

Scamp Fishery Performance Report

SAFMC Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

SEDAR68-RD34

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Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Scamp Fishery Performance Report October 2019

At their October 2019 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for Scamp and developed this fishery performance report (FPR). The purpose of the FPR is to assemble information from AP members’ experience and observations on the water and in the marketplace to complement scientific and landings data. The FPR for Scamp will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in Scamp Research Track Assessment (SEDAR 68) and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

Jim Atack (Recreational/NC)*	Recreational/NC)
Randy Beardsley (Recreational/FL)	Gary Manigault Sr. (Charter/SC)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)	Kerry Marhefka (Commercial/Dealer/SC)
Dick Brame (NGO/Recreational/NC)	Randy McKinley (Commercial/ NC)
Jack Cox (Commercial/Dealer/NC)	Greg Mercurio (Charter/FL)*
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)	Jim Moring (Recreational/SC)
James Freeman (Commercial/FL)*	David Moss (Recreational/FL)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)	Red Munden (Conservation/NC)
Lawton Howard (Recreational/GA)*	James Paskiewicz (Commercial/FL)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)	Andy Piland (Charter/NC)*
Jimmy Hull (Chairman; Commercial/Dealer/Retail/FL)	Cameron Sebastian (Charter/Commercial/SC)
Deidra Jeffcoat (Charter/GA)	David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)*
Todd Kellison (At-large/NOAA)	
Robert Lorenz (Vice-Chairman;	*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the Scamp fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <http://data.safmc.net/FPRAll/>. The summary presents an overview of several aspects of the fishery including life history of the species, stock status, and trends in landings and fishery economics for both the commercial and recreational (for-hire and private) sectors. The information was provided as background to elicit the discussion presented in this Fishery Performance Report.

Observations on Fishery and Stock Abundance

In general, the AP agreed that abundance of Scamp has declined overall and, in some areas, more evidently than in others.

Asked whether Scamp are targeted recreationally in the Carolinas, a recreational fisherman from North Carolina replied that they are not. He fishes out of Masonboro Inlet (Wrightsville Beach/Carolina Beach Inlet). From there, he stated that it is a forty to fifty-mile run offshore, so

fishermen are not making those trips for Scamp. However, fishermen do go offshore to fish for Red Grouper and catch Scamp incidentally (one out of every six fish) on those trips. He added that private recreational fishermen in his area are running 24- to 32-foot boats and they don't encounter Scamp until they reach a depth of around 125 to 140 feet. Beyond 250 feet, electric reels and heavier weights (>24 to 36 ounces) are necessary, so that limits how many anglers target Scamp off southern North Carolina.

A North Carolina commercial fisherman added that there are areas off Morehead ("in the 600s") where Scamp are targeted commercially. A two-day trip can yield a thousand pounds. Those trips are rare, however (every other year); usually a three-day commercial trip will bring back 100 to 200 pounds of Scamp.

A for-hire captain from North Carolina added that for-hire operations in his area do not target Scamp mainly because the area mentioned above is "very rough bottom, and the guys nicknamed it The Graveyard, because you can go there and make tombstones out of your anchors if you try to anchor fish it." He explained that Scamp are normally mixed in with Snowy Grouper in deep water and that Scamp were generally found between 42 and 100 fathoms.

According to a North Carolina commercial fisherman, Scamp are "a different fish" in that they are found higher in the water column than other groupers. They are hard to catch and so they are not targeted. He recounted that a commercial trip could at one point yield a box and a half of Scamp. However, that does not happen often anymore. He claims Scamp are not as aggressive as other groupers, or maybe they are smarter, so they are harder to catch. A diver from Myrtle Beach agreed with these observations and added that, while diving near where other fishermen are using baited hooks to catch fish, he has watched as other groupers cluster around the bait whereas Scamp tend to keep their distance so they are not caught as often. Indeed, as a Council staff pointed out, the common name "Scamp" refers to the fish's reputation as difficult-to-catch bait stealers. Synonyms for "Scamp" include "rascal" and "scalawag."

