



THE FISHER' INSIDER

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The following is the full letter that Bob Ship and Roy Minton laid on the Gulf council at their last meeting. In the dozen or so years I've been following the snapper mess, this is the first time I've seen folks of their stature state the obvious. That the fundamentals used in the red snapper stock assessment are so deeply flawed that they defy logic and the scientific process. The harshness of the language they use in the document is also interesting in that it is a public missive and now part of the Gulf Council's record. It clearly states that the bureaucrats are clueless and have been from the get go. As you might imagine, the bureaucrats are ignoring the arguments set forth. The good news is that both of these guys sit on the council, which could make for interesting future council meetings.

"During this year, the Gulf Council will be addressing the very difficult issue of setting TAC for the red snapper fishery. All indications are that there will be a great deal of pressure to lower the TAC, due to the assessment generated from the 2005 SEDAR exercise. We were involved in the SEDAR process and became aware of numerous problems inherent in the analysis of red snapper stocks. We are outlining these, and feel they are issues that need thorough discussion during 2006 Council meetings.

There are two fundamental problems with the process. The first is that the entire SEDAR/modeling exercise is premised on the assumption that the stocks are recruitment limited and not habitat limited. This is a natural assumption based on the concerns of bycatch mortality of recruits and the perceived lack of a large population of large spawning adults. However, there is equally persuasive evidence of habitat limitations. Major shifts in snapper demographics during the last one hundred and fifty years, especially the last half century, concurrent with major changes in habitat creation, strongly argue that habitat limitation was previously a major factor in governing red snapper population structure. In addition, it is a basic tenet of ecology, recognized from the days of Charles Darwin, that the vast majority of natural populations of marine organisms are habitat/resource limited.

The second is the projection of future MSY. Currently these estimates range from 18 million to 25 million pounds annually. Even this high number is more than a 100 percent reduction of previous 40 to 60 million MSY projections of a decade ago, reflecting a "reality check" conferred on recent models. However, the current MSY projections are at least double the largest harvest in the history of the fishery. One wonders how a stock can be overfished if it's never harvested even half of projected MSY.

Although shrimp bycatch has been suggested as the reason for this anomaly, serious bycatch problems did not exist during the first century of the fishery, during which period serious regional depletions occurred and caused the fishery to shift its focus to many different areas to maintain harvest levels.

In addition to these fundamental flaws, there are numerous additional aspects that reflect negatively on the reliability of the process.

In the past, model projections have had a miserable history of error and inaccuracy. In the early nineties, the models predicted that unless shrimp bycatch were reduced by 60% and directed harvest were reduced to one million pounds annually, red snapper stocks would crash. In the late nineties, during discussion of BRD mandates, similar dire model projections were made. Despite that, in his recent report to Congress, Assistant Administrator Hogarth as well as the SEDAR reported that red snapper stocks are improving.

The SEDAR assessment assumes stock demographic consistency through time. This is reflected in several of the Figures describing the stocks back to the mid to late nineteenth century. This is not supported by the existing literature, and in fact the literature indicates just the opposite. Whereas currently 60% of the commercial harvest is taken from the area between the mouth of the Mississippi River and South Padre Island, numerous exploratory voyages in the 1880's sampled that the area repeatedly and found no commercially viable populations of red snapper.

The recruitment levels (fishery independent) reported in the SEDAR for more than a decade have been consistently higher than predicted. However, the predictions result from a biased fishery dependent stock estimate and a stock recruitment (S/R) relationship that is essentially unknown, the S/R used is a proxy based on species thought to have similar life history patterns. However, the recruitment numbers, if applied to estimate stock size, would estimate a much larger stock than that described by the model. It is far more logical to rely on fishery independent data than fishery dependent data.

There is a major discrepancy in the conclusions of the SEDAR assessment working group (AW) and the review working group (RW). The former assumed that natural density dependent processes during age zero swamped bycatch mortality, rendering it negligible. The RW disagreed and included bycatch mortality as a factor for both age zeros and ones and overruled the AW position. Regardless of which position is correct, this reflects a

major difference in the projected impact of shrimp bycatch mortality with a domino effect on all projections and bycatch reduction scenarios during stock recovery. This single issue calls the entire SEDAR analysis into question and creates an uncertainty which should render the results as unreliable.

In the SEDAR power point presentation by Dr. Porch (excellently done), there is a slide which traces the sudden increase in harvest from the western Gulf in the 1950's. Several possible causes are provided, but none referencing the massive habitat changes that were occurring then with the creation of the offshore oil and gas industry. This is another example of habitat impacts and demographic changes that are missing in the SEDAR.

The Council for several years had strongly urged NMFS to conduct longline surveys in the deeper waters of the northwestern Gulf. Finally these have occurred and as expected have revealed a substantial number of very large red snappers, many of the size range that has been "missing" in previous modeling exercises. However, we are told that these cannot be included in the assessment because the time series is too short. This is an egregious flaw in the process. These data are of major importance, especially since the lack of large adults has been a driving force in the dire projections of future stock assessments. That they cannot be included is another reflection of the inadequacy of the process.

Alabama has sampled red snapper populations (fishery independent) within the established artificial reef zones offshore for a number of years, but personnel at NMFS say that the data aren't compatible with their data because they weren't collected over natural hard bottom and therefore they will not include them in their analyses. Knowing that 35% to 40% of all recreationally caught red snapper from the Gulf of Mexico come from the areas offshore from Alabama, it is surely worthwhile to substantiate whether this perceived incompatibility is real or not. If it's real, then steps should be taken to make the data sets compatible if possible.

These and many other areas of uncertainty and recognized data needs mentioned in the SEDAR report argue strongly that there is no justification for modifying TAC or ABC numbers at this time. Until the fundamental questions regarding snapper demographic changes, habitat issues and reconciliation of projected MSY with historical catches can be answered, there is strong justification maintaining status quo."

We welcome your fishin' photos. Drop them by 2600 Padre Boulevard on the Island, or mail them to I.B. Hooked, c/o Coastal Current Weekly, P.O.Box 2429, South Padre Island, Texas 78597. Be sure to include the name of the angler, weight and type of fish, where caught, and name of boat if applicable. Photos with SASE will be returned.