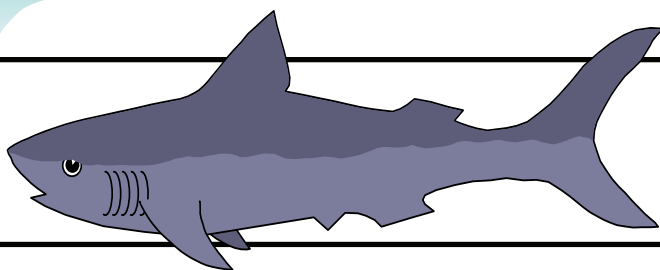


# FISH



# TALES

## A Green Light on Red Snapper?

Recent federal action on red snapper management gives the GRN some optimism that one of the Gulf's hallmark fish may finally be on the road to recovery. Despite scientific evidence that the stock is severely depleted, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) decided in August to delay further action on red snapper until 2007. In response, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA-Fisheries) has finally taken some control of the matter. On October 13, 2006 NOAA-Fisheries draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) became available for public review. It discusses various management alternatives for red snapper — many of which are now planned to be put into place by NOAA-Fisheries rulemaking process, outside the Council.

Briefly, the contents of the DEIS include: a significant reduction in total catch allowed each year;

reduction of the size limit for the commercial sector; eliminating charter boat captains and crews from taking bag limits; rules for the shrimp fishery to reduce bycatch; and reef fish gear limitations to reduce bycatch.

NOAA-Fisheries decision to step in and implement regulations on red snapper means the Council will not vote on the outcome. Given the Council's historic unwillingness to

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Image: NOAA Photobank

Red Snapper

## Globe's Commercial Fish Stocks May Collapse By 2048, Study Says

A new study by a team of international scientists has pointed to dire consequences for global fish populations if current overfishing, pollution, and climate change trends continue. The study, published recently in the journal *Science*, predicts the global collapse of all currently fished stocks by the year 2048.

While the study is an analysis of trends at a surface level, and may miss finer points of fisheries management at the regional level, its conclusions should serve as a very loud wakeup call for fisheries managers around the world. The analysis, performed by 12 researchers from 12 different academic and

non-governmental institutions, uncovered increasing rates of natural resource collapse tied closely to decreasing rates of biodiversity throughout global ecosystems.

The paper points to rapid loss of

*(Continued on page 2)*

## GOLIATH GROUPEL: A BIG ISSUE

Ever since the fishery for Goliath grouper was completely closed in federal waters of the Gulf and South Atlantic in 1990 and also in Florida state waters soon after, there have been protests from some fishermen.

Over the past 16 years, assertions that Goliath grouper are eating anything and everything in their paths have increased, as their population numbers seemingly rise. Some anglers claim this contributes to why there are so few reef fish. With 16 years of protection in the Gulf, the Goliath population should be increasing, but opening a fishery for Goliath remains questionable.

Goliath grouper are a long lived (they have an age span of 30-50 years), slow growing, and late maturing (reaching reproductive age around 5-6 years) species. Adult Goliath grouper can be found near offshore reefs, deep holes near shore, and in rivers; younger fish favor the shallower waters of mangroves. These are fish that tend to remain in the same spot year after year. Such behavior allows them to become familiar to divers, and the species' natural boldness



Measuring Goliath grouper.

Source: NOAA

often sends them swimming to check out visitors to their area. Goliath groupers' primary diet consists of crabs or lobsters, but they may also take bait offered on a fishing hook.

Goliaths' curiosity, predictability, and "opportunistic" feeding habits make them easy prey. Their slow growth and late maturity make replenishing a depleted population challenging.

Claims from anglers in southwest Florida that Goliaths are eating baby sea turtles, and decimating all manner of reef fish species are now reaching Council members. At its August meeting, the Council requested information from NOAA-Fisheries scientists about what take, if any the Goliath population could sustain.

