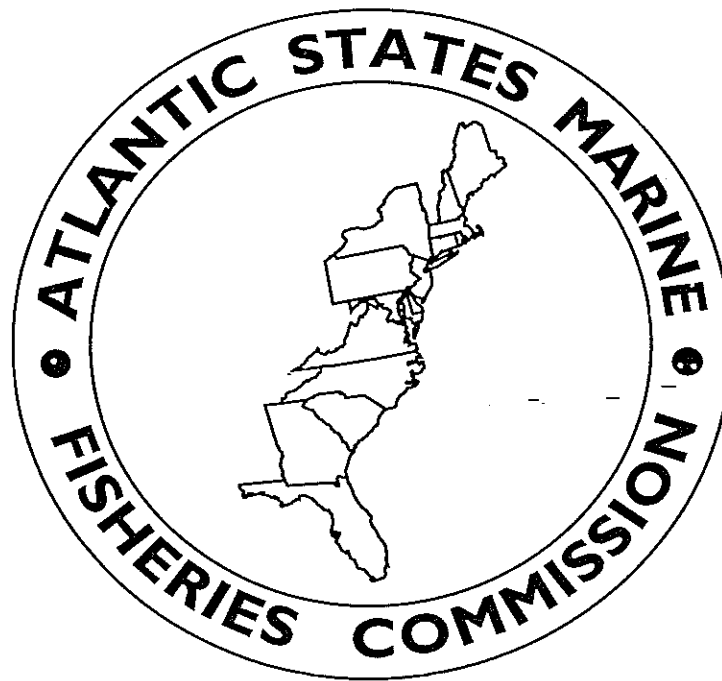


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**Report on Priorities for Marine Recreational Fisheries of the  
Atlantic Coast**

**March 1996**

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Marine Recreational Fisheries of the Atlantic Coast**

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# Report on Priorities for Marine Recreational Fisheries of the Atlantic Coast

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## Introduction

Marine fisheries of the Atlantic coast have supported significant recreational activities from Maine through Florida. An estimated 40 million fishing trips were made along the Atlantic in 1991 alone, with approximately 207 million fish caught on these trips. Approximately 72 million of these fish were landed, representing a total weight of roughly 32 thousand metric tons (NMFS, 1991). Participation in marine recreational fishing (MRF) on the Atlantic coast increased 300% during the 30-year period of 1955 to 1985. Since 1985, participation has flattened out. The catch by anglers also have followed this disturbing trend. Yet, even with these decreases, it is estimated that in 1991, marine recreational fishing generated nearly \$17.6 billion to the national economy, including \$4.5 billion in wages and salaries for approximately 290,400 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs.

Populations of the majority of popular target species are showing signs of severe stress and in many cases are overfished. Available information indicates that nearly one-third of all species and stocks for which information is available have experienced significant population declines since 1977. Fourteen stocks, species, or species groups are considered by federal scientists to be over-exploited. Even the most conservative estimates suggest that it would require

nearly a decade to rebuild some of these stocks even if fishing were to stop altogether.

Management of coastal fisheries resources is extremely complex. Increasingly, management decisions are becoming more difficult as the consequences of action and inaction effect the livelihoods and quality of life for more Americans each year. Problems in management of these interjurisdictional resources stem from a number of areas including a deficiency in adequate information on stocks (life histories, abundance, rates of harvest and natural mortality, etc.), lack of social and economic data, political vagaries, and allocation disputes. Faced with these obstacles and continually decreasing budgets, fisheries managers most constantly assess priorities for their programs and limited resources.

The purpose of this report is to identify priorities for saltwater sport fisheries of the Atlantic coast leading into the 21st century to provide a template for the Commission's evolving Sport Fish Restoration Program. Information in this report will be used as guidance to periodically assess commission programs to provide service to its members, and to provide effective liaison between state, federal, and private groups. In addition to input from individuals involved in Commission activities and the various boards and committees for the Commission, this report also includes personal observations and recommendations from staff involved in seven-years of first-hand experience with the various programs of the Commission's.

