More Red Snapper Discussion

I am a professor in the Department of Oceanography and Coastal Sciences at Louisiana State University. I have served on advisory panels to the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council, including the mackerel and reef fish stock assessment panels (SAPs), the latter of which I chaired until 2004, when the SEDAR (SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review) process subsumed the responsibilities of the SAPs. There has been an enormous increase in knowledge about the life history and ecology of red snapper in the last 20 years, and I dare say it is among the most well-studied species for which NOAA Fisheries is tasked to assess. The assessments themselves, including data used to inform them, have been reviewed both externally and internally numerous times and are unequivocally state of the art. Yet these assessments have been greeted with suspicion and doubt from the first to the last, even though assessment results have been remarkably consistent.

As someone who understands the red snapper stock assessment and has contributed some of the information that it uses, I know that the modern methods used by NOAA Fisheries include information based on substantial amounts of biological data. In addition, it considers long and thorough time series of catch data obtained from both recreational and commercial fishers, including catches from all of the habitats on which fishing occurs, including artificial reefs.

Modern assessments are forward-looking and determine what the red snapper stock can be, based upon the entire suite of available data, rather than what it used to be. This allows the process to account for changes in the ecosystem to which the stock belongs. This is not to say that the modern stock assessments are not without their uncertainties, but the amount of data required and used is enormous, and the uncertainties are acknowledged and represented in the outcomes. The results for red snapper remain consistent and have been thoroughly vetted by an assessment process that now includes data reviews, assessment workshops, assessment reviews and, finally, approval by the SSC before they reach the Council.

The good news is that the red snapper stock is indeed recovering from its low in the late 1980s to early 1990s (when numbers of oil and gas platforms were highest in the western Gulf), and it appears that strong year classes were produced in 2004 and 2006, which explains in part why fishers are seeing and reporting more fish. Strong year classes also were produced in 1995 to 1996 and 1999 to 2000, and each time this occurred, a red storm arose, much like what is occurring today, as these year classes entered the fishery. The difference is that the red storm was abated in previous years by improvements in estimates of red snapper longevity, which prolonged the rebuilding schedule, thus permitting higher catches in the near-term; the allowance of higher catches were falsely interpreted by many as errors in the stock assessment.

The problem now, which has been the same for many years, is the paucity of larger, older fishes (particularly females) in the population and the high fishing mortality rates on younger ages that preclude rebuilding of a stable age structure. The recovery today may also be benefitting from a significant reduction in bycatch mortality, owing to decreases in shrimp fishing effort that began in 2002, although new data suggests that this effect may not be as large as once thought.

I must ask two final questions in light of the "bad data" mantra I have heard for years: Is it wise to perceive a perspective paper, based upon patchy landings data from a primitive fishing fleet (some of which are more than 100 years old), that infers as much about the stock from where fish were not captured long ago as from where they were captured as an assessment that stock size was much smaller in the past than it is now? If the same assessment concluded that red snapper were more abundant in the past than they are now, would you believe it?

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