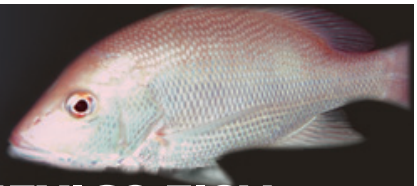
THE PEW ENVIRONMENT GROUP



GULF OF MEXICO FISH CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfFish

CONSERVING FISH IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

ABUNDANT SPECIES, HEALTHY OCEANS, A STRONG ECONOMY

Known as the American Mediterranean, the Gulf of Mexico is an economic and environmental treasure. Within its 600,000 square miles lie natural wonders and habitats ranging from an underwater Grand Canyon 12,000 feet deep to coral reefs and one of the largest contiguous seagrass beds in the Northern Hemisphere.

The extent of damage caused by the 2010 oil spill remains unknown. But the disaster lends urgency to protecting the Gulf's resources, including its diverse bounty of fish.

For years, overfishing has been taking a toll on the world's ninth-largest body of water, and several fish species are at critically low levels. Depleting fish too fast risks unbalancing the ecosystem and harming an economic engine that supports millions of people and jobs.

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Commercial fishing boats rest in a harbor in Apalachicola, Fla., in the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf Coast supplies about one-fifth of the nation's commercial fish and shellfish.

THE 2009 CATCH

Gulf of Mexico

1,489,364,000 lbs.

The same weight as 27 Statues of Liberty

Commercial
1.42 billion lbs.*

Recreational
69.6 million lbs.*

* State and federal waters

Sources: National Marine Fisheries Service, National Park Service

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

SPOTLIGHT: GAG GROUPER

If you think of a mouthwatering fish sandwich, it may be gag grouper. But since 2004, the population has been sliced nearly in half.

Gag are a popular target in part because they are easily found. Some smaller fish remain close to shore or swim near artificial reefs and rocky bottoms. Males congregate at limerock outcroppings on the seafloor. Male gags have dropped from as high as 17 percent of the population in the 1970s to as low as 2 percent since the 1990s, leaving fewer breeders. Fishery managers enacted catch limits and set up marine reserves to protect gag hot spots, but the species is still declining.

Recent studies found gag fishing must be reduced by 50 to 60 percent—to just more than a million pounds in 2011 from the average catch of 3.79 million pounds in 2006-08. Reduced commercial limits and a recreational season closure are likely in the short term. But fishing seasons could soon be expanded as gag rebound. Catch may be restored to near current levels within five years with a rebuilt population within a decade. New 2011 rules will be modified starting in 2012.

RED SNAPPER: ROAD TO RECOVERY

For decades, red snapper have been fished at unsustainable rates. Too many adult fish were caught, and young fish were frequently snared by accident in shrimp trawls. In 2007, fishery managers dramatically reduced the impact of trawling on red snapper and finally set strict scientific limits on catch.

A 2009 report showed the measures are working. Red snapper are more plentiful, bigger and spreading over a wider area. As a result, managers raised allowable catch for 2010—from 5 million to 6.9 million pounds—and future increases are likely if recovery continues.

NOAA

But ensuring fishermen stay within allowable fishing levels is a major challenge. From 2007 to 2009, recreational anglers have hauled in more than a million pounds beyond what was allowed annually, despite general compliance with seasonal closures, bag limits and trip limits. The excess is probably due to the growing number of anglers and more fishing. In 1990, anglers took more than 13 million trips in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana; in 2009, they took 22 million, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service. Even though red snapper may be more plentiful and larger, managers had to shorten the recreational fishing season to get better control and adjust for the excess take in previous years.

The dilemma exists partly because managers set the fishing limit at the precise amount that is safe for the population—a method that doesn't leave any room for error. The theoretically safe quota can easily be exceeded because of difficulties in controlling how many fish are actually caught. A wiser strategy would be more cautious limits or more effective control of the numbers of fish caught. Managers also are exploring ideas for a new saltwater angler registry, more timely data collection and analysis, and tag or stamp programs that permit fishing for certain species, such as red snapper.

MAKING THE CASE

The Gulf of Mexico oil spill has underscored the need for expanded research and data on fish populations and habitat. The Pew Environment Group asked Congress to appropriate additional money for studies that would help guide long-term restoration.

New research is needed to better monitor fish populations in addition to advancing efforts to improve the quality and timeliness of information collected from recreational fishermen—data that help determine population health and needed regulations. When these statistics are not available in a timely manner, managers may not be able to prevent quotas from being exceeded. They may unexpectedly shorten fishing seasons, halt fishing or further restrict the amount of fish that can be taken—a major frustration to fishermen.

Federal fishery managers and scientists are uncertain whether the oil spill will negatively affect the health and abundance of fish, which could lead to additional fishing restrictions. Now more than ever, high-quality research and timely data are critical.

WHAT'S BEING DONE

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council is working on federally mandated plans to end overfishing—catching fish faster than they can reproduce.

Three Gulf species—gag grouper, greater amberjack and gray triggerfish—have critically low population levels and unsustainably high fishing rates. Red snapper fishing rates have stabilized for the first time in decades, but the population is smaller than the target set by managers to ensure its sustainability.

The federal Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires fishery managers to set science-based limits on fish caught annually.

The Gulf council is revising management plans for species undergoing overfishing and is considering rules to prevent overfishing for about 50 more species ranging from cobia to all other groupers and snappers. The U.S. secretary of commerce must give final approval to council actions.

The 17-member appointed council manages fisheries in Gulf federal waters up to 200 miles off the coasts of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. The council is composed of recreational, charter and commercial fishermen, state fishery managers and other experts. It meets five times a year in public sessions throughout the Gulf region.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Visit **www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfFish** to learn more and join our e-alert network. We'll let you know about important fishing policy changes and how you can help.
- Contact Sharon McBreen at smcbreen@pewtrusts.org or 321-800-6313 to sign up for fish news or join our cause.
- For information, please contact project leader Holly Binns at fishinfo@PewTrusts.org or 850-727-8241.

PEW ENVIRONMENT GROUP'S GULF OF MEXICO FISH CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

Pew is leading efforts to work with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service to establish science-based annual catch limits to end and prevent overfishing.
The campaign works to bring scientific expertise to bear on fishery management plans and seeks common ground with fishermen to find solutions that balance human and environmental needs and raise awareness about overfishing and potential remedies.
The Pew Environment Group is the conservation arm of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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