Reflecting on possible factors that have contributed to low abundance/recruitment, a commercial fisherman from North Carolina cited increased recreational fishing pressure in his area. He claims that anglers are using newer Daiwa electric reels with braided line and catching a lot of Scamp. He has noticed a large upswing in recreational diving. He also mentioned an overabundance of sharks, and other environmental factors such as hurricanes and habitat loss, as additional contributors. Another commercial fisherman based out of Morehead City, North Carolina thinks that all groupers have experienced some overfishing, and the grouper fishery in general is very susceptible to being overfished. He speculates that fishing pressure (both commercial and recreational) and the increase in the technology (electronics and fishing gear) that allows fishing in deeper water, are partly to blame.

Another commercial fisherman from North Carolina recounted that about fifteen years ago, inshore of Frying Pan Shoals, there was "just massive amounts of small Red Grouper and Scamp, I mean absolutely, and they are gone now, completely gone."

Another AP member recalled that, in the 1980s, he would catch 500 to 700 pounds of Scamp ("ten or fifteen pounders") in a high-relief artificial reef (the Naeco) in one stop. He stated that

commercial fishermen used to target Scamp back then and the Naeco "used to be full of big Scamp but they are not there anymore." Fishermen still target groupers in May and June commercially off North Carolina but shift to targeting Vermilion Snapper and Gray Triggerfish in July. He claims to interact a lot more with Scamp in the winter, when the fishery is closed.

Further south along the coast, a diver based out of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, said he sees Scamp intermixed with Gag ("probably with the Gray, and probably it's 60 percent Scamp and 40 percent Gray") in his area, ranging in size between 18 to 22 inches. In his 30 years of diving, he claims the abundance of Scamp has not changed and he sees a lot of small individuals compared to the number of fish at or above the minimum size limit (he estimates a 6:1 ratio). In addition, he observed that Scamp prefer low-relief, scattered rock bottom. The same fisherman surmised that a factor in the perceived low abundance of Scamp may be that experienced fishermen who are effective at catching them are aging out of the fishery. Additionally, he offered that commercial fishermen in his area prefer targeting Vermilion Snapper because they can still be assured a profit.

A commercial fisher based out of Charleston, South Carolina, concurred that catching grouper is more difficult than it used to be because there are so many Red Snapper. However, she noted that trends in fishery-independent surveys show a declining trend over many years suggesting that environmental factors may be at play.

Off Ponce Inlet, Florida, a commercial fisherman stated there has been an effort shift from groupers to other species. During the annual shallow-water grouper spawning season closure from January 1 through April 30 commercial fishermen don't target Gag Grouper, during which time they would always encounter a few Scamp. Nowadays, he claims, the commercial snapper grouper fishery has become mostly a "day boat" fishery. Most of the people that used to fish for grouper are fishing for Vermilion Snapper and Greater Amberjack during that time.

According to AP members from South Florida, recreational fishermen rarely catch Scamp and they find them a little deeper than where Red Grouper are found. Abundance of Scamp in that area has not changed over the past 15 to 20 years; however, the species is only caught incidentally. The annual January-April spawning season closure that has been in place for many years (it was implemented in 2009) has not resulted in improvements in abundance or recruitment of groupers, according Florida fishermen on the AP. Furthermore, in terms of recreational effort, a fisherman from South Florida offered that spearfishing has impacted the abundance of groupers in areas close to shore, causing species like Scamp to be found further offshore and consequently be less available for most private recreational anglers due to the distance and difficulty in anchoring.

A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys, offered that over the past five years, he has landed about 200 pounds of Scamp, usually while he is targeting Greater Amberjack or Black Grouper in about 250 to 350 feet of water.

Observations on Fish Size and Recruitment

A commercial fisherman from North Carolina, stated that there are fewer Scamp than there were 10 to 15 years ago in an area 100 to 110 feet deep near Frying Pan Tower that fishermen referred

to as The Nursery Area, because fishermen had to throw back large numbers of juvenile Scamp and Red Grouper. He thinks recruitment is indeed low and a cause for serious concern. Another commercial fisherman from the same area said that he still sees small Gag and small Red Grouper in the waterways, and people catching them in crab traps in the fall and off their docks. However, he has never seen small Scamp. He claims fishermen are generally catching fewer large fish than in the past.

