

Keeping the con in conservation

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Who needs better science?

Earlier this year, recreational fishing organizations launched an extensive lobbying effort aimed at preventing an experimental longline fishery for swordfish from being carried out in areas that have been closed to longlining, though still open to recreational fishing, for several years. The experimental fishery, which would have been accomplished under stringently controlled conditions by commercial fishing boats, was designed to improve bycatch reduction gear and bycatch reduction techniques in the pelagic longline fishery. The closed areas were selected because there was already a great deal of scientific information pertaining to them from earlier studies. Availability of this large amount of preexisting data would have reduced the size and complexity of the experimental fishery tremendously. About half of the fishing effort was to have been in the closed areas and half in areas still open to longlining.

Needless to say, the opposition by the recreational fishing groups was ostensibly based on conservation. Article after article, web page after web page, rant after rant claimed that allowing the longliners into these areas would result in horrendous bycatch levels – primarily of other highly migratory species (tunas, sailfish, marlin, sharks and swordfish) and sea turtles.

In actuality, estimates were that on the order of 75 white marlin, 50 blue marlin and under 20 sea turtles would have been caught inadvertently in the experimental fishery, divided equally between open and closed areas. Using the latest bycatch reduction gear and techniques, which are mandatory in the pelagic longline fishery, the mortality of the turtles would have been negligible, and most of the marlin would have survived capture.

So the recreational fishing groups that were so concerned about the impacts on marlin and sea turtle conservation in these closed areas went to a tremendous effort to save perhaps a couple of marlin and no sea turtles whatsoever.

They were successful. The experimental fishery in the closed areas wasn't allowed.

The “Big Game” fishing tournament scene

A few months later approximately 450 recreational fishing boats participated in this year's White Marlin Open, a recreational fishing tournament held annually in Ocean City, Maryland. Most of them fished for 3 days. The primary quarry was white marlin, but there were also prize categories for other “big game” species.

The prize awarded for the largest white marlin killed was \$1,650,000. The fish weighed seventy-eight and a half pounds. (For what is perhaps more than you ever wanted to know about big time tournament sports angling, you can visit the tournament website at <http://www.whitemarlinopen.com/>.)

During the tournament, 486 white marlin were caught and released and 13 were killed outright (“boated” in the politically aware vernacular of fishing tournaments). For blue marlin, 79 were released and 3 were killed.

But when it comes to catching white marlin, the anglers in the Ocean City tournament evidently aren’t all that good (although the money certainly is). On the first day of the Pirate’s Cove (North Carolina) Billfish Tournament a week or so later, the 115 boats that fished caught 129 white marlin (<http://www.pcbgt.com/day4standings05.pdf>). During the entire tournament the 123 boats that were entered caught 488 white marlin and 35 blue marlin. All of the white marlin caught were released, and all but 2 of the blue marlin were released.

And bringing up the rear for this two week period of tournament activity was the Mid-Atlantic \$500,000 fished out of Cape May, NJ and Ocean City, MD. One hundred and sixty-nine boats caught 220 white marlin and 27 blue marlin, with 11 white marlin and 4 blue marlin “boated.” (<http://www.tournamentlive.com/index.php>)

In total, during these three tournaments 1,194 white marlin and 135 blue marlin were caught and released while 24 white marlin and 9 blue marlin were killed and brought to the dock.

Live to fight another day?

While no one can accurately predict how many of the marlin that were released subsequently succumbed to the trauma of being caught, estimates of white marlin “catch and release” mortality range up to 59%, depending upon the gear that is used and the techniques that are employed to do the catching (see *Application of pop-up satellite archival tag technology to estimate postrelease survival of white marlin [Tetrapturus albidus] caught on circle and straight-shank [“J”] hooks in the western North Atlantic recreational fishery* by A. Horodysky and J. Graves and available at <http://fishbull.noaa.gov/1031/horo.pdf>.) This means that during these three tournaments, in addition to the 24 white marlin that were definitely killed (or “boated,” if you would rather employ the tournament organizers’ feel-good euphemism), another 700 could have been killed, along with an additional 70 or so blue marlin, through injuries sustained while they were being “fought” to boatside. (See also <http://www.fishingnj.org/pdfs/LifeAfterCandR.pdf> .)

To save readers from doing the math, that works out to one marlin killed for every three to four days that each boat fished (the Asbury Park Press reported a catch rate of one marlin per boat per day in the 1999 Cape May tournament).

This was just for three tournaments. In both 2003 and 2004 there were over 200 fishing tournaments for highly migratory species held in the United States’ EEZ. In every one of these tournaments, points or prizes were offered for both blue and white marlin, so we can safely infer that these species were targeted in all of them.

But not all of the boats that fish for marlin do so in tournaments. There are thousands that don’t. And the boats that compete in the tournaments certainly fish for marlin outside the tournaments as well.

So how many recreational fishing boats are there that are actually targeting marlin? No one seems to be counting. How many days a year do they fish for marlin? No one seems to be keeping track. How many marlin are they catching? How many marlin are they killing? When it comes to recreational “big game” fishing, the questions seem to go on and on and on. The answers definitely don’t.

