



Looking at the big picture of the recreational dolphinfish fisheries of the U.S. Gulf and Atlantic waters, it is Florida that stands out as the primary consumer (Table 1). When Florida's two coasts are combined, anglers in the Sunshine State are responsible for more than 62% of the total harvest. North Carolina fishermen harvested the second highest proportion of dolphin, accounting for almost 31% of the total landings. Only three of the remaining coastal states, New York, Virginia and South Carolina, produce 1.0% or more of the recreational dolphin harvest.

Table 1. Distribution of total recreational dolphin harvest from U.S. Gulf and Atlantic waters, 1998 through 2007.

State	% of Total	State	% of Total
MA	0.02	GA	0.10
RI	0.28	SC	1.00
DE	0.24	E FL	39.80
MD	0.76	W FL	22.65
NJ	0.95	AL	0.62
NY	1.02	MS	0.03
VA	1.12	LA	0.69
NC	30.70		

A state's share in the dolphin fishery is a function of two primary factors: the state's proximity to the warm offshore currents inhabited by dolphin and the size of the offshore recreational fishing fleet. Just as the North Carolina recreational offshore fleet has grown during the past five years, harvesting an increased proportion of the dolphin landings, so will other coastal states' offshore fisheries. The question will become how much increase in fishing effort can the dolphin stocks withstand before declining.

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Dolphin Tagging Progress by Zones, October 31, 2008

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22N	28N	193
2	FL Straits	23N	25N	343
3	South Florida	25N	27N	537
4	Central Florida	27N	30N	35
5	North FL & GA	30N	32N	48
6	Southern SC	32N	33N	90
7	N. SC - S. NC	33N	35N	17
8	Northern NC	35N	36.5N	10
9	Virginia	36.5N	38N	8
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38N		4
11	Gulf of Mexico			17
12	W Central Atlantic			2
13	Caribbean Sea			3
	Total			1307

Year-end Incentive Awards



Through the generosity of Shimano Fishing Tackle and the Don Coffey Company and Star Rods and the Sea Striker Fishing Tackle Company, the Dolphin Tagging Study can offer four year-end awards. In addition to giving a Shimano TLD50 2 speed on a standup Star Rod for the most dolphin tagged by a private boat, charter boat and individual angler, a rod and reel will also be given to the boat tagging the most dolphin in areas other than off the east coast of Florida.

This is being done for two reasons. First, Florida anglers enjoy a distinct advantage with a longer season of high abundance and a much shorter ride to the fishing grounds than most other areas on the east and Gulf coasts. Secondly, it is imperative that large numbers of dolphin are tagged in the Mid-Atlantic Bight, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea so that information about the movement behavior unique to dolphin in those areas can be gathered.

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