A private recreational fisherman from southern North Carolina concurred that he has never seen a juvenile Scamp in his area. The fish he encounters range from 22 to 30 inches beginning in 140 feet of water.

A for-hire AP member from North Carolina stated that he does not recall ever catching a Scamp less than 20 inches. He told of a wreck where he believes the North Carolina state record for Scamp was caught in recent years. The wreck is in 160 feet, as shallow as he claims Scamp get caught in his area. He maintains that most Scamp congregate in an area ten miles or so northeast of the Big Rock, from forty fathoms to fifty fathoms over very rough, rocky bottom. Scamp from that area, are "mid-range fish: twelve to twenty pounds".

Off northern South Carolina, Scamp of various sizes are mixed, according to a diver on the AP. He recollects seeing many Scamp in the 15- to 20-inch range while diving in waters 90 to 125 feet deep. Mixed in with those, there are always "a couple of mossbacks" and some Gag. He claims the small fish outnumber the big ones seven to one. He explains that most of the Scamp he encounters are "in at least ninety feet or water, or a little bit more". He went on to point out that some of the recent entrants into the fishery, especially those who spearfish, appear to be causing damage by "cleaning out" an area of reef fish. His concern is that large, breeding fish, are being removed causing harm to the population.

A recreational sportfisherman representing anglers off east Florida indicated that Scamp catches average about one in six groupers (mainly Gag) and that he has been seeing large Scamp recently, even some that broke his club's record from 1967. He stated he doesn't see juveniles very much at all; whereas they do catch Scamp over 20 pounds in 200 feet of water.

A representative for the charter industry in the lower Florida Keys contributed that Scamp are uncommon in the catch and when one is caught, it is in 120 feet of water or deeper on a wreck or some rubble and the fish are usually barely legal or under the minimum size limit.

A commercial fisherman from the Florida Keys recalled interacting with juvenile Scamp. On windy days in the wintertime, when he would remain within three miles of the shoreline, he claims he would see Scamp, six inches or so, while "flatlining" for yellowtail and mutton snapper in Hawks Channel. He recounted dropping bait to near the bottom, using a 1/0 hook on relatively light tackle, and catching small Scamp.

According to a private recreational fisherman from South Florida, legal sized Scamp as well as juveniles, can be found in the Dry Tortugas. He believes the area may be a nursery for the species, as it has been shown to be for many others.

A NOAA Fisheries representative on the AP offered that there is no documentation of inshore settlement for Scamp. Studies off the Atlantic coast of Florida and the West Florida Shelf, where extensive seagrass beds exist, have shown that Gag are recruiting to those areas. There is also evidence that Red Grouper recruit to inshore nurseries but, based on inference and fishermen's observations, Scamp probably settle somewhere offshore.

Observations on Discards

AP members agreed that there is little discarding of Scamp taking place as fishermen are not catching them and they are easy to avoid.

Observations on Price and Demand

A commercial representative from North Carolina offered that Scamp sold for \$6.75 per pound in the previous two years (2017-2018). In 2019, the price went up to \$7 per pound for both Scamp and Gag.

In Florida, demand for fresh, local seafood is strong and increasing every day, according to a commercial AP member. He claims that Scamp has always been the highest-priced grouper, calling it "the Cadillac of grouper." He agreed that the price per pound Scamp in his area could easily reach \$7 per pound.

Observations on Community Dependence and Working Waterfronts

Asked to discuss whether communities are dependent on the Scamp fishery, a commercial fisherman from Ponce Inlet, Florida, answered that many communities would "love to be dependent on the Scamp fishery, and we would love to be able to catch some Scamp, obviously, because we could get a good price for them". However, though demand is high, Scamp are notably scarce.