## **The Commission's Sport Fish Restoration Program**

The Wallop-Breaux Amendment to the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act is one of the most significant measures in the history of sport fishery development and management. The legislation has had a strong influence on many of the Commission's programs. With financial assistance of the Wallop-Breaux Program created with this legislation in 1984, the Commission initiated a Sport Fish Restoration Program on "Cooperative Interstate Fishery Management in the Territorial Sea of the United States." This program, initiated in 1986 has continued through 1995 under its original goal and program elements. The goal of the program has been to coordinate and provide administrative support to the 15 east coast states in their efforts to conserve and enhance marine and anadromous sport fish, and to provide public use and benefits from these resources. Activities of this program have covered a wide array of fisheries management planning, fishery management plan monitoring and implementation, fishery enhancement and development, research and statistics, and education. During the 10 years leading up to passage of the ACFCMA, significant funding for ISFMP finfish management activities (other than striped bass) were supported in large by three multiyear grants from the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program (Wallop-Breaux Program) of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Over half of the species falling under the management ISFMP have been covered under these grant. These included recreationally import stocks of bluefish, summer flounder, winter flounder, weakfish, tautog, red drum, spot, spotted seatrout, Atlantic croaker, Spanish mackerel, scup, and black sea bass. The activities funded with Wallop-Breaux assistance have been in the form annual projects. Development and execution of these projects has been the responsibility of ASMFC staff working

through the various programs, management boards, and committees. In addition to management activities of the ISFMP, identifying and addressing board issues and concerns over east coast sport fisheries has been tasked to the Commission's Marine Recreational Fisheries Committee.

### **ASMFC Marine Recreational Fisheries Committee**

In 1987, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) and its member states formed an interstate Marine Recreational Fisheries Committee (MRFC) to address priority issues in recreational fisheries research, development, and management focusing on the high priority species listed above. The objectives of the committee are:

1. To provide a forum for continuing discussion of problems, issues, and opportunities relating to the conservation, management and development of marine recreational fisheries;
2. To encourage full consideration of marine recreational fisheries issues and concerns in all ASMFC programs;
3. To assist in coordination of state and federal recreational fisheries research, development, and management programs; and
4. To help secure the involvement and support of the marine recreational fishing community in ASMFC fisheries management programs.

One of the first undertakings of the newly created MRFC was to compile baseline information on existing recreational programs and activities. The result



was the Commission's Recreational Fisheries Report No. 2 published June, 1988. In addition to an overview of state programs, the report included a survey of priority issues for interstate and state/federal marine recreational fisheries programs. This document has provided the Commission basic direction for development of projects which addressed such priorities to coordinate state and federal activities and seek solutions to pressing issues.

Under the the charter, the Commission's Marine Recreational Fisheries Committee who had been responsible for addressing such issues was formally disbanded as a standing committee and retained on an ad hoc basis to deal with issues as they were identified by Commission staff or the newly appointed Sport Fish Restoration Committee.<sup>1</sup> The program will continue, however with significant reduction in funding (over a two-thirds reduction in previous budgets). During 1995, the Commission reassessed the direction of the its marine recreational fisheries program. In accomplishing this task, input from member states was examined to establish priorities for Atlantic coast recreational fisheries to provide direction for new initiatives and to focus staff energies on marine sport fish issues of coastwide concern.

The Commission's Sport Fish Restoration program has involved a wide variety of fishery planning, assessment, enhancement, and evaluation activities. These activities are described in a series of reports which includes this publication. With completion of this report and others of the fiscal year 1995, the Commission's Sport Fish Restoration Program will be reorganized to focus on a

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<sup>1</sup>The Sport Fish Restoration Committee is a Commission Chairman appointed group with annual appointments. The Committee was originally established in 1994 by Dr. Bill Hogarth to provide the Commission with guidance on coastwide issues relative to the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Program of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This role remains an underlining responsibility of the committee.

more limited number of issue relative to coastwide concerns over marine sport fisheries of the Atlantic coast.

## **PRIORITY OF RECREATIONAL FISHERY ISSUES**

The Marine Recreational Fisheries Committee held its first meeting in Norfolk, Virginia in 1987. Due to the wide array of topics within the scope of any group dealing with recreational fishing, one of the first tasks of the committee was to develop a limited number of priority issues to address and perhaps resolve. As a first step in this exercise, the committee generated a list of possible items. The list has continued to expand since it was developed eight years ago and is presented in Appendix A. This listing provides a useful tool for consideration in the ever shifting priorities of fisheries managers. However, some of the issues remain of higher priority than others. These are discussed in some detail below.

