



DON'T TAKE THE BAIT!



Greater amberjack

Myths have persisted for years about the impact of recreational fishing on ocean fish populations and how to manage that impact. Most recently, these myths have resurfaced as justification for a new bill, S. 1916/H.R. 2304, the Fishery Science Improvement Act. Don't let these myths (summarized in more detail below) disguise the fact that this legislation would put some of America's most valuable and vulnerable ocean fish populations at risk of overfishing by exempting them from science-based catch limits and accountability measures. **Congress should reject S. 1916/H.R. 2304 and stand strong for the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA).**

MYTH

Recreational fishing has a negligible impact on ocean fish populations.

FACT

Big fun, big deal. Recreational fishing can have a major impact on the health of fish populations.

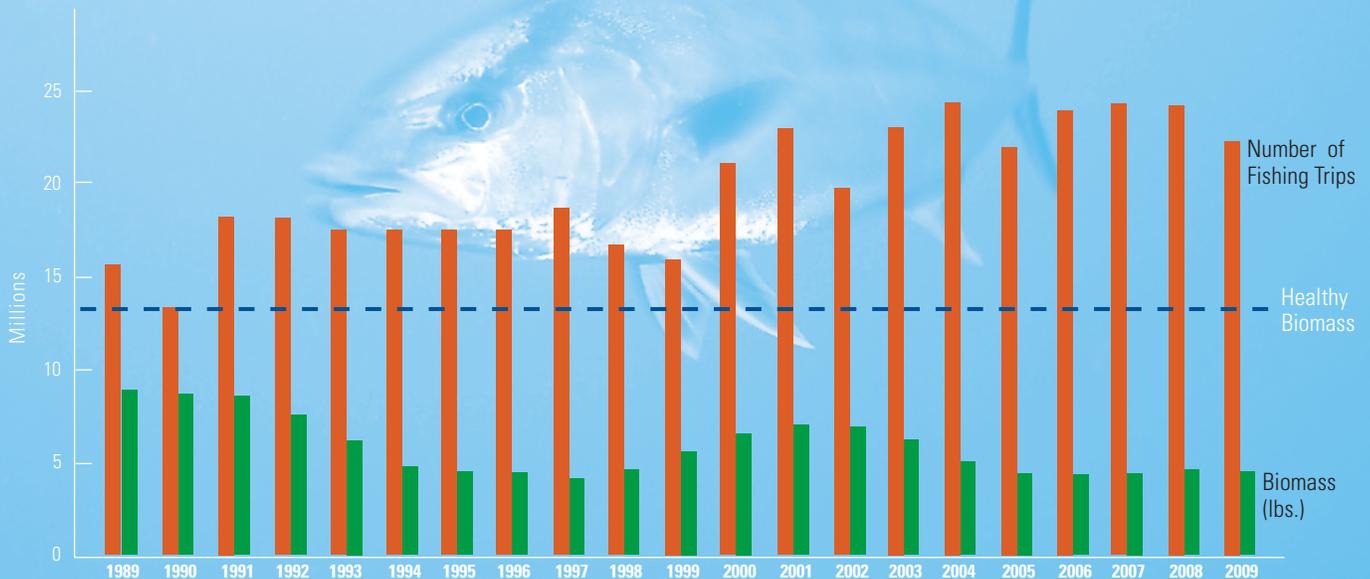
It is hard for some people to imagine that recreational fishing can have much of an effect on the health of ocean fish populations, particularly compared with the impact of commercial fishing

vessels, which can bring in many thousands of pounds of fish per trip. In reality, however, millions of individual anglers catching a few fish per trip can have a huge impact on their target fish species.

