

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

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October 2016



2017, the Acid Test for Dolphinfish

The 2017 fishing season could be the acid test of the resilience of dolphinfish to withstand heavy fishing pressure. The 2016 spring dolphin fishing season along the U.S. East Coast arrived early, featured some excellent fishing for 15-to 25-pound fish, but was rather abbreviated except off North Carolina. The scary part of the 2016 season was that the young-of-the-year (YOY) school fish did not show up in good numbers after the gaffer dolphin had left.

The normal sequence of events in the annual dolphin season is for the YOY fish to come flooding into the area after the larger dolphin have left the area. Large schools of these voracious little fish provide fun and excitement for anglers that sustain the charter boats off southeastern Florida and the Outer Banks of North Carolina throughout the summer. This year has seen a trickle of YOY dolphin showing up late and in very low numbers. The story only gets worse when you talk to anglers in the Gulf of Mexico, which is known for its large schools of very small dolphin, and they say that the small fish are not in their waters either.

The critical issue: these YOY fish form the population segment that is responsible for the spring gaffer dolphin along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf coasts the next year. I think everyone can understand that you have to have baby fish to get big fish. Without a strong run of YOY fish this year, what kind of fishing season will we see next year?

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



In 2017 will dolphin be under that beautiful grass line you see up ahead? Photo by E. Kattel.

If this stock of fish existed solely in U.S. territorial waters, we would have a very serious situation at hand. However, with dolphinfish, as with other highly migratory species, there is a large part of their life that we know little about. We know that these fish utilize and even circumnavigate the Sargasso Sea, riding the ocean's many currents as far south as the Caribbean Sea. This migratory route encompasses a vast area that could harbor large numbers of dolphinfish that would normally have traveled to the U.S. coasts but for some reason did not.

Changes in the circulation pattern of the western North Atlantic Ocean could precipitate such a change. It could be something more sinister, such as a latent effect from the Deep Water Horizon oil spill. Has that toxic cloud that has been growing in the Gulf of Mexico reached critical mass for larval dolphin? We do not know.

The optimistic view of this event would be that we could have an excellent dolphin fishing year in 2017. This would support the long-held belief that the dolphin stock is bulletproof and cannot be overfished. The fact that dolphinfish have no restriction on their harvest in the Gulf, shows that this sentiment is held by the Gulf coast states except for Florida.

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Young-of-the-year dolphin make up more than 99 percent of the fish tagged each year. Photo by D. Gates.

Effect of Small Fish's Absence on Tagging

Fishermen made it very clear in 2016 that they do not tag big dolphin, those over 30 inches in fork length. I have spoken with many of my more active taggers who have said that they have not caught any fish small enough to tag. Fewer than two dozen dolphin over 30 inches in length have been tagged in 2016 as of the end of July, and half of these fish were tagged by one person, Capt. Bouncer Smith of Miami, Florida. Many of the fishermen who have been the top taggers year after year, tagging from 50 to more than 300 fish during the month of June, have reported tagging fewer than a dozen fish in 2016. Everyone said that their lack of tagging fish was not because of a lack of effort. Each one reported that they could not find any small fish.

So what does this mean for the 2016 tagging study? It means that fewer fish have been tagged in 2016 than any year previously, with the exception of the very first year when few fishermen were participating. This year only 349 fish had been reported tagged by the end of July. Other than the first year, 2012 had been the low point in the number of fish tagged by the end of July with 621 dolphin marked and released. Over the duration of this study an average of more than 1,400 dolphin have been tagged each year by the end of July. The number of fish tagged during the first seven months of the year has accounted for an average of 80 percent of the total number of fish tagged for the year. The most fish tagged in a year after July was in 2012, when 46 percent of the fish tagged that year occurred in the last five months, 537 fish.

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Another perplexing part of the 2016 season is that 24 tagged fish have been reported recovered. Five of the recoveries involved fish tagged in 2015, which survived over the winter before being recaptured. Disregarding these five, a total of 19 fish tagged in 2016 have been reported recovered. This translates to a 5.44 percent recovery rate for this year's fish, which is twice the average annual recovery rate for this study. Does a smaller population of fish translate into a greater likelihood for a tagged fish to be recaptured?

The 2016 dolphin fishing season is the first year in the 15-year study by the DRP to show a significant change in the movement of large dolphin and the abundance of young-of-the-year fish. This is great science, but most likely not the kind that fishermen want to see.

The Invisible Staff

The Dolphinfish Research Program has been conducting research on dolphinfish for fifteen years. During this time it has reported its amazing findings in 149 electronic newsletters, in several online reports, and on its Web site. The success this program has enjoyed has been due in a large part to several long-term friends who assist me behind the scenes.



Jim Goller of Beaufort, South Carolina, who operates jgNetWorks, set up and has maintained the DRP Web site at no cost to the program. Like me, Jim is retired from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources where he was the promotion

and marketing manager for the Information Office of the DNR. He also serves as the executive director of the Harry Hampton Memorial Wildlife Fund, a 501 (c) (3) organization that raises private funds to conduct work in concert with SC DNR for better environmental education and wildlife conservation in South Carolina. Without Jim's hard work, there would not be a Dolphinfish Research Program Web site.



Linda Renshaw, former editor of the award-winning *South Carolina Wildlife* magazine, published by the SC DNR now retired and residing in Charleston, South Carolina, has worked hard to keep my writing in line with proper English.

She has been a wealth of information and suggestions to make publications by the DRP literarily correct. Without her help there would have been times that I would have looked pretty silly.



And then there is David Harter of Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. Dave is the most environmentally active and most engaged steward of natural resources of any individual that I know. The DRP would never have gotten started without his help. When the first thoughts of transforming the research program

from a state government program into a private research effort began to become a reality, it was Dave who stepped forward offering to receive donations to the Hilton Head Reef Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) for which Dave serves as vice chairman. This allowed for donations to the dolphinfish research effort to be fully tax deductible, which has significantly increased the level of contributions. Without the upfront money that the foundation's collaborative support allowed to be collected, the DRP never would have gotten off the ground and certainly would not have lasted as long as it has.

These individuals were friends of mine long before a private research program focused on my favorite game fish became a consideration. It has been their unwavering belief in the importance of the research and their willingness to give freely of their time that has been a major reason for its success. All of the fishermen who have enjoyed reading about the amazing discoveries by this research program owe a note of thanks to these individuals.

Without your financial support this program will cease to exist.

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