Dino Barone

South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

From the Outer Banks of North Carolina to the tropical waters off the Florida Keys, the fisheries managed by the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council are as diverse as the creatures and habitats that stretch along more than 1,100 miles of coastline. Grouper lurk around coral-covered ledges in waters up to 600 feet deep, brightly colored dolphin fish (mahi mahi) skim the ocean surface in Gulf Stream currents, and spiny lobster poke their antennae from under tropical corals. The area includes Islamorada, Florida, boasting itself the "Sportfishing Capital of the World", and many historical fishing communities with diverse commercial fleets scattered along the coasts of the Carolinas, Georgia and eastern Florida.

Management plans have been developed by the Council for the Snapper & Grouper complex (reef fish), Coastal Migratory Pelagics (mackerels), coral, golden crab, shrimp, sargassum, and spiny lobster. In addition, the South Atlantic Council is the lead council for the management of dolphin (mahi mahi) and wahoo along the Atlantic coast.

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Opportunities & Challenges

As the human population continues to grow in the southeast, so does the pressure on the region's marine resources. The total number of anglers in the South Atlantic increased by 55% between 1997 and 2006. This trend is expected to continue. In 2006, the South Atlantic region had 2.6 million marine recreational anglers who took a total of 24 million fishing trips. This increase in fishing effort creates a serious challenge for the Council as it works to provide sustainable fisheries.

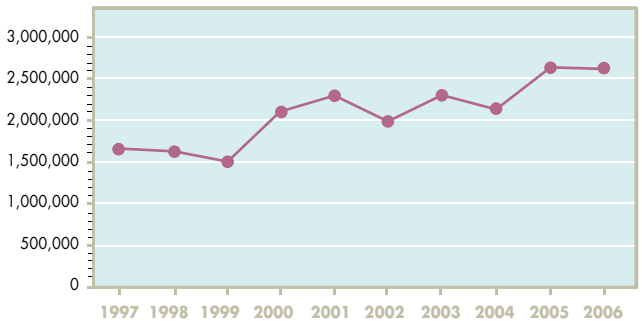
Providing Sustainable Fisheries

Of the eight fisheries the Council manages, seven are being managed at sustainable levels and only one, the snapper grouper fishery, has species that are experiencing overfishing. The mixed-species nature of this fishery offers the greatest challenge for successful management. Many of the 73 species included in the management unit are long-lived, slow to reproduce, and often don't survive the trauma of being caught from great depths. Species such as red snapper may live to be 54 years old while others like gag grouper have complex life cycles, changing sex as they age. The Council is addressing overfishing for species in the snapper grouper complex and rebuilding stocks to sustainable levels under current and proposed management measures.

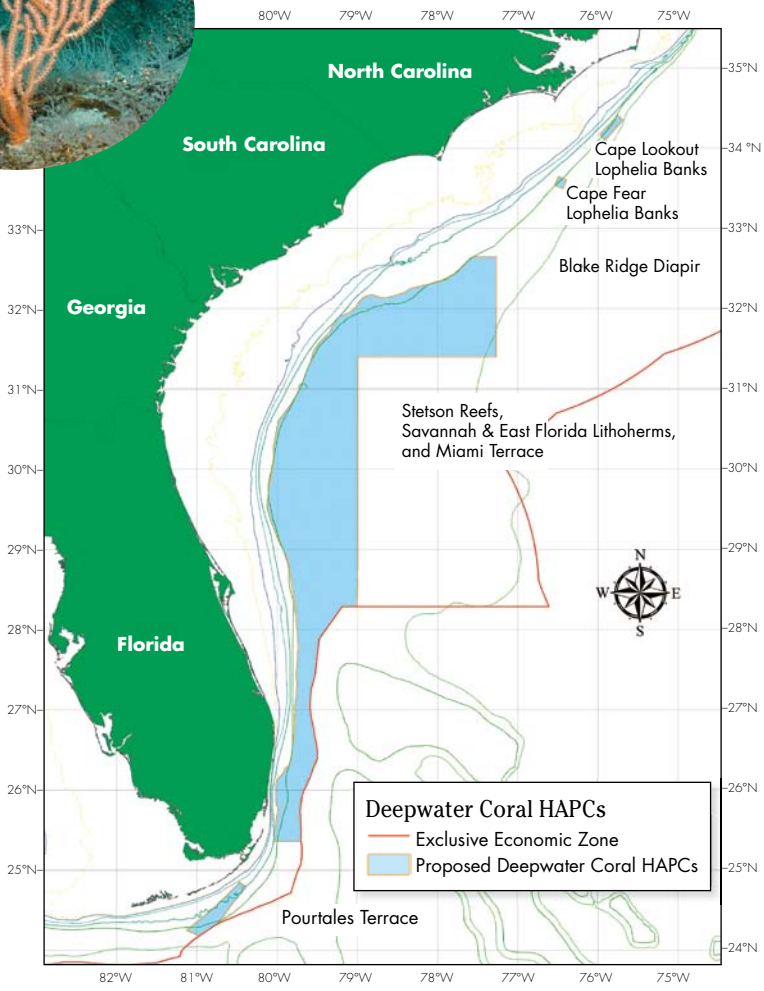
Allocating Limited Resources

The Council faces increasing challenges in dealing with allocation. The growing human population has led to an increase in the number of recreational anglers while competition from imports, decreased waterfront accessibility and other factors have led to a reduction in commercial fishing operations. For some fish stocks, reductions in harvest are necessary to meet mandated rebuilding plans. The requirement that Councils develop annual catch limits may lead to further reductions. The Council is considering three sectors (commercial, recreational and for-hire) when dividing a limited amount of fish. As the Council reviews its options, additional economic and social data and analyses are needed to help assess the cumulative impacts of regulations and aid in making fair and equitable allocations.