### **Research and Statistics**

The need for better and more compatible data on fish life histories, mortality, recruitment, catch per unit of effort, angler participation has ranked the highest among priorities for State and Federal fisheries manager to address. While statistics on participation in the fisheries are among the longest term measurements available for analysis, fewer data are available for harvest and activity related expenditures. Catch and effort data deficiencies and precision continue to be a problem. Such data deficiencies have handicapped marine fisheries management and constrained policy and allocation strategies.

Local and regional differences among the fisheries of the Atlantic coast present some unique and complicating factors for collection, compilation, and dissemination of marine recreational statistics. Such statistics are essential to the decision-making process for marine fisheries managers. In 1990, Atlantic coastal states contributed approximately \$600,000 of Wallop-Breaux funds to the NMFS Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey (MRFSS) which was used for additional survey questions and modified sampling designs of the MRFSS to meet state-specific needs. Since 1985, Wallop-Breaux has contributed over 3 million dollars to improve catch and effort statistics through both the MRFSS and independent state surveys. Compatibility, as well as applicability of these data to local, state, and regional fisheries is essential, yet lacking. Accurate and precise data are fundamental for achieving reliability in regulation of fishing activities.

Recent changes to federal data collection programs have raised long-term concern for collection, analysis, and utilization of data on participation, harvest, landings, and value (social and economic) of marine recreational fisheries. Liaison with state and federal agencies collecting and utilizing such information is essential to clarify recent changes in the statistical methods and implication these changes have to management of priority species. Such clarification will improve the decision-making process by building confidence in these programs among the decision makers. This activity also will begin to build better communication between the statistics programs and management decision-making entities.

## Habitat Loss and Degradation

The loss of nearshore ocean and estuarine fishery habitat is probably the greatest long-term threat to marine fish productivity. This has remained one of the top four priority concerns of fishery managers for the continued availability of healthy stocks of marine sport fish. Estuaries and wetlands are especially important as sport fish nursery and spawning areas. Depending upon region, 32% to 94% of economically important Atlantic marine fish are dependent upon wetlands at some stage of their life. Nationwide wetland loss continues at the devastating rate of over 200,000 acres per year. Both nonpoint and point source pollution continue to foul coastal waters. Dangerously high levels of pollution in these areas have resulted in consumption advisories being issued for striped bass and bluefish, among other species.

Typically, marine fisheries managers have little control over activities which effect perturbations in the quality and quantity of fisheries habitat. Alarming rates in loss of vital habitat mandate fisheries management programs to address habitat issues in the context of the regulatory process. Although the Commission has developed over 15 plans for 18 species, only those dealing with shad, river herrings, and winter flounder contain comprehensive analyses and recommendations on habitat requirements. Investing in habitat restoration programs would result in longer term benefits to the fishery than similar efforts aimed at controlling harvest. Sound recommendations for protecting habitat essential for sustaining healthy fish stocks must be incorporated into other fishery management programs. Interagency agreements between the fisheries agencies and those with decision-making authority which can affect fisheries habitat must be worked out based on such recommendations. Additionally,

educational programs which help fishermen to make a connection between healthy habitat and healthy fish stocks are needed. Such programs will aid fishermen in minimizing their own impacts, and will instill an awareness to foster habitat protection actions in their own communities.

### **Priority Species**

With increasingly limited personnel and financial resources available to state and federal agencies for management of vital marine fisheries, it is necessary to establish priorities in programs to effectively allocate such resources. The Atlantic coastal states have determined that it is necessary to look at management programs in terms of priority species. With state and federal agencies working on mutually identified priorities and recommendations, a coastwide approach to managing priority species throughout their range should be developed.

### **Public Outreach and Education**

Misunderstandings by fishermen over regulations, both proposed and enacted, often leads to emotional confrontations between the regulators and the regulated. Proposed management measures frequently are delayed by such confrontations, and activities deleterious to the fishery resource continue, often until precipitous declines in the fishery occur. To counter this potential, fishermen effected by such regulations need to be fully informed and educated about the fisheries, management programs, and the effects of their own activities on the resource. If management efforts are to be successful, fishermen must have an active role in development of regulations effecting their activities. These

elements are essential to restore and maintain healthy, productive fisheries which will improve economic returns and sport fishing opportunities through an interactive management programs.

The key element to the success of the Wallop-Breaux program has been a "user pays/user benefits" philosophy. With this approach, those who bear the responsibility of paying the costs of the programs should enjoy the benefits of such programs. Education of the fishing public on State and Federal fishery management and develop program benefits is vital to assure ongoing public support of important programs. The Commission encourages informed public participation in management of Atlantic coast sport fisheries and habitat protection. It is believed that the benefits provided by an informed and active fishing public will bring about better cooperation between states and federal agencies on actions relative to priority MRF issues.