NOAA-Fisheries is collecting existing information and will report back to the Council. The Council would then discuss what actions would be appropriate with respect to Goliath, given existing science on their status.

## Study Notes Role of Marine Biodiversity in Fisheries Collapse – cont. from page 1

marine populations dependent upon estuaries, coral reefs, and coastal and oceanic fish communities. Additionally, the research showed that native species diversity has rapidly declined since the commencement of large scale industrial fishing. On the flip side of that, regions and ecosystems with higher biodiversity were shown to be more stable, and more able to foster the rebuilding of collapsed stocks.

The researchers found that globally, the rate of fisheries collapse has been increasing over time, to the point that 29% of currently fished species have dropped to less than 10% of their

highest catch levels.

Not all news was gloom and doom though, as the paper's analysis of the effects of marine reserves and fisheries closures showed an overall increase in biodiversity of 23% and a fourfold increase in catch per unit effort in areas at the edge of the reserves when management measures are enacted.

The paper concludes by recommending sustainable fisheries management, pollution control, maintenance of essential habitats, and the creation of marine reserves as a way of putting conservation of marine biodiversity and fisheries stocks on a sustainable

path. The paper ends with the ominous warning that "business as usual would foreshadow serious threats to global food security, coastal water quality, and ecosystem stability, affecting current and future generations."

Though the study release deservedly grabbed headlines around the globe, this research is only the most recent in a string of findings by commissions and panels urging these sensible steps towards a sustainable sea-future. With red snapper, red grouper, gag grouper greater amberjack and other Gulf fish stocks depleted and/or overexploited, the Gulf region should pay the study close heed. Will our leaders finally wake up to these realities and act?

## SANCTUARY OF THE SEASON: FLORIDA KEYS

In 1990, Congress passed the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Protection Act to provide protection of the marine ecosystems surrounding the Florida Keys. These areas provide important and unique natural resources, including seagrasses, mangroves, and extensive coral reefs. Past management in the Florida Keys focused on protecting small portions of the coral reef ecosystem in a piecemeal fashion, and have failed to take a wider approach to protecting the marine environment of the Florida Keys. As a result, the coral reefs have been in steady decline.

The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary provides coordinated protection, management, and conservation of the nationally significant resources of the Florida Keys for current and future generations.

Marine zoning is used in the Keys Sanctuary to coordinate the protection of the biological diversity of the marine environment and consists of areas such as national wildlife refuges, state parks, wildlife management areas, ecological reserves, sanctuary preservation areas, and special-use areas to provide protection of Sanctuary resources.

Ecological reserves are designed to encompass large, contiguous habitats. They are intended to provide natural spawning, nursery, and permanent residence areas for the replenishment and genetic

protection of marine life and to protect and preserve all habitats and species. These reserves are intended to protect areas that represent the full range of diversity of resources and habitats found throughout the Sanctuary. A great example of an ecological reserve in the Sanctuary is the Tortugas Ecological Reserve on the western most tip of the Sanctuary.

The Tortugas Ecological Reserve is made up of two sections (north and south). Tortugas North includes 91 square nautical miles of federal and state waters to the west and north of Dry Tortugas National Park. Tortugas South encompasses 60 square nautical miles southwest of Dry

Tortugas National Park. The Reserve is managed to prohibit: taking, disturbing or injuring any organism; fishing; touching coral; and anchoring or mooring by vessels more than 100 feet in length.

Vessels may enter Tortugas North without an access permit only if they travel without stopping and with fishing gear stowed. Visitors wishing to stop in Tortugas North or tie up to mooring buoys must obtain a permit by calling the Key West or Marathon offices of the Sanctuary. Diving and snorkeling are permitted. The Sanctuary has installed twelve mooring buoys in Tortugas North. Anchoring is prohibited. Tortugas South doesn't allow any stopping, diving, snorkeling or fishing.

