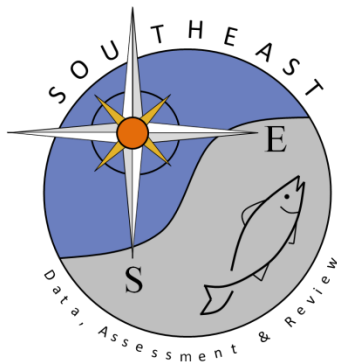


DRAFT Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel Red Snapper Fishery Performance Report

Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel

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DRAFT
Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel
Red Snapper Fishery Performance Report
October 2024

At their October 2024 meeting, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Snapper Grouper Advisory Panel (AP) reviewed fishery information for red snapper and updated this fishery performance report (FPR), which was originally developed in 2020. 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 red snapper will be provided to the Scientific and Statistical Committee (SSC) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SEP) to complement material being used in the upcoming SEDAR 90 red snapper stock assessment and to inform future management.

Advisory Panel Members:

James Paskiewicz (Chair; Commercial/FL)
Chris Kimrey (Vice Chair; Charter/NC)
Vincent Bonura (Commercial/FL)
Gettys Brannon (NGO/SC)
Scott Buff (Commercial/Recreational/NC)
Chris Conklin (Commercial/SC)
Tony Constant (Charter/Recreational/SC)
Jack Cox (Commercial/NC)
Andrew Fish (Commercial/FL)
Robert Freeman (Charter/NC)
Richard Gomez (Charter/FL)
Matt Mathews (Recreational/GA)
Randy McKinley (Commercial/NC)

Thomas Meeks (Recreational/GA)*
Chris Militello (Recreational/FL)*
David Moss (Recreational/FL)
Paul Nelson (Commercial/Charter/FL)*
Andy Piland (Charter/NC)*
John Polston (Commercial/FL)
Stephen Ranney (Charter/SC)
Paul Rudershausen (Scientist/NC)
Cameron Sebastian (Charter/Commercial/SC)
Haley Stephens (For-Hire/FL)
Todd Kellison (NOAA/NC)*
*not in attendance

Fishery Overview

Summary information on the red snapper 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 FPR.

Observations on Abundance and Distribution

Red snapper continue to be prevalent and seem to have increased since 2019 throughout the South Atlantic region. Furthermore, red snapper seem to have continued to increase within the last 3 years (since 2022). This increase is evident from a variety of new behaviors and inhabited areas, some examples of which are listed below.

Fishermen throughout the region have observed an expansion of red snapper into shallower waters. Generally, red snapper that are found closer to shore are smaller fish. Recreational AP members from southern SC noted catching more red snapper in areas with depths of 30 feet and closer to shore. Off the SC/NC border, red snapper now inhabit reefs that are ~3 miles from

shore. Off Topsail Beach, NC, red snapper have been caught in depths as shallow as 30 feet (7-10 miles from shore). Off Morehead City, NC, 6-12 pound red snapper are consistently caught in cooler waters during spring at depths of 60-100 feet. Fewer are caught in this area later in the summer, as the water warms, which may be temperature-related or due to a temporary, localized reduction in that population from fishing that occurred earlier in the year.

Off Ponce Inlet, FL, red snapper have been caught along the shoreline and in the river inlets. Small red snapper (<10 pounds) are available as far as 30 miles offshore (further offshore than historically). Large red snapper (36+ inches) are available as close as 10-15 miles from shore (further inshore than historically). The fish seem to be habitat generalists, with a variety of sizes living in a wide variety of depths. Red snapper in this area also are not only staying on the bottom, but do come up closer to the surface. These fish seem to be acting curious by following trolling motors.

Red snapper, which have historically been associated with hard bottom or bottom structure, are also now being caught in areas with minimal or no bottom structure. AP members from Ponce Inlet, FL, and southern SC suggested that red snapper may be too abundant for their traditional habitats and seem to be exploring new areas in search of food.

