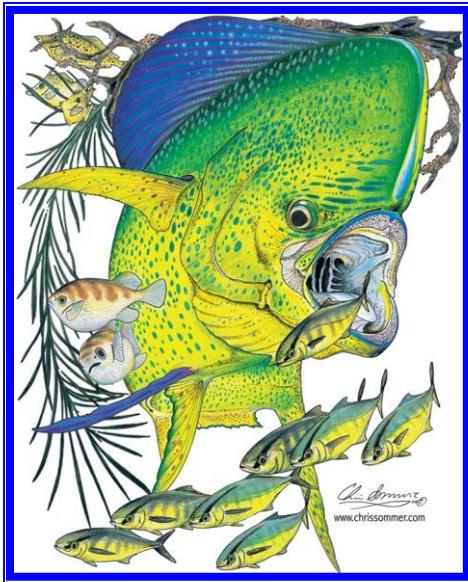


Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

October 2014



Once again, anglers fishing with Capt. Bouncer Smith off Miami, Florida, demonstrate their willingness to release trophy-size dolphinfish after a little education and encouragement from Bouncer. Photo by R. Smith.

Banner Year for Tagging

What started out as a good year for tagging dolphinfish turned into an exceptional year. The number of dolphinfish reported tagged through August 31, 2014, is 1,771 fish. This exceeds the number tagged in 2010, 1,754, which was the second-highest number of fish tagged in the program in one year. Current fishing reports have good numbers of small dolphinfish showing up early off Antigua, the Virgin Islands, and the western end of Puerto Rico, which could indicate a banner tagging season is coming to the tropics. It is doubtful that 2014 will challenge the record number set in 2007 of 2,474 fish tagged.

Anglers fishing off the Florida Keys (zone 2) were the most active in tagging dolphinfish in 2014, marking 770 fish so far. South Florida anglers from Jupiter Inlet to Key Largo (zone 3) have also had an outstanding year, tagging 601 fish as of the end of August. This is the second-highest number of fish marked in a single year in these two areas. Tagging in these areas during April and May was on par with previous years but during June tagging exploded and carried over into July. August has also seen above-average tagging in these areas as well.

Tagging in other areas has not been as active. Tagging in the Bahamas (zone 1) has suffered from the loss of participation by U.S. civil service workers on Andros Island. While the 2014 activity exceeded the number of fish marked in the past three years, it is still well below the average of 100 fish tagged each year. Fishermen from Jupiter to St. Augustine, Florida, zone 4, have tagged fewer than half of their average number of fish. Similarly, anglers from St. Augustine, Florida, up to Georgetown, South Carolina, zones 5 and 6, have tagged only one-third the number of dolphinfish as they usually do.

The story changes in North Carolina, zones 7 and 8. Fishermen from north of Georgetown, South Carolina, to the

Virginia line tagged more than twice as many dolphinfish as normal, though the number is still below the 100 mark. The vast majority of these fish were tagged just south of the Cape Hatteras shoal off the Outer Banks.

Anglers fishing the Mid-Atlantic Bight, Virginia through New York, zones 9 and 10, have historically tagged few dolphinfish, largely because they do not catch that many. This region typically only accounts for only five to six percent of the dolphinfish caught recreationally off the U.S. Atlantic seaboard. During the course of this study MAB anglers have tagged an average of 16 fish each year. 2014 has been one of their better years, but they have a long way to go to have meaningful numbers being tagged.

The Gulf of Mexico, zone 11, has been a bright spot from the standpoint of growing activity. This major dolphinfish fishing region has been slow to get involved with tagging dolphinfish, averaging only 25 fish marked each year. Understand that the Gulf Fisheries Management Council has stated that there is no indication that dolphinfish are overfished in the Gulf and therefore should not be managed. With this mentality

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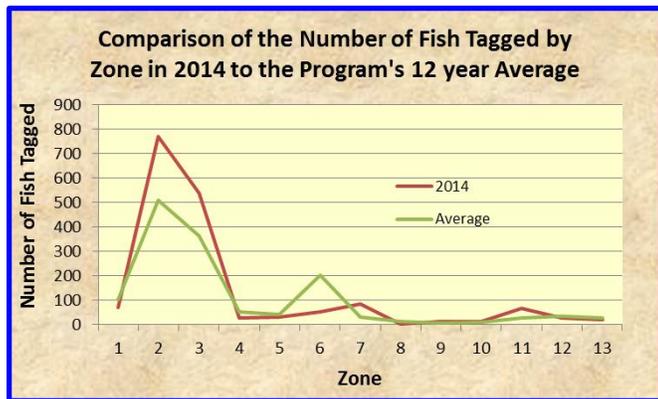
GRADY-WHITE BOATS



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Graphed out, the 2014 tagging activity shows where the fishermen have been aggressively marking and releasing dolphin.

displayed by the fishery experts, it is no wonder that few fishermen are concerned enough to throw back fish with tags. More Gulf anglers are needed to tag to get the number of fish marked up to a meaningful level of several hundred fish each year.