Source and for more information:  
[www.floridakeys.noaa.gov](http://www.floridakeys.noaa.gov)



Photo: NOAA photobank

Florida Keys Sanctuary Inhabitants

## GULF GROUPS, MANAGEMENT STAFF, PULL BACK CURTAIN

In an effort to engage more people in Gulf of Mexico fish management, the Gulf Council staff organized public forums, outside their regular meetings and hearings, for people to learn about and participate in our fishery management process. The forums were open discussion events held throughout Florida in October 2006.

Council staff coordinated the forums in which they briefly explained

the Council, the Council process, and fishery management in the Gulf of Mexico. Participants then had time to ask questions or discuss issues important to them and their area.

The forums were held in Key West, Naples, and Madeira Beach. Each venue saw different issues raised. In Key West, many commercial fishermen attended and they had concerns with a new requirement that all reef

fish and shrimp commercial fishing vessels must have an electronic unit to help monitor fishing locations. In Naples, many recreational fishermen participated and their primary topic was about the local goliath grouper population (for more information see "Goliath Grouper, a Big Issue" pg. 2).

Oddly, in Madeira Beach, a legendary Gulf fishing hot spot, there were only a few participants. Discussions in-

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*This publication is the product of the GRN working on the following issues of concern: overfishing, essential fish habitat, full implementation of the Sustainable Fisheries Act, and public education on the importance of sustainable fisheries management.*

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## Get Your Fish On—cont. from pg 3

cluded concerns about bycatch reduction, better data collection, and a more open process.

Attendees were pleased that the Council made the effort to meet constituents outside of regular Council meetings and required hearings. Some commented that Council members should attend such events in the future, so people can speak directly with decision makers.

These first events were intended to test whether such forums would be planned in the future throughout the Gulf. Given the level of participation and positive feedback, it is likely that more forums will be scheduled in the other Gulf States soon — hope to see you at one!

### **GRN and Friends Reach Out To...You!**

Never content to wait for the Gulf Council to act, the GRN and our partners the Ocean Conservancy and the Sierra Club have organized a series of public workshops around the Gulf from Corpus Christi to Tampa, with stops in Galveston, Houston, New Orleans, Mobile, Pensacola, and Panama City.

Similar to the Council's forums, the Gulf groups sought to inform the general public about the fisheries management process. Unlike the Council's efforts, our aim was to engage people in the process in order to seek sustainable fisheries management solutions. Each event offered attendees an opportunity to write a letter to their legislator and the Secretary of Commerce demanding an end to red snapper over exploitation in order to rebuild the depleted fishery.

In an interesting wrinkle, our Galveston and Houston events were targeted by a subset of users of a certain Texas recreational fishing webboard as opportunities to make their case that, no matter what

## Red Snapper Salvation? — cont. from pg 1

make hard decisions when it comes to red snapper, this is a long awaited and important step forward for NOAA-Fisheries.

Complications to this approach do arise when interim measures expire — they can only be in effect for 180 days, and extended for another 180 days. If a long term plan is not in place by the time the second 180 days expire, regulations will return to what was in effect prior to the interim rule: we'd go back to a red snapper total annual catch of 9.12 million pounds and assorted other regulations that have proved less helpful than originally expected.

NOAA-Fisheries could completely take control of the entire red snapper process by developing a Secretarial Plan, again outside the Council process, to avoid any further Council stalling or inaction. This would go into effect sometime during the 360 days the interim rule is in place to avoid a lapse in important regulations.

NOAA-Fisheries hopes to have regulations in place for next year's fishing season, beginning in Jan 2007.

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Make sure to visit our website to get red snapper updates and to support sustainable management of this critical Gulf fish! Log on at [www.healthygulf.org](http://www.healthygulf.org)

the scientific assessments show, red snapper populations are fine, and if they're not fine, they are only impacted by illegal commercial fishing, never recreational fishing.

While that perspective was in attendance at both workshops, it was far less heated than the rhetoric on the webboard indicated, and it was a minority view voiced by only a handful of attendees. The vast majority of the conservation-minded public has consistently urged fish managers to follow the science and rebuild Gulf stocks.