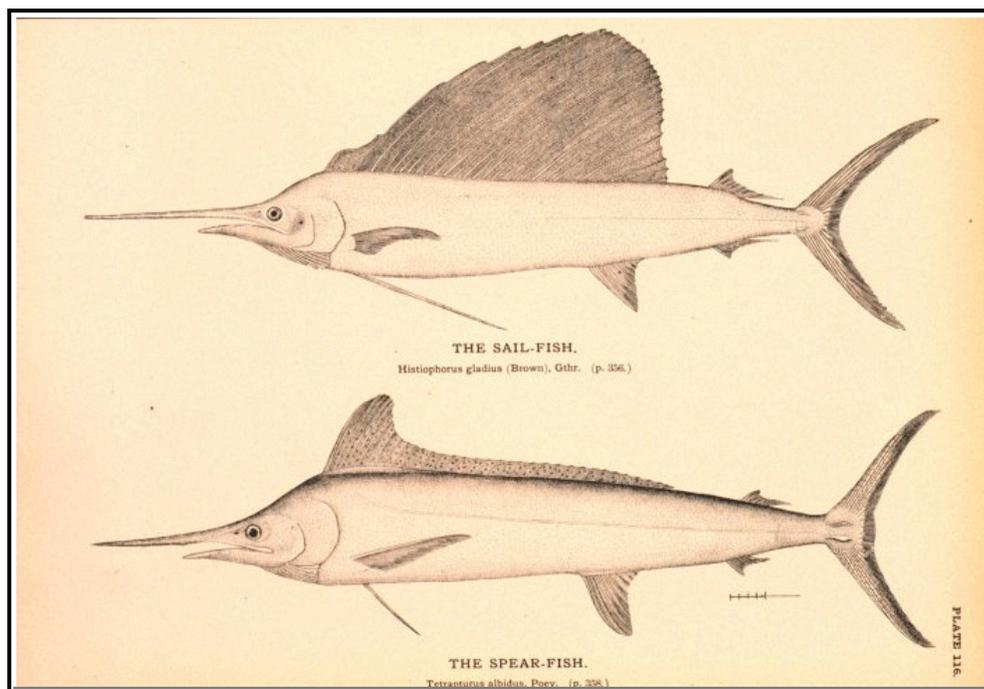


2001 Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation for Atlantic Highly Migratory Species



DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service



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U.S. Department of Commerce
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
National Marine Fisheries Service
Office of Sustainable Fisheries
Highly Migratory Species Management Division
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Documentation Requests:

All documents cited in the SAFE report, as well as additional copies of the report, are available from the Highly Migratory Species Management Division, Office of Sustainable Fisheries, National Marine Fisheries Service:

Othel Freeman
1315 East West Highway
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: (301) 713-2347
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Dealer Permits:

Tuna dealer permits are issued out of the Northeast Regional Office of NMFS (978-281-9370), shark and swordfish dealer permits are issued out of the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

Atlantic Tuna Permits:

Questions regarding the Atlantic tunas permit process should be directed to Commerce One Customer Service at (888) 872-8862, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern Time. Fishermen may also listen to or view updates to the regulations via the toll-free automated telephone system or the website (www.nmfspermits.com).

Atlantic Shark and Swordfish Permits:

Questions regarding renewals or transfers of shark and swordfish limited access permits should be directed to the NMFS Southeast Regional Office (727-570-5326).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Stock Assessment and Fishery Evaluation (SAFE) report provides a summary of the best available scientific information on the condition of stocks, marine ecosystems, and fisheries being managed under federal regulation. Consistent with the guidelines for National Standard 2 of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the SAFE report is prepared annually and used as a reference in the evaluation and refinement of fisheries management practices. The report updates the data necessary to determine appropriate annual harvest levels, documents significant trends in the resource, marine ecosystems, and fisheries over time, and identifies associated bycatch and safety issues. Through a comprehensive annual update of key biological, economic, and social indicators, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) can ensure use of the best available scientific data in its decision making process.

The 2001 SAFE report for Highly Migratory Species (HMS) includes the latest stock assessment data, recommendations, and resolutions from The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and their Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) through December 2000. The report is divided into the following nine sections: Stock Assessment Update; Essential Fish Habitat; Fishery Data Update; Economic Status of HMS Fisheries; Community and Social Data Update; Fish Processing, Industry and Trade; Bycatch; HMS Permits; and Issues for Consideration and Outlook.

Stock Assessment Update

The SCRS conducted several stock assessments in 2000, including: West Atlantic bluefin tuna, Atlantic yellowfin tuna, North and South Atlantic albacore tuna, and Atlantic blue and white marlin. The bluefin tuna, North Atlantic albacore, and marlin stocks remain overfished. Yellowfin tuna and South Atlantic albacore stocks are fully fished. A stock assessment for Atlantic blue marlin and Atlantic white marlin was completed in July 2000. A two-phase rebuilding plan for Atlantic blue and white marlin was recommended by ICCAT in November 2000. No stock assessments for Atlantic sharks were conducted in 2000.

Essential Fish Habitat

Several investigations continued surveying shark nursery grounds and pupping areas along the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico coasts during 2000. Early life history studies on billfish are providing important essential fish habitat information. A comprehensive program examining the importance of the Charleston Bump area to a suite of fishery resources, including HMS, was conducted this year. This program is taking a multi-disciplinary approach to describing biological and oceanographic features of this important nursery and fishing area.

