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Endangered Species: The Fishermen

Generation after generation, millions of Americans have enjoyed access to the saltwater world for both recreation and income. In the past decade with the increased influence of special interest groups and the rise in popularity of "the sky is falling" mentality this form of recreation and vocation has been increasingly threatened to the point that "save the fish" seems to be the "catch of the day".

The coastal communities along the United States seaboard are projected to double by 2025, according to the Population Reference Bureau. This increase in population is sure to increase water based activities like recreational and charter fishing. In year 2000 the number of charter fishing trips that were run out of North Carolina Marinas was 193,056 and increased steadily until year 2005 at 259,029 trips. One would expect this trend to continue through 2010 and 2015 but that is not what we see in the official numbers released by various government agencies. In 2010 the trips dropped to 165,304 and in 2014 the number of charter trips were down to a meager 96,620 (NCDMF 86). There is a dollar multiplier in effect that runs deep in the coastal communities, when people do not come to the coast to fish, then the tackle stores do not sell bait, ice, and gear. The hotels do not sell rooms, the restaurants do not have patrons to fill their chairs, boat manufacturers do not build as many boats, and without boats being built the repair shops service less vessels each year.

Income based Commercial fishing have experienced a similar decline in the number of trips and the number of pounds caught. In year 2000, there was 102,060,290 pounds of finfish caught and sold by the commercial fishing industry in North Carolina, then fourteen years later

in 2014, there was only 29,440,062 pounds caught and sold (NCDMF 50). Although there was roughly a 4,000 dollar loss of income in the two comparable years, the data clearly shows that the regulations are allowing less fish to be caught and sold commercially and to make up the loss in revenue the fish houses have to increase their prices.

All marine fisheries organizations are influenced by the same main piece of legislation, the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA). Originally enacted in 1976 to end the destruction of fish stocks from foreign fishing. Its intention was to help the fisherman, not hurt them, by supporting domestic fishing and protecting their catches from foreign fishing fleets. This has since been revised, and now the meaning has completely changed. MSA switched focus in 1996 to stop overfishing and the decline of fishing stocks. In 2006 Former President George W. Bush made reauthorizing MSA the top priority of his Ocean Action Plan. It is in this current version of MSA, the idea of "Best Available Science" was introduced. "Conservation and management measures shall be based upon the best scientific information available." (Sec 30- Part A2 Magnuson Stevens Act). This data would then be derived from Marine Recreational Fishing Statistics Survey (MRFSS), and SouthEast Data, Assessment, and Review (SEDAR) studies.

The MRFFS data used in SEDAR studies is collected by various means, two of the main methods are telephone calls in local areas, and dock interception of fishing boats. The first method is phone surveys. The calls are random with questions such as "have you been fishing for "X" species in the last "Y" days, if so what were your catch numbers, type of boat used, and fishing gear used to target the species". If the person being surveyed had not been fishing in the "Y" amount of days, then the survey would receive a zero for that call. Then if a person had targeted that species but not been very successful then the number would be recorded.

The issue with this is the fact that fishermen like any other profession or hobby, are made up of people of all different skill levels and abilities. This is not taken into account, and due to the vast size of jurisdiction and the small amount of phone calls that can be made, the data that is successfully found gets magnified by a large degree which would cut down on accuracy.

The method of dock intersection surveys that are used in MRFFS data are done by physically going to fishing docks of various boats, and asking about the catch then surveying the fish by measuring them and asking about the location where the fish were caught. The records according to John Carmichael the program manager for SEDAR at SAFMC, are said to be confidential.

Government confidentiality to many fishermen is not good enough to give up their fishing spots according to many lifetime anglers. This leads to fake fishing locations being accounted for fish that are not from that area. Then when the these locations are fished by actual surveyors they find that they are fishing on sandy bottom and none of the fish that were targeted are found there, leading to an obvious conclusion of overfishing. Then this data like the telephone surveys are expanded by large degrees and applied to the almost 12,000 miles of shoreline.

If the data provided is the “best available”, then it will be applied. Even if the science is not from the area that it is being applied to, it will still be used because it is the “best available. If the data were accurate, current and collected from its regional location then it would be better but there is not enough resources available to conduct studies from every site, for every species. This means that there will be a lack of good resources and the data is more hit or miss, but it is still the “best available”.

The data and regulations themselves are set by National Marine Fisheries (NMF) a subsection of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and other smaller subsections of the agency specific to the region. The specific governing agency for the southeastern North Carolina is the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (SAFMC), it jurisdiction runs from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, to the Key West, Florida. The first issue with the regulations being set by SAFMC, is that the area of jurisdiction is over 11,000 miles of coastline, and the marine environments are very different.

In North Carolina the type of bottom typically found is live bottom, wrecks and sandy bottom. Live bottom has a plethora of fish varying from small bait fish, to large sharks, and grouper. Most species of Grouper-Snapper complex can be found on both live bottom and wrecks. Sandy bottom however is not very beneficial to catching bottom fish because they do not live around bottom without structure. Grouper normally live around structured bottom like rocks, and ledges, they prefer to live in holes in between the rocks and wait for small fish to come through then they swallow their prey whole. The other bottom fish in the Grouper-Snapper complex however live more suspended over the bottom and attack the prey as they swim in a group. Then in Florida there is more tropical reefs surrounding the beaches, and a very narrow live bottom found near the coastline giving less habitat for the Grouper-Snapper complex fish to live.