The abundance and behavior of red snapper has also resulted in catches on gear or fishing methods other than offshore hook-and-line bottom fishing. Some commercial fishermen off central Florida (Ponce Inlet and Cape Canaveral) are frequently catching red snapper while trolling for king mackerel in about 85 feet of water. Headboat fishermen off Ponce Inlet are catching red snapper via sight-casting and fishing at the surface, at depths around 60 feet, without a sinker. Off southern SC, 15-20 inch red snapper are caught while targeting Atlantic spadefish, a species that is typically shallower and more pelagic than red snapper.

Observations on Fish Size and Recruitment

Off southern SC, a recreational AP member has continued to see a substantial number of ~36 inch red snapper, but has also noticed an increase in 15-20 inch red snapper.

A headboat AP member from Ponce Inlet, FL, commented that red snapper seem to be hardier/fatter, even at shorter lengths. A commercial AP member from the Florida Keys commented that yellowtail snapper also seem to be stockier/fatter, and more often with an anal prolapse.

A commercial AP member from Ponce Inlet, FL, has noticed relatively more small fish abundance in the most recent years (although there were still substantial numbers of large fish, as well).

Observations on Best Fishing Practices and Release Survival

Headboat captains at the NC/SC border estimate out of 10-20/day caught, only about 10 for the entire year are estimated to not survive after release (using a descending device and proper handling techniques). Additional estimates from these captains include 1 fish unlikely to survive out of 90 caught that day and a roughly 2% mortality rate. The fish that are less likely to survive seem to be larger fish that were fought for a longer time. Some AP members commented that the

discard mortality rate may be overestimated for fishermen that use proper handling/releasing techniques.

A scientist AP member noted a study that found only about 10% of surveyed headboat anglers in North Carolina knew proper venting techniques. More information on common depths fished could help inform discard mortality rates to account for how many red snapper that are caught are likely to require barotrauma treatment via venting or a descending device for optimal survival after release. Some of this information is collected through the SciFish application.

Observations on Fishing Behavior and Effort

Given the inability to retain red snapper, effort throughout the region has been directed toward avoiding red snapper. However, due to the increased abundance of the stock, this effort is difficult to accomplish, and red snapper are still frequently encountered, even in areas in which they haven't been caught historically.

A headboat AP member from Ponce Inlet, FL, commented that her business used to advise people to reel slowly so fish don't come off the hook, but now they advise for people to reel as fast as possible to avoid shark depredation. This headboat does not typically fish in deep enough water to see severe barotrauma, but is prepared with descending and venting tools if it's observed.

Observations on Social and Economic Community Dependence

Red snapper are a highly desirable species, but due to the low catch limits, businesses have had to pivot to be more financially dependent on other species with higher catch limits. Similarly, recreational anglers throughout the region have a strong desire to target and catch red snapper, but are largely unable to do so because of current regulations.

The ability to own and operate a fishing business in the South Atlantic is increasingly difficult. This is due to increasingly strict regulations (which affects income), along with inflation/rising costs, and strong interest from other industries to acquire coastal property. As harvest opportunities have continued to decline, the number of functional fishing businesses has also decreased. Fishing businesses also provide valuable work opportunities for individuals who are passionate about their work and trained with a specialized skillset that may not be easily transferrable to other industries.

Twenty years ago, there were 9 headboats operating out of Ponce Inlet, FL. Today, there is only one. The increasingly restrictive regulations on red snapper and other South Atlantic snapper grouper species has had drastic impacts on the for-hire industry, fishing opportunities, and associated coastal businesses. Headboat tickets for the short red snapper recreational season sell out very quickly (2 trips both sold out in 11 minutes).

The decline in headboats is similarly reflected throughout the region. Headboats are an important component of the fishery that provides cost-effective marine fishing access for individuals that do not own boats. With the high demand and very limited recreational red snapper season, some recreational for-hire businesses have begun increasing prices for those trips. Other businesses, like the Ponce Inlet headboat, maintained their prices to continue to

provide cost-effective access to their customers.

Observations on Management Measures

A charter captain from SC noted the difficulty in adherence to and enforcement of the current strict regulations on red snapper when they are as abundant as they currently are. Fishermen are frequently tempted to retain red snapper because during some days, that is all they are catching.