Fishery Data Update

There are several sources of new information concerning HMS fisheries. These include updated catch and landings data, logbook and observer data, and recently conducted social surveys. In this document, data are analyzed by gear type to more easily assess the implications for each of our multi-species fisheries. Some of the more important developments from 2000 are:

- implementation of time/area closures, gear modifications, and gear requirements to reduce bycatch (including HMS species and sea turtles) in the pelagic longline fishery;
- implementation of vessel monitoring systems on pelagic longline (which was delayed indefinitely by a Federal court ruling);
- Advanced Notices of Proposed Rulemakings to implement a recreational monitoring program for billfish and swordfish, as well as to reduce bycatch of bluefin tuna;
- ICCAT's adoption of a two-phase rebuilding for Atlantic blue and white marlin, and the implementation of the 10-year international rebuilding program for North Atlantic swordfish adopted by ICCAT in 1999;
- updated estimates of shark catches by U.S. fishermen from the 2000 Shark Evaluation Annual report; and
- settlement agreements were reached in two shark lawsuits.

Economic Status of HMS Fisheries

The 2001 SAFE report includes a section on the economic status of commercial and recreational HMS fisheries. In the previous SAFE report, this information was presented in association with various gear types, but this year's report combines all available economic information into one section, including: production (U.S. and international); ex-vessel prices; wholesale prices; fishing costs and revenues for commercial fisheries; costs and revenues for dealers; recreational fishing; and charter/headboat fisheries. In addition, this section provides a review of rules that had or will have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities under the Regulatory Flexibility Act.

Community and Social Data Update

Analyses relative to National Standard 8 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act rely heavily on the availability of community studies and profiles. As HMS by definition are highly migratory resources, fishermen often tend to shift locations in an attempt

to follow the fish. The inclusion of typical community profiles in HMS management decisions is somewhat difficult and continued social and community studies to identify the participants in these fisheries are of great importance. This section of the SAFE report includes an overview of current information and provides a summary of new research, including a social and economic examination of the fishing ports and coastal counties along the mid-Atlantic coast. This section also provides a summary of expected community and social impacts of several agency actions completed during 2000.

Fish Processing, Industry and Trade

Domestic and international consumer preference continues to play a large role in HMS markets. The Fish Processing, Industry and Trade section provides an overview of U.S. trade activities relative to HMS, required documentation, and summaries of U.S. imports and exports of HMS products. Bluefin tuna trade remains strictly monitored through use of the Bluefin Statistical Document program. Data indicate that roughly 84 percent of Atlantic bluefin tuna landed in the United States in 1999 were exported. Sharks and shark products continue to be an important export, although the nature of reporting is much less detailed than that used for bluefin tuna. Swordfish are an important import into the United States, as indicated by data collected through the Swordfish Import Monitoring Program. The use of trade data is an important tool in the monitoring and management of HMS and an effective supplement to existing information sources. In 2000, ICCAT also recommended an enhancement of trade monitoring efforts for swordfish and bigeye tuna in the coming years.

Bycatch

Bycatch of finfish and sea turtles and incidental catches of marine mammals and sea birds continue to be areas of concern in HMS management, with major steps taken during 2000 to reduce bycatch in the pelagic longline fishery through implementation of several time/area closures, gear modifications and gear restrictions. These actions were taken in compliance with the HMS FMP and a Biological Opinion (BO) on HMS fisheries received on June 30, 2000. Bycatch in the squid mid-water trawl and menhaden purse seine fisheries is also discussed in this section. A summary of agency actions taken during 2000, as part of the National Bycatch Plan, is also provided. A challenging aspect in dealing with bycatch is the international component of HMS fisheries, particularly considering that the United States often represents only a small percentage of the overall catch of these species on an Atlantic-wide basis.

HMS Permits

NMFS continues to explore effective and equitable means to reduce overcapitalization problems. As of October 2000, there were 982 total permit holders in the limited access commercial shark, swordfish and tuna (pelagic longline only) fisheries. This section provides additional management actions that may be considered to further reduce the number of permits, if

deemed necessary. Options for upgrading and safety issues are also discussed.

NMFS has made significant improvements to its Atlantic tunas permitting system, including a website where constituents can purchase initial and renewal permits for Atlantic tunas, update permit information, and report recreational landings of bluefin tuna (www.nmfspermits.com). Increasing the level of automation in the permitting process as well as the methods of renewal (i.e., phone, fax, Internet) is expected to improve constituent satisfaction and reduce administrative costs. NMFS hopes to build upon this success and consider automating other HMS permitting processes in the future.

Issues for Consideration and Outlook

In 2001, NMFS plans to continue implementing and evaluating the FMP measures in an attempt to address overfishing and overcapitalization problems that affect many HMS fisheries. It is anticipated that as a result of the HMS FMP, Amendment 1 of the Atlantic Billfish FMP and the 2000 ICCAT recommendations that more focus will be placed on implementing and/or enhancing monitoring of HMS recreational fisheries through charter/headboat permits and logbooks, observer programs, and landings of billfish and swordfish by recreational anglers. New SCRS information, new ICCAT recommendations, and other recently released studies need to be incorporated, consistent with National Standard 2. Improvements in data coordination and management within NMFS and with other agencies should contribute to increasingly effective monitoring and management. Further actions related to the June 30, 2000, BO on HMS fisheries, as well as the anticipated BO early in 2001 resulting from a re-initiation of consultation are expected to address loggerhead and leatherback sea turtle bycatch in Atlantic pelagic longline fisheries. The April 2 - 4, 2001 HMS Advisory Panel meeting provides an excellent opportunity to identify and discuss those issues raised in the SAFE report which require further action. Through continuous public and constituent interaction, increased monitoring, ongoing life history work, and additional socio-economic assessment, NMFS strives to continue building sustainable fisheries for all Atlantic Highly Migratory Species.

TABLE OF CONTENTS