In order to assure that millions of anglers continue to enjoy quality saltwater fishing experiences, it is essential that they participate in the management activities and understand the necessity for such regulatory activities. The proposed work focuses on such interactive state manager/angler programs and will improve angler awareness relative to marine fish resources and the need for management. With active participation in management processes, marine fish managers will be provided with better information about angler concerns, and anglers will develop more of a stake in the management process. Improved communication between these two important groups will result in more effective fisheries management.

## **Fisheries Enhancement**

Since the initiation of Wallop-Breaux funding in 1985, nine Atlantic coast states have deployed over 125 new artificial reefs with Wallop-Breaux Funds. These projects include a wide variety of fishery development partnerships involving fishing clubs, tackle manufacturers, large corporations, and state resource agencies. The most successful projects resulted from technical expertise, knowledge of the marine environment, and an understanding of local community needs coordinated through the Commission's Artificial Reef Committee. The 1990 economic benefits associated with all of the new Wallop-Breaux artificial reef projects along the Atlantic was estimated at approximately \$80 million. These data are critical to support continuance of these popular and proven programs of the state agencies. However, such evaluation data are not collected on a national or coastwide basis. Often, study results are outdated and difficult to compare from region to region. The proposed report will compile updated economic evaluations and develop guidelines for coordinating future studies at the state, regional and national levels. Through such a tactic current reef programs will be improved, which will result in a net increase in sport fishing opportunities coastwide.

## **Discussion**

In looking to the future of Atlantic coast recreational fisheries, a number of general trends are apparent. Recreational fishing has been clearly demonstrated to support a large and expanding sport fishing industry. As the marine recreational fishing constituency has increased in numbers, it has become more

unified in its positions on management issues and grown more active and influential in the political arena. Greater attention is being focused on the recreational fisheries in most Atlantic states and the need for more cohesive unified to sport fisheries has become a priority for State and Federal fishery management agencies.

Many of the priorities for marine sport fisheries are based on what is allowable for expenditures under the Wallop-Breaux Program, and national mandated determined under other Federal programs. Undoubtedly, priorities will be reassessed under the implementation strategies of the new Recreational Fishery Resources Conservation Plan developed pursuant to the Executive Order on Recreational Fisheries signed by the President on June 3, 1995. The Commission being active in development of the plan will draft its own plan for participation.

With implementation of the Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act (ACFCMA) in early 1995, programs of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Commission) have been reorganized to effectively carry out the mandates of the Act. In order to effectively execute management requirements of the Commission's Interstate Fisheries Management Program (ISFMP), the Act provides authority for appropriation of Federal funds to the Commission ten times in excess of funding previously available. The Commission's Sport Fish Restoration Program (SFRP) has been in a transition period during this reorganization phase. Priorities set for Atlantic marine sport fisheries through the deliberative bodies of the Commission undoubtedly will effect the direction the SFRP will take in the future.



**Appendix A:**  
**LIST OF PRIORITY ISSUES IN MARINE RECREATIONAL FISHERIES**

## LIST OF PRIORITY ISSUES IN MARINE RECREATIONAL FISHERIES

- concern over habitat loss and environmental degradation
- MRF information and education needs
- angler ethics
- Public involvement in fisheries research and management to include: interstate coordination of fishery regulations, public information, etc.
- need for research, coordination, funding, and development of public information on catch-and-release and catch-tag-and-release programs
- Fishing access and facilities (demand analysis, planning, design, funding, public information, and coordination)
- licensing - develop issues and model state legislation
- Statistics and data base development (methods, coordination, compatibility, funding and contracting)
- need for a universal definition of marine recreational fishing
- contaminants - advisories on recreational species
- development of a joint policy state/federal MRF policy
- underutilized species (development and public information)
- Funding stability
- Allocation issues (equity concerns) regarding gamefish status, gear restrictions, and special management areas
- User conflicts (nature, extent, resolution strategies, and opportunities to eliminate barriers between users)
- Non-hook and line (shellfishing, bait fishing, finfishing)
- Planning needs (research and development)
- Status of fisheries (why can't we catch fish?)

- Gear conflicts
- hook and release mortality
- bycatch in both commercial and recreational fisheries
- Socio-economics
- Law enforcement
- stocking versus wild stocks
- Angling ethics