The Gulf Stream, which is the large body of water that moves south to north bringing in warm water all the way up the east coast to northern North Carolina where it meets the opposing cold water current named the Labrador Current which runs north to south meeting at Southern Virginia. In North Carolina the Gulf Stream can be found 50 to 70 miles off the coast off the southeastern most part of the state, such as Cape Fear, and Frying Pan shoals, depending on the

time of year and the conditions of the ambient air temperature. Whereas in Florida the Gulf Stream is found 3-10 miles off the coast, this would mean that the fish in the two states that live in warm water would be much closer inshore that the states that the Gulf Stream is closer to the coast. This would mean that there is different climates of the water, and the abundance of certain species would be different.

South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council also outsources the research that is used to apply to the areas they manage, John Carmichael explains that SAFMC "The Council does not collect data nor does it conduct stock assessments." This is because agencies like NOAA, and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), along with the state agencies do the data collecting. SAFMC's job is to regulate about how the data is applied and used in the stock assessment workshops then are correlated to current fishing regulations. Although outside recommendations are used, including by legislators, fishermen and special interest groups like the PEW charitable trusts. It was noted that PEW, who has prided themselves in global and maritime conservationism. PEW in 2009 was partnered with SAFMC and the SEDAR studies, by writing letters to SAFMC advising how the amendment 10, and 17A to the MSA should be used for regulating bottom fishing, calling for the "need of strong protections to rebuild the population" (PEW, December 3,2010).

PEW is not the only group who have a personal agenda in marine conservation and supporting more regulations. The Walton Family Foundation, which owns approximately 50 percent of the Walmart Corporation (Forbes), donated 36 million dollars in 2011 according to the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) to support Catch Shares Programs being pushed to privatize fishing and another program that establishes Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). Catch Shares as according to National Marine Fisheries is the "umbrella term used to describe fishery

management programs that allocate a specific portion of the total allowable catch to individuals, cooperatives, communities, or other eligible entities". This meaning that the individual who has been allocated the shares must stop fishing as soon as he or she runs out of shares. If more shares are needed then shares can be bought, sold or traded in the market. This on the surface seems to be a responsible management solution to end overfishing, but this could lead to entities like Walmart, chain restaurants and special interest groups to purchase a majority of the shares with their large financial resources thus putting restriction on who can fish. Jim Donofrio, the executive director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance said "the individual anglers and local business owners are being denied opportunity, and I hope the federal trade representatives are willing to get onboard with their support of real small-town values.", when he was discussing the involvement of Walmart influencing maritime conservation issues and how the implementation of Catch Shares would destroy the local small town tackle stores, fish houses, and other local fishing establishments. Giving large corporations like Walmart a competitive edge when it comes to buying and influencing fishing stocks.

South Atlantic Fisheries Marine Management Council depends on data that is sourced out to third parties, then evaluate the research to impose regulations to both commercial and recreational fishing. The bureaucratic agencies are corrupt with special interest groups that feed the system biased data. Putting millions of Americans out of jobs, and forcing them to leave a tradition passed down from generations. These industries depend on fishing, but instead of there not being enough fish to catch, today's issue is that strict and unfair regulations are being dictated on the southeastern United States fisheries and the effects can be felt all over coastal communities

Since 1976 when the Magnuson-Stevens Act was signed into legislation, the regulations have been steadily increasing by methods of season closures and smaller bag limits with larger minimum sizes for many main fish species. Bottom fish, collectively known are the species in the Grouper-Snapper complex, found on hard bottom and wrecks. These species are very popular to catch recreationally and commercially off the southeastern United States. Some of the main species are Vermillion Snapper, Red Grouper, Silver Snapper, Gag Grouper, and Scamp Grouper. The limits of these fish have been greatly impacted. For example in 2005 the bag limit on Vermillion Snapper was ten per person per day, at a minimum of ten inches each. This was the standard for many years. In 2010 the rules changed and anglers could have only five per person per day, and the species must be over twelve inches long. This regulation change has also been in effect for Grouper, an angler can now only have three grouper per day of any kind over twenty inches, and only one can be a Gag or Black Grouper which must be over twenty four inches to keep. The other very popular commercial and recreational fish is the Black Sea Bass, which before 2010 they were required to be over ten inches, and an angler could have fifteen per person per day. Currently the standard is thirteen inches with a five fish bag limit. Then the total bag limit of the Grouper-Snapper complex is only twenty fish per person per day, for all species total.

The Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) argues that overfishing has been a serious problem for decades, and that many coastal communities are still battling intense deficits in fishing stocks as of April, 2015. As they have partnered with National Marine Fisheries to join forces in research of fishing stocks. They reported that 6 species have been removed from the overfishing list, which is the first in decades. Alongside with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) they have been urging the U.S government to find more sustainable practices for fishing and to

end Commercial fishing with nets, trawls and traps. This would end wasteful bycatch and the mortality rates of unwanted fish. This is a very good goal, fishermen and conservationists alike agree that overfishing is an issue and should be controlled in a healthy way. Just like overfishing, over regulating ca be just as destructive to the people that depend on the industry,

Large advocacy groups with deep coffers fund research projects like SEDAR, and influencing EDF, and SAFMC, makes for unfair regulations. That are suffocating small town economies with their implications because of the involvement of large special interests groups. The solution is to find a good middle ground, between overfishing and over regulating. Like any business the best model is one where everyone involved wins. The fishermen, fish, and conservationist should all feel comfortable with regulations that not only protect the fishery but also protect livelihood of millions of fellow Americans. The first step to the solution is getting large special interest groups and their wallets out of the equation completely, and strive for more accurate, customized data used for regulations specific to the area they are applied to. The oceans have been around for about 4.5 billion years, and they will be around for a lot longer than that, but if not stopped and supported the local fishermen is next on the endangered species list.

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