Number of Recreational Participants 1997-2006



Source: NOAA Fisheries Marine Recreational Information Program, 2009



Designation of Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern will aid in the protection of the largest contiguous distribution of deepwater coral ecosystems in the world.

Coral photo: Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institution

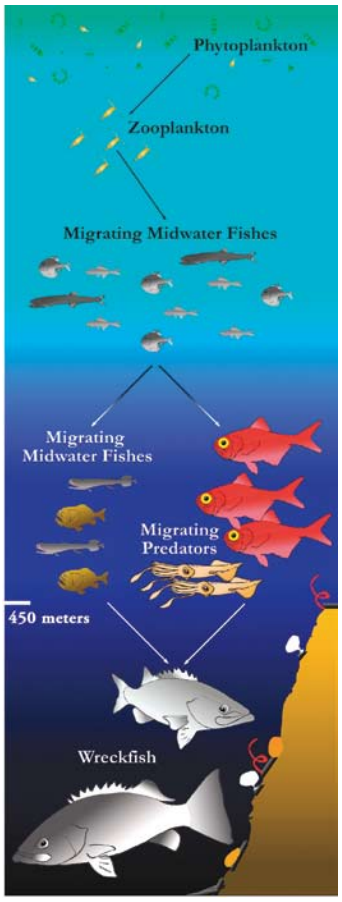
Protecting Deepwater Corals

The Council is working to conserve and manage deepwater corals, and protecting what is currently thought to be the largest contiguous distribution of deepwater coral ecosystems in the world. The Council is considering designating over 23,000 square miles as Coral Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, protecting these areas from bottom-damaging fishing practices. The Council supported production of the award-winning film, *Revealing the Deep,* highlighting the importance of deepwater coral ecosystems and current research being conducted off the southeastern coast of the United States. Copies of the DVD are available through the Council's office.

Establishing Marine Protected Areas

The Council established a series of eight deepwater marine protected areas along the southeastern coast from North Carolina to southeastern Florida. These marine protected areas, ranging in size from 8 to 150 square nautical miles, are designed as a management tool to help protect deepwater snapper grouper species and their habitats. The marine protected areas are the result of a sixteen-year deliberative and open public process by the Council, and were implemented in early 2009. Trolling for pelagic species such as tuna, dolphin, and mackerel is allowed in the areas, but bottom fishing for snapper grouper species is prohibited. This series of marine protected areas is the first to be established along the South Atlantic coast, and were developed based on sound science coupled with a "bottom up" approach using public input in the open process inherent to the regional fishery management councils.

Robert Cardin



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Ensuring Quality Stock Assessments

The South Atlantic Council is responsible for administering the South East Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) stock assessment program. SEDAR is a cooperative fishery management process initiated to improve the quality and reliability of assessments of fishery resources in the southeastern United States. SEDAR oversight is provided by the South Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and US Caribbean Regional Fishery Management Councils in coordination with NOAA Fisheries and the Atlantic and Gulf Interstate Fishery Commissions. The Council works with SEDAR to improve the quality of stock assessments, improve the quantitative basis of fishery management actions, and increase the relevance of research and monitoring programs in the Southeast Region. Due to the limited number of stock assessments that can be completed on a yearly basis, along with data limitations for many stocks, the Council will be challenged to establish appropriate annual catch limits for some stocks.

Expanding an Ecosystem-based Approach

The Council has developed a Fishery Ecosystem Plan that describes the South Atlantic ecosystem and its fisheries. It serves as a source document that includes information on biological, ecological, social, and economic information for fisheries in the South Atlantic ecosystem. As the Council expands its ecosystem-based approach to management, the use of "place-based" management through designation of Habitat Areas of Particular Concern, marine protected areas, and other managed areas will become more important. The greatest challenge to implementing ecosystem-based management in the southeast region is a scarcity of data and lack of knowledge of basic ecosystem functions.

Improving Stakeholder Participation

Public participation is the foundation of the Council management process. The South Atlantic Council has 14 advisory panels that include fishermen, representatives from environmental groups, business owners and other stakeholders familiar with fisheries issues. Panels provide valuable information at the "grass roots" level for the Council to consider in making management decisions. Public hearings and scoping meetings are also a key to public input. Recently, the South Atlantic Council has developed a new approach that uses an informal "round table" format, where fishermen and other participants can meet with Council staff to discuss issues and receive additional information. Participants may then provide their comments to Council representatives attending the meeting. The informal environment facilitates a more personal exchange of information and results in a better informed public.