It's generally accepted that the use of circle hooks greatly reduces the catch and release marlin mortality. Consider that if circle hooks were used in the three tournaments discussed above, the marlin mortality – exclusive of those fish purposely killed – would be far, far less than 700 fish. As Horodysky and Graves determined, catch and release marlin mortality using traditional “J” hooks can be over 50%. So, it would seem that mandating the use of circle hooks, something that the commercial longline fleet enthusiastically accepted last year, would be a no-brainer for the supposedly conservation minded recreational anglers. (In case you aren't aware of how “conservation-minded” these big game anglers are, Jeff Merrill wrote in an Asbury Park Press article “**Big fish, big bucks,**” that Cape May tournament organizer Dick Weber “*has always been a strong believer in fisheries conservation in general and billfish conservation in particular, and this tournament has donated well over \$1 million to fisheries' conservation organizations since its inception.*” We'd bet dollars to donuts that a big chunk of that money went to the Recreational Fishing Alliance, a “conservation” organization headed by Viking Yachts – see below - chairman Bob Healey, that claimed credit for stopping the experimental longline fishery described above from taking place.)

So what's being done to guarantee the conservation of these marlin, other than the questionable move of shutting down an experimental fishery designed to reduce longline bycatch even farther than it has been already through the mandatory use of state-of-the-art gear and techniques? According to Dick Weber in the same Asbury Park Press article, “*We are actively considering the mandatory use of circle hooks with natural baits and may implement it for the tournament in the future even before NMFS requires us to do so.*”

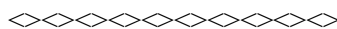
Dare we point out that “active consideration” of a conservation technique, no matter how active, has not yet been shown to save any fish.

The National Marine Fisheries Service is currently proposing that the use of circle hooks be mandatory in the recreational white marlin fishery when bait is being used and the Recreational Fishing Alliance is, according to John Geiser writing in the Asbury Park Press on September 25, opposed. Mr. Geiser quotes Jim Donofrio, Alliance Executive Director, “*while the RFA supports the continued conservation ethic that has resulted in 99 percent catch-and-release rates for billfish, we are opposed to making the use of circle hooks mandatory,*” Though the RFA did support the mandatory use of circle hooks in a small recreational fishery targeting spawning striped bass in the Delaware River, they are unaccountably unwilling to extend the same conservation benefits, benefits that the commercial longliners have fully embraced and have been trying to improve upon over the opposition of the RFA, to the marlin that are the quarry of the big game fishing crowd.

And that good old conservation ethic resulting in “99 percent catch- and-release rates” isn't all that effective either, particularly when over half of the fish that are released can end up dead.

The RFA is also opposing the NMFS proposal to cap annual recreational marlin landings at 250 fish, claiming that recreational fishing isn't the problem, commercial fishing is.

But what's a dead marlin or two, or two or three hundred, when recreational anglers are the folks who are doing the killing? After all, they're doing it through “catch and release,” and it seems that we're all supposed to think that doesn't result in dead fish.



And while we're on the subject of “Big Game” fishing tournaments and conservation

In the above referenced Asbury Park Press article about the Mid-Atlantic \$500,000 tournament, Dick Weber, the tournament organizer, was quoted *"there's so many things that depend on government policy in terms of protecting the fish, maintaining an adequate fuel supply, and keeping a regulatory posture that allows the sport of offshore fishing to continue to be what it is."* We've always been mildly interested in the fuel consumption of the boats that tournament anglers use in pursuit of their quarry (and their hundreds of thousands of dollars in prizes), but Mr. Weber's concern over *"an adequate fuel supply,"* coupled with the recent fuel "crisis" brought about by hurricanes Katrina and Rita really brought the issue to the fore. While digging up information for this FishNet, we came across a website that has "road" tests of various yachts (go to <http://powerandmotoryacht.com/boattests> and select the appropriate vessel, then go to the "specs" page). Each of the evaluations includes a table detailing the particular boat's fuel consumption at varying speeds.

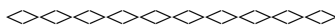
Using sport fishing boats of varying sizes (according to Dick Weber in the Asbury Park Press article, in the Cape May tournament *"most of the participant's boats are 45 feet and larger"*), we found that with their motors running at 2000 rpm, a reasonable cruising speed, the fuel consumption of these typical vessels was as follows:

Boat model/length	Fuel consumption @ 2000 rpm
Grady White Express 35	27 gallons/hour*
Egg Harbor 42	58 gallons/hour
Bertram 51	76 gallons/hour
Rybovich 60	118 gallons/hour
Viking Convertible 74	136 gallons/hour

*The Grady White 35 Express was powered with outboard motors, so we used the fuel consumption at what was reported as the most "economical" speed.

The reported mileage varied from 1.37 miles per gallon for the Grady White moving at 8 miles per hour to 0.22 miles per gallon for the Viking 74 manufactured by RFA Chairman Bob Healy at 44 miles per hour. It's kind of hard to imagine a boat burning well over 75 times as much fuel to move a single mile than a Chevy Suburban or Ford Expedition SUV so four or five anglers and a crew of two can fish, but apparently that's what offshore "big game" fishing is all about.