In 1989, when the U.S. population was 247 million and only birds tweeted, anglers took **15.7 million fishing trips** in the Gulf of Mexico. Twenty years later, in 2009, when the U.S. population was 307 million and satellite navigation and sophisticated fish finders became widely available, anglers took **22.3 million fishing**

MORE FISHING, LESS FISH¹

Greater Amberjack and Recreational Fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, 1989-2009



Greater amberjack: Gregg Carter

trips in the Gulf of Mexico, a **42 percent increase**.² The number of individual anglers in the Gulf has also risen, by 64 percent in the past two decades. This increase is understandable—the U.S. population is growing, and fishing is fun—but it has serious implications for the health of the region’s most popular sport fish. For example, from 1989 to 2009, recreational fishermen took approximately 62 percent of the total catch of greater amberjack.³ By 2009, the greater amberjack population was depleted to 34 percent of a healthy level because of decades of overfishing.⁴

MYTH

Limiting the number of fish an angler or vessel can take is enough; we don’t need annual catch limits and accountability measures.

FACT

History has shown that enforceable catch limits are the most effective way to prevent overfishing.

Historically, recreational fishing has been managed by “bag” limits—restricting the number of fish individual anglers can keep from a trip—or vessel trip limits, not by constraining the total amount of fish killed. Therefore, if the number of fishing trips or

anglers goes beyond anticipated levels, the number of fish killed can far exceed the target catch level, leading to overfishing.

Science-based annual catch limits (ACLs), in tandem with accountability measures if the ACLs are exceeded, guard against overfishing by providing an overall cap on catch. Managers use other tools that are tailored to the specific needs and management goals of the fisheries to meet the ACLs. In the Southeast, managers are using ACLs in combination with measures such as bag limits and spawning season closures to manage many species, including black sea bass, gag grouper, red grouper, red snapper, snowy grouper, tilefish, and vermilion snapper.

MYTH

Setting catch limits for fish species lacking full stock assessments amounts to guesswork.

FACT

Scientifically sound and proven methods to set annual catch limits for fish populations without full stock assessments are in use around the country.

Information such as average catch and/or biological data exists for every federally managed fish population, including

those lacking full assessments. When stock assessments aren't available, scientists and managers rely on these other sources of information to determine sustainable catch levels, including:

- Basic biological information such as growth rates, age at maturity, and reproductive potential, which are used to determine a species' susceptibility to overfishing.
- Average catch data and historical catch trends, which, for example, can indicate future problems if catch is declining.
- Local knowledge and information about catch levels and biology for similar species.

On the West Coast, fisheries managers are using these approaches to determine ACLs for the valuable Pacific groundfish fishery, where less than a third of groundfish have assessments.⁵ In the Southeast, managers have set limits at or near current catch levels for some data-limited species with stable levels of catch, such as cobia and wahoo.⁶ The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is providing additional guidance to managers on models and tools for setting catch limits for fish species lacking full assessments.⁷

MYTH

The legal requirement to set science-based annual catch limits and accountability measures has not resulted in increased resources for stock assessment science.

FACT

Funds and resources for stock assessments and fisheries science are on the rise, thanks to the MSA's ACL requirement.

Federal funding for fisheries science has increased significantly since the MSA reauthorization in 2006, when Congress mandated science-based ACLs to prevent overfishing:⁸

- Funding for **stock assessments**, which guide the setting of catch limits by providing scientific analyses of the health of fish populations and the amount of fishing they can support, **has more than doubled**, from \$24.5 million in 2006 to \$51.0 million appropriated in 2010.
- Funding for **fisheries statistics programs**, which include the collection of recreational fishing data, **has nearly doubled**, from \$12.6 million in 2006 to \$21.1 million in 2010.
- Funding for **survey and monitoring projects**, which provide timely analysis of catch and fishing effort, **has increased by 63 percent**, from \$14.6 million in 2006 to \$23.8 million in 2010.



Black sea bass: Karen Roeder/NOAA

South Atlantic Black Sea Bass: A Cautionary Tale

This popular recreational fish has suffered from decades of overfishing. Although assessments in 1991, 1996, and 2005 indicated the depleted status of black sea bass, managers did not set enforceable catch limits. Instead, they relied on indirect measures such as size and bag limits for the recreational catch, and trip limits for the commercial sector. Today, after two failed rebuilding plans based only on these measures and no accountability if too many fish were caught, managers are finally taking the necessary steps to restore this fish. These steps include science-based annual catch limits and accountability measures such as halting fishing earlier in the season if the quota is close to being met. After 20 years of failed management, these measures are needed to finally end overfishing and rebuild this valuable fish population.