AP members representing the commercial industry strongly agreed that the continued loss of working waterfront is detrimental (one fisherman used the adjective "devastating") to fishing communities along the South Atlantic coast. AP members shared accounts of fish houses going out of business in their communities and impacting commercial fishing. One fisherman from the Myrtle Beach, SC area stated "it's a dying industry in our area, and the real estate property values are too high, and so, for the docks that we've acquired, we've got to put the biggest boats in there that carry the most people and that generate the most revenue, and it's just the way it is up there".

A recreational fisherman from southern North Carolina offered a different perspective: while there may be "slip shortages" in some areas, newer boat designs (in the 24- to 30-foot class) over the past five years have allowed anglers who can afford them a faster way to carry more people to fishing grounds. This, he maintains, will inevitably increase fishing pressure for species like Scamp.

AP members also talked of other problems related to shortage of infrastructure. A for-hire captain from Daytona, Florida, expressed frustration at the inadequacy of public recreational boat ramps and large number of users that result in crowded and unsafe conditions. He maintains the

problem will continue to get worse since boat dealerships are proliferating at a quick pace. A charter captain from Georgia and a recreational fisherman from south Florida echoed the same concerns for their areas.

Environmental Observations

In general, AP members agreed that over the last ten years, hurricanes (e.g. Hurricane Florence) have impacted habitat and may have contributed to the observed decline in abundance of certain species. In addition, the abundance of Red Snapper as that population rebuilds was cited as a possible contributing factor to declining abundance in grouper species due to predation.

According to the NOAA Fisheries representative on the AP, fishery-independent studies have shown that mean length of Scamp in the South Atlantic region has increased over time. Even though fishermen may be seeing small fish in their areas, at a regional scale, the number of small fish has decreased, which has caused the mean size in the survey to increase.

A commercial fisherman based out of Morehead City, North Carolina offered observations on water quality in that area. He recounts living on a canal for twenty-five years where, in the fall of each year, he would set pinfish traps to catch grouper and would consistently catch juvenile Gag, five to six inches long. However, he has not caught any in the last five years. He reasons that frequent dredge operations in the inlet may be affecting water quality to such an extent that fish are unable to access nursery areas. His observations were corroborated by other AP members from North Carolina.

Poor water quality was cited as a concern in other areas of the South Atlantic as well. A commercial representative from Port Orange, Florida, stated that deep-water grouper fishermen who target Snowy and Yellowedge Grouper off of Port Canaveral, have commented to him that the water quality offshore in deep water is negatively affected, as evidenced by lower catches, when freshwater from Lake Okeechobee is released.

AP members from Florida also spoke of concerns over frequent algae blooms and red tides affecting water quality.

Increased frequency of "cold-water events" in recent years was also cited as a factor that may be impacting grouper populations by causing the fish to disperse.

Asked how seasonal sea conditions have affected fishable days, an AP member observed that during September and October 2019 there was "huge groundswell" and very poor visibility due to suspended silt as a result of increased hurricane activity. However, he also offered that such occurrences are not new.

Others agreed that weather patterns have changed, and the weather is more volatile. Water clarity has diminished, and storms have increased in intensity. Fishermen agreed that days at sea are "not what they used to be"; fishermen can no longer count on stretches of calm weather for seven to fifteen days. Nowadays, claims one fisherman from North Carolina, "you've got to watch the weather close. If you get three days of pretty weather, you've got to go with it".

According to a Florida commercial fisherman, cold fronts have not been affecting Florida waters in recent years the way they used to. He claims the fronts are stalling to the north affecting the migrations of many species, prey and predator alike.