We can now relate much more realistically to Mr. Weber's concerns about having adequate fuel supply.



And then, if you still don't like the data that the managers are collecting

On the commercial side, we easily – and effectively – handled the dilemmas that we regularly faced when it became obvious that the data that was being used in formulating fisheries management plans wasn't good enough. We made a commitment to work with the managers and scientists to provide better science. In fishery after fishery we have done this and will continue to do this, to the extent that "cooperative research" is becoming an integral part of fisheries science.

Seems kind of simple and straightforward, doesn't it?

Our recreational fishing colleagues have evidently come to similar conclusions regarding the quality of the data underlying recreational fisheries management, and we would have expected – particu-

larly after they had observed the progress the commercial fishermen had made in working with the managers to acquire better data – them to pursue a similar strategy.

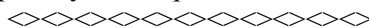
Well, not quite.

According to Tom Rock’s column in the August 28 edition of Newsday, *“a coalition of sportfishing groups might soon be challenging the way fish are counted by stumping it at the beginning and organizing a boycott against the voluntary collection of all information to recreational fishing collection programs. The idea of a boycott, spearheaded by the United Boatmen of New York and New Jersey and the New York Fishing Tackle Trade Association, would target the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS) program used by the National Marine Fisheries Service to establish its limits and quotas.”*

On the same day, John Geiser wrote in the Asbury Park Press *“activists in the recreational fishing community are so disgusted with the fisheries management process they are considering leading an organized boycott of cooperation with the system. This Mid-Atlantic Tea Party would be the first formal attempt to shake the hitherto impenetrable management system with its haughtily undemocratic attitudes. The effort is being considered by the United Boatmen of New Jersey and New York and the New York Fishing Tackle Trade Association. Repeatedly frustrated and infuriated by a system that fiddles while the recreational fishing industry burns, the coalition announced Friday it is exploring a host of targets it can attack. Foremost is the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey, that pseudo-census of anglers and their catches, that has served for years as the basis for management decisions.”*

We can sympathize with our recreationally oriented colleagues when it comes to feeling set upon by the fisheries management establishment. However, we can’t help feeling that the solution to a problem that has its roots in the unavailability of accurate data doesn’t have much to do with organizing a boycott to stop the existing flow of data. That brings to mind expressions involving noses and faces and cutting implements, doesn’t it?

C’mon guys, wake up and join (at least) the twentieth century. Science is here to stay, and so is fisheries management based on science. Unless you have anything to hide, you aren’t going to suffer if the managers have more accurate data concerning your fisheries, are you? The only way they are going to get that is with your help and your cooperation.



And last but certainly not least

In an act of not uncharacteristic hubris, the Ocean Conservancy has been peddling what it terms its “Overfishing Scorecard,” in which it purportedly rates the various regional fisheries management councils, summarizing *“the known data from each of the eight regional fish councils and reports on their progress toward ending overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks.”*

Needless to say, the report focuses solely on the fish, paying no attention at all to the fishermen or the fishing communities that are dependent on those fish for their well-being.

Fortunately, the regional fisheries management councils that are being rated aren’t constrained by such a myopic view of the fisheries in our Exclusive Economic Zone or of our government’s role in managing them. As a matter of fact, the Magnuson Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, the federal legislation that controls the regional councils, rightfully recognizes the importance of the human dimension of our various fisheries. There are ten “National Standards” that any fishery man-

agement plan prepared, and any regulation promulgated to implement any such plan through the Act, must be consistent with. Six of these ten standards (numbers 1,4,5,7,8 and 10) deal directly with the human dimensions of the fisheries.

In these days of rampant coastal overdevelopment, at a point when any waterfront property in most regions of the country has doubled, trebled, quadrupled or more in value in the last few years, our fisheries managers are becoming increasingly aware of the necessity of preserving onshore infrastructure. And to their credit, they are starting to realize that there is a threshold level of fishing activity, both recreational and commercial, necessary to maintain this infrastructure. Anyone with an actual interest in the future of fishing in the U.S. knows this, and knows that it's far more involved than the moronically simple-minded idea that healthy fish stocks will equate to healthy fisheries. Oceans full of fish aren't going to do any of us any practical good without the wherewithal to catch them – for sport, for profit or for sustenance.

Were the Ocean Conservancy to grade the various councils not just on their ability to “save” the fish stocks, but also on their ability to save the many businesses that depend on them, the scorecard would probably look quite different. For example, along with increasing fish stocks we still have a commercial fishing industry and a recreational fishing industry in New England. What's threatening the future of those industries today isn't going to be the future health of the stocks, it's going to be whether harvest levels continue to be such that the businesses that depend on them can survive. If not, they'll be replaced in fairly short order by tee shirt shops, restaurants and condominiums, and that's something that's irreversible.

The Ocean Conservancy's and other so-called “conservationist” organizations' continuing slavish devotion to the health of the fish stocks regardless of the health on the businesses and the entire communities that depend on the harvest of those stocks puts the lie to their claims that what they are doing is for the good of recreational and commercial fishermen.