Persuading fishermen in the tropical region of the western north Atlantic (WNA) and Caribbean Sea, islands bordering the northern sections of the Caribbean Sea (zone 12 and 13), to release some of their dolphin has been difficult. Thanks to the efforts of Wess Merten when he was in graduate school at



September 2014 ocean currents are carrying large mats of Sargassum into the northeastern Caribbean Sea as well as the Old Bahamas' Channel off the north shores of the northern islands. Mats, like the one shown above, are bringing with them large schools of small to medium dolphin. Photo by G. Hernandez.

The Dolphinfish Research Program needs your financial support. No federal funds support this important research. This program exists because of private donations.

Dolphin Tagging Progress, August 31, 2014.

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22° N	28° N	68
2	FL Straits	23° N	25° N	770
3	South Florida	25° N	27° N	601
4	Central Florida	27° N	30° N	25
5	North FL & GA	30° N	32° N	29
6	Southern SC	32° N	33° N	53
7	N. SC - S. NC	33° N	35° N	89
8	Northern NC	35° N	36.5° N	0
9	Virginia	36.5° N	38° N	12
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38° N		11
11	Gulf of Mexico			66
12	W Central Atlantic			27
13	Caribbean Sea			20
	Total			1771

the University of Puerto Rico, anglers all over the island signed up to tag dolphin. His success on Puerto Rico has led to anglers on other islands to sign up to tag.

While the current tagging activity is slightly below the annual average of 57 fish, their 2014 fishing season is just getting under way. The 2013 dolphin season in the WNA and Caribbean was one of the worst in recent history. However, the 2014 season is offering hints of a great season with good numbers small and medium size fish showing up under large mats of Sargassum a month early.

This year has already been an above average, with more than 1,700 tags already placed in fish and 41 tagged fish (annual average of 39) reported recovered. This leaves a lot of tagged fish out there that we hope will survive to make it to the southern tropics this winter where some will be recovered. The high number of fish tagged in July and August, 467 fish, should also enhance the odds on fish being recovered on their wintering grounds.

And Even More Recaptures

There are three more very interesting recaptures to report, coming from widely separated areas: Miami, Florida, Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, and St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. These recoveries bring the total for the year to 41.

The first fish recovered was tagged by Cynetha Lee while fishing aboard Don Gates boat the *Killin Time II* off Cudjoe Key, Florida on June 11, 2014. The fish was recovered 914 miles to the north, off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, by Jimmy Hillsman, mate aboard the charter boat *High Return*. Recovered 63 days following its release, the fish traveled at an average rate of 14.5 miles per day. This is just over half the speed that Florida fish traveling to North Carolina normally exhibit.

The second tag recovery also originated in the Keys. Norm Brown tagged the fish off Islamorada, Florida, while fishing

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aboard William Pomenti's boat *Scungilli* on August 15, 2014. It was recovered by Rick Muller off Miami, Florida, just one day later while fishing on the *II Enjoy*. It had covered an amazing 77.1 miles during its brief liberty, which is the second-fastest speed for a dolphin recaptured this year. The fastest fish this year covered 104 miles from one day to the next.

The third recovery, coming from St Thomas, presented the opposite behavior of the previous fish. It was in no hurry to go anywhere. Tagged by Steve Gross off St. John's, Virgin Islands, during a July 29, 2014, fishing trip aboard the charter boat *World Class Angler*, the fish was at liberty of 21 days, during which it moved only 12.6 miles. It was recaptured by Capt. Tyler Maltby aboard the St. Thomas charter boat *Double Header*. This fish showed a rate of travel of only 0.6 mile per day; in other words, it was lingering in the area or it was traveling in circles in an ocean eddy.

Financial Support Needed

The Dolphinfish Research Program is a research effort by fishermen for fishermen. The 2014 program has been amazingly successful in tagging dolphin in the Atlantic and Caribbean. Reports of tag recoveries have been higher than normal and have provided new insight into the amazing movements of dolphin. Fishermen as well as fishery management personnel who have heard talks on the results of the study are impressed by the success of the program in revealing important facets of dolphin life history.

This program needs your help to continue. It does not receive any government funding, relying on private donations for its financial support. It is private fishermen, fishing organizations, and businesses that have provided the funding to allow this research to continue. The DRP works in concert with the Hilton Head Reef Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) organization, which allows all donations to be fully tax deductible.

While the 2014 tagging and recapture activities have soared, financial support has fallen to its lowest point. Please consider making a donation to keep this important and highly successful research program operating. The dolphinfish stock is too important to the recreational fishery to wait until the stock is overfished to begin collecting needed information. Checks should be made out to Reef Foundation/Dolphin Study and sent to the DRP office at the address shown at the end of this newsletter.



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