Observations on Management Measures

A commercial fisherman from North Carolina expressed dismay at not knowing what has caused the decline in grouper populations. While he admits he doesn't want to stop fishing, he's very concerned that "something catastrophic" has happened. He also voiced concern about the increased effort in commercial diving. He recounts a recent radio communication from a diver who claimed to have caught five fish that weighed over 250 pounds, a 100-pound Black Grouper, and 3 Gags that were fifty pounds each. "The diving situation" according to him "could be the nail in the coffin for the last big fish and some of the big breeders". He went on to acknowledge that a lot of fish houses depend on that product (e.g., hogfish) and offered that a slot limit could be considered as a management measure for the diving component. The same slot limit could be applied to the hook-and-line component for certain species since the average size of fish caught by that gear is smaller than what divers are landing. He also suggested lower trip limits for divers. Such measures, he claims, would also keep divers from other areas shifting effort to North Carolina waters.

Another commercial fisherman from North Carolina recommended that the Council consider implementing a Scamp commercial trip limit of 500 pounds for hook-and line and divers. He indicated that most of the commercial landings of Scamp in his area and in South Carolina are coming from the divers. He reiterated that Scamp are a hard fish to catch on hook-and-line, but powerheads are very effective. Some divers are catching 1,000 pounds so he feels it is important to slow the harvest down with a reasonable trip limit until scientists can determine the cause of the decline in abundance. He went on to point out that the Council has already employed some tools to help answer some of the unanswered questions. For instance, the Council could evaluate whether the Spawning Special Management Zones are working as they were intended to protect spawning populations of snapper grouper species.

Speaking on behalf of the charter/headboat sector, an AP member from South Carolina indicated that a size limit would be preferable to reducing the allowable take or imposing a season.

An AP member offered that actions in Snapper Grouper Regulatory Amendment 29 will help with discard mortality issues. Among other changes, the amendment would require that a descending device be on board all vessels fishing for or possessing snapper grouper species. He said it is important for fishermen to understand why such regulations are needed and not only encourage fishermen to use best fishing practices but educate them on how to put them to practice.

Another AP member suggested that the Council evaluate the effectiveness of the shallow-water grouper closure. He pointed out that the closure has been in place for ten years and it would be appropriate to conduct a review to share with the AP.

A commercial representative on the AP recounted that, when the Council put in place the current deep-water Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), they talked about setting aside other types of

habitat, from deep to shallow water. She acknowledged that the impetus to revisit such an action may not be there right now; however, she is hopeful that it will be in the future. Protecting habitat, she argued, is crucial to protecting species like Reg Grouper, Gag and Scamp. Marine Protected Areas located inshore could alleviate impacts from poor water quality, overdevelopment, and other non-fishing threats.

Asked whether current monitoring efforts (trap index, and catch estimates) are sufficiently monitoring the stock, a representative from Florida answered no. He believes that the Southeast Fisheries Science Center should be conducting a hook-and-line survey to sample for larger fish, along with the chevron trap survey. In addition, he suggests sampling year-one recruits with smaller Z-traps to begin determining recruitment patterns.

A diver on the AP offered that management could utilize the help of the diving community to supplement data collection and monitoring efforts. He claims divers can gather valuable information directly from the places where fish live as many of them engage in diving simply to observe the animals in their natural environment.

One AP member observed that Scamp and Yellowmouth Grouper are very similar in appearance and there could be identification issues between the two species.

Other Observations

AP members expressed concern over species moving north of the Council's area of jurisdiction in response to climate change. A member inquired as to trends in landings of Scamp in the Mid-Atlantic region.

A charter captain from the Florida Keys observed that when grouper season opens in May of the year, there is an influx of divers to the Lower Keys, "almost like a new mini-season". He claims the divers harvest a lot of fish during that time.

A commercial fisherman from the same area recounted that he sees grouper frequently during the months that harvest is closed. He claims that as soon as harvest is allowed, "within a matter of two to three days", the fish are gone. According to him, this is "not because they were harvested, but they are gone because of the pressure, and I don't know if these fish are moving away to be caught somewhere else outside of the spawning period, but I do know that they are adapting to what we have done in this closed period of time." Furthermore, he explained that this apparent change in fish behavior has occurred over many years. During the first few years after the annual closure was implemented, the fish would be harvested within the first six weeks of the opening, as evidenced by his catch records of Black Grouper. Over time, the May 1 opening of grouper season triggers the fish to leave the area.