Source: South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. 2011. Black Sea Bass Management Overview. February 2011. <www.safmc.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=P5sv2jTAPzw%3D&tabid=666>.



NOAA Pisces ship: NOAA



NOAA lab in Pascagoula, Miss: NOAA

In the Southeast, NMFS commissioned the research ship *Pisces* and dedicated a new lab in Mississippi to support fisheries research in the Southeast and the Caribbean in 2009 and added six stock assessment scientists to the Southeast Fisheries Science Center in 2010.⁹ Taking away the legal requirement to set catch limits on key species in the Southeast could jeopardize these gains, because NMFS might redirect resources toward regions where the catch limit requirement remains.

After decades of mismanagement that resulted in plummeting fish populations and lost livelihoods, Congress acted in 2006 to strengthen the MSA by requiring an end to overfishing. Although the skeptics had their doubts, we are nearing the finish line, and soon overfishing should be a thing of the past. **Congress should reject S. 1916/H.R. 2304 because it would undermine this national success story.** Instead, it should support real efforts to improve fisheries science by investing in research, data collection, and monitoring programs of the National Marine Fisheries Service.



Black sea bass: NOAA

Endnotes

¹ Graph contains biomass data provided by Southeast Fisheries Science Center (SEFSC) staff Sept. 28, 2011. Trips data are from National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). Recreational Fishing Statistics Queries. <<http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/recreational/queries/index.html>> Accessed Sept. 28, 2011. Fishing trips means number of all recreational fishing trips in the Gulf of Mexico for all species as estimated by the Marine Recreational Fisheries Statistics Survey, years 1989-2009.

² NMFS. 2011. Recreational Fishing Statistics Queries. <<http://www.st.nmfs.noaa.gov/st1/recreational/queries/index.html>> Accessed Sept. 28, 2011.

³ Southeast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR). 2011. SEDAR 9 Stock Assessment Update Report. Table 4.1.3.1, Page 49. Table 3.2.3, Page 35 (estimated recreational and commercial landings). February 2011. <<http://www.sefsc.noaa.gov/sedar/download/SEDAR%209%20GAJ%202010%20Stock%20Assessment%20Update%20FINAL%20plus%20Appendix%202.pdf?id=DOCUMENT>>.

⁴ Biomass data provided by SEFSC staff Sept. 28, 2011.

⁵ E.J. Dick and A.D. MacCall. 2010. Estimates of Sustainable Yield for 50 Data-Poor Stocks in the Pacific Coast Groundfish Fishery Management Plan. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)

Technical Memorandum. June 2010. <<http://swfsc.noaa.gov/publications/TM/SWFSC/NOAA-TM-NMFS-SWFSC-460.pdf>>.

⁶ Scientific and Statistical Committee (SCC) Meeting Report, South Atlantic Fishery Management Council. April 2011. <<http://www.safmc.net/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=u%2fKJfmdm00%3d&tabid=680>>.

⁷ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Technical Memorandum NMFS-SEFSC-616. 2011. Calculating Acceptable Biological Catch for Stocks That Have Reliable Catch Data Only. May 2011. <www.pifsc.noaa.gov/tech/NOAA_Tech_Memo_SEFSC_616.pdf>.

⁸ NOAA Budget Office. 2011. President's Budgets and Blue Books: 2006-2011. <<http://www.corporateservices.noaa.gov/nbo/>>.

⁹ NOAA press release. NOAA Commissions New Fisheries Survey Ship and Dedicates New Fisheries Service Building in Pascagoula, Miss. Nov. 6, 2009. <http://www.noanews.noaa.gov/stories2009/20091106_pisces.html>. Oral testimony of Eric Schwaab, NOAA assistant administrator for fisheries, at the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation's Oceans, Atmosphere, Fisheries, and Coast Guard Subcommittee hearing on MSA implementation. Mar. 8, 2011. Page 26. <http://docs.lib.noaa.gov/noaa_documents/NOAA_related_docs/Legislative_acts/fishery_conservation_management_act_shrg_112-34.pdf>.