

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Gray Triggerfish Fishery Performance Report October 2021

SAFMC Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

SEDAR82-RD40

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At their October 2021 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for gray triggerfish 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 gray triggerfish will be provided to complement material being used in the research track assessment (SEDAR 82) scheduled for completion in fall 2023 and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

James Hull Jr. (Chair;
Commercial/Dealer/Retailer/FL)
Robert Lorenz (Vice Chair;
Recreational/NC)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)
Richen "Dick" Brame (NGO/NC)
Randall Beardsley (Recreational/FL)*
Tony Constant (Charter/Recreational/SC)
Jack Cox Jr. (Commercial/NC)
Andrew Fish (Commercial/FL)
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)
Lawton Howard (Recreational/GA)
Rusty Hudson (Commercial/FL)
Chris Kimrey (Charter/NC)*

Andrew Mahoney (Commercial/SC)
Randy McKinley (Commercial/NC)
Chris Militello (Recreational/FL)
Harry Morales (Recreational/SC)
David Moss (Recreational/FL)
Fentress "Red" Munden
(Conservation/NC)*
James Paskiewicz (Commercial/FL)
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)
Cameron Sebastian
(Charter/Commercial/SC)*
David Snyder (Consumer Rep/GA)*
Todd Kellison (At-Large/NOAA)
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the mutton snapper fishery in the South Atlantic region is available at the following link: <https://safmc-shinyapps.shinyapps.io/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.

The total annual catch limit (717,000 pounds whole weight (lbs ww)) is allocated 43.56% to the commercial fishery (312,325 lbs ww) and 56.44% to the recreational fishery (404,675 lbs ww). A minimum size limit of 12 inches fork length is in effect for both sectors. The commercial trip limit is 1,000 pounds whole weight. The commercial annual catch limit (ACL) is managed using a split season, with 50% of the commercial ACL (156,162 lbs ww) allocated to Season 1 (January-June) and 50% allocated to Season 2 (July-December). Any unused ACL from Season 1 is carried forward to Season 2. Unused ACL from Season 2 is not carried forward. The recreational bag limit is 10 fish per person per day, with gray triggerfish counting toward a 20 fish aggregate bag limit for an assemblage of porgy, jack, grunt, and

other species.

Observations on Potential Spawning Behavior

Spawning fish have been observed most often in late May through June. Eggs were observed from May through October in 2021.

Fish can be found off the reef while building nests and aggregating to spawn.

Observations on Fishing Gear/Behavior

Gray triggerfish are being caught more frequently using “chicken rigs”, gear with a weighted sinker and 2-3 hooks spaced vertically in the water column.

Gray triggerfish are typically found higher in the water column than red snapper, co-occurring in some areas with vermilion snapper and jacks. Gray triggerfish can be targeted while avoiding red snapper.

They have been caught in 80-150 feet, but more recently have been caught higher in the water column (about 20 feet below the boat). Commercial efforts occur up to 180 feet.

Triggerfish can be caught without anchoring due to newer technology (trolling motors) and fishing techniques that allow boats to better hold their position.

Typical baits are squid or cut fish. Non-natural baits have been considered in some areas to reduce red snapper interactions.

Catches typically occur during the day; little if any night fishing.

Observations on Fish Size

Fish in the same area can be of very similar size, so fishermen may move on from areas after catching a few undersized fish.

Fishermen have noticed a tendency for smaller triggerfish to be nearer to shore.

Observations on Shifts in Effort or Stock Abundance

There has been a general rise in recreational effort. Gray triggerfish, specifically, have been targeted more as a nearshore meat fishery that can be retained with reductions to catch limits for red snapper and other snapper grouper species.

Commercially, gray triggerfish used to be caught more as bycatch, but are targeted more now due to closures or reduced limits in other fisheries.

North Carolina

In Morehead City area, recently have had more difficult catching limits of gray triggerfish. This may be impacted by increased effort and targeting from both sectors. Also, schools seem to be smaller, though in similar locations.

Observations on Releases/Discards

A study of release mortality was published in 2019 (Runde et al.), which will provide updated

information for SEDAR 82. A study investigating impacts of current best practices and descending devices may be useful.

Barotrauma effects seem to increase at 90 feet and deeper depths.

There has been less discarding of triggerfish relative to other species due to alignment of management to complement the vermilion snapper season (both species have a 50/50 split season, with seasons from January-June and July-December).

Observations on Price and Demand

In addition to increased targeting due to efforts shifts away from more restricted species, desirability and awareness of gray triggerfish's good taste have increased since the 2000s for both sectors.

Gray triggerfish demand and price have increased, making some businesses fairly dependent on this species, with consideration of closures and limitations for other species. Gray triggerfish are sold easily and for a good price.

North Carolina

In North Carolina, gray triggerfish have become one of the most requested bottom fish.

Prior to about 10-12 years ago, triggerfish were not as desirable in North Carolina and if caught, were often shipped to Florida. This has changed with increased awareness of and desirability for the taste of triggerfish in this area.

Observations on Management Measures

Stepdowns could be considered in the future to help ensure year-round fisheries.

Reduced limitations on red snapper could alleviate pressure on gray triggerfish.

Generally, the AP felt that current measures do not need to change very much, but proactive measures could be considered to maintain the fishery. Close attention should be given to this fishery to prevent population decreases and management limitations in the future. Fisheries have become dependent on gray triggerfish. Keeping the fishery open is important to continue fishery-dependent data collection, as well as commerce.

The current acceptable biological catch is based on historic catch as no stock assessment has been successfully completed to indicate whether overfishing is occurring.

The change in recreational bag limit to 10 fish per person impacted the daily take.

Environmental Observations

Fish distribution does not seem to have changed much from the past in the South Atlantic, but it may be useful to see if gray triggerfish are being seen in substantial numbers in the Mid-Atlantic. Even if gray triggerfish are observed further north, this doesn't necessarily impact the South Atlantic population as it is not a migratory fish.