A commercial/recreational AP member from Southport, NC, questioned when the effort from enduring harvest limit reductions despite growing abundance of red snapper will result in an increase in allowable landings. The increase in red snapper without an increase in harvest access has had negative biological, social, and economic effects resulting in business closures, along with pessimism and distrust in the management process. The regulations protecting red snapper are the reason why fishing access cannot be increased, as the regulations cause discarding, which is the bulk of the fishing-related mortality. Some level of increased retention of red snapper needs to be considered.

Management and stakeholders could refer to New England fisheries for potential ways to interact and implement management strategies.

The short recreational season makes the potential for recreational harvest highly dependent on weather. In the northern part of the region (off the Carolinas), the weather can be more variable than off Florida, leading to disparate opportunities for fishing during red snapper season in some years.

Given the importance and unique niche of the headboat component of the fishery, a headboat AP member from Ponce Inlet, FL, expressed support for consideration of separate ACLs/quotas for headboats.

A commercial fisherman from Topsail, NC, commented that a commercial bycatch allowance may be helpful to maintain a steady supply of fresh, local seafood without severely impacting the health of the stock.

Larger commercial vessels that can make longer trips are seemingly being penalized relative to smaller vessels that make shorter trips. Some increase to the trip limit or changes in how trip limits are enforced may help this be more equitable. A 75-pound trip limit is not enough to target, and a year-round 75-pound bycatch limit could be considered.

The AP continues to advocate for actions to reduce shark encounters (both depredation and attacks on humans), potentially by an increase in shark harvest. The increased abundance of sharks is having negative consequences on South Atlantic fisheries, without any benefits of commercial value from allowable harvest. An expanded shark fishery would benefit from some re-marketing to remind consumers that it is an affordable, sustainable source of protein. Some form of certification showing humane and sustainable catch could be useful to accomplish this.

In fish stocking and freshwater management, sometimes small, aggressive fish are removed initially so that juveniles of all species can survive to adulthood. Given the aggressive nature of

red snapper, a strategy to achieve this may have the benefit of achieving greater balance between red snapper and other species. Regardless of the topic management strategy, achieving greater balance between red snapper and the rest of the South Atlantic bottom fish species needs to be a consideration; not just improvements to the red snapper stock, individually.

Environmental Observations

Several AP members expressed concerns about potential negative effects of the increase of red snapper on the health of other, co-occurring stocks. Through predation or competition, red snapper may be contributing to the decline or continued depletion of South Atlantic stocks like black sea bass, sand perch, whiting, etc.

Off Florida, the increased abundance of sharks and frequency of depredation are an additional deterrent (other than catching/releasing many red snapper) to fishing activities. In the Florida Keys, shark attacks seem to have become more prevalent. The AP noted that between the increases of red snapper and sharks, there seems to be some imbalance to natural predator-prey interactions for South Atlantic fish populations. Off Ponce Inlet, goliath grouper are similarly affecting fishing activities via depredation and increased consumption of other fish as that population's abundance and biomass continues to grow.

With warming waters, there has been an increase in warm-water spawners (like red snapper and mangrove snapper) and declined recruitment in winter-spawning groupers (like red, black, and gag grouper). Changes in water temperature could also be affecting the range and distribution of South Atlantic species.

Over the last 5 years, there seems to be large and persistent runoff from Lake Okeechobee that is likely affecting South Atlantic fish species. Generally, Florida AP members especially expressed strong concerns with water quality. While the Council may not have jurisdiction over managing water quality, they should make every effort to communicate with and request actions from the appropriate management bodies.

Inability to retain red snapper while they are abundant has led to redirected targeting toward other available species with higher catch limits. A recreational AP member from southern SC has observed fewer triggerfish (gray triggerfish bag limit is 10 fish and the recreational season is open all year) in that area as more fishermen have been targeting this species.

Other Observations

Increased abundance of red snapper has impacted the Florida king mackerel fishery, notably with fishermen changing the depths at which they fish (trying to fish shallower) to avoid red snapper. However, as noted previously in the report, red snapper behavior has also adjusted with some of them now coming higher in the water column.