



20

BILLEFISH CONSERVATION

16



WITH BASS2BILLFISH



by: Peter Miller

When it comes to wildlife conservation and management, it's reassuring when a plan-of-action results in a positive outcome. I think the key to success when managing sportfish species is collaboration between recreational and commercial fishermen and the fisheries management organizations that dictate legislature. For me, preserving the world's billfish species hits close to home. I have been competing in billfish tournaments since 1989 and have won or placed in over 120 high-profile events. Let's take a look at some of the initiatives that are ensuring the survival of the world's most coveted family of predatory species.

CONSERVATION BY RECREATIONAL AND TOURNAMENT FISHERMAN

Perhaps the most notable shift in billfish conservation is the advent of circle hooks. Circle hooks have done wonders in regards to release mortality. In 2008, the National Marine Fisheries Service mandated that natural baits must be rigged with circle hooks in all Atlantic billfish tournaments. This is a great example of a management organization working with fisherman toward a goal that ensures the future of our fishery. The Billfish Foundation states: "The use of non-offset circle hooks with natural baits, in place of the more traditional J-hooks, can dramatically increase a fish's chance of survival."

Circle hooks are less likely to hook a fish in the gills, stomach, or vital organs. I have been professionally billfishing for more than 20 years and I don't feel that circle hooks provide a lower hook-up ratio. For the time being, circle hooks are only mandatory during tournaments, but more and more fishermen use circle hooks in non-tournament settings, as well.



"If we look at the last half century, we have taken many steps in the right direction and a few steps backward, in regards to billfish conservation"

Releasing a billfish quickly is another tactic that lowers mortality. The longer the fight, the less likely a fish will be able to recover and the more likely that fish will fall prey to a predator. The idea is to get the fish to the boat as quickly as possible. A combination of aggressive, calculated boat handling, as well as angler and mate cooperation and communication will put the least strain on a fish. Understanding the fish's movements develops with experience. If you watch a seasoned crew; they seemingly know the fish's next move. This leads to less time

fighting the fish and a shorter end game. On the leader - an astute wireman knows how much pressure will prevent a billfish from going berserk, but the wireman also maintains control. After tagging a billfish; holding and swimming the fish boatside while the captain idles slowly helps ensure that the fish is revived and swims away strongly. Seemingly so, there are less photos of billfish out of the water. Competent anglers know that pulling a fish over the gunwale and into a boat puts a ton of strain on a fish's internal organs.

The Fish Grip



The Fish Grip Co
 www.thefishgrip.com
 thefishgrip@att.net
 601-353-3193
 All Products made in The United States Of America

AWARENESS BY ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS

It's not only important to protect the game fish. Lower down the food chain, the bait fish or forage fish; do not garner the same conversation as our sport fish. That's what makes these stocks so vulnerable to overfishing. Forage fish are harvested to manufacture vitamins, fish oil, cosmetics and animal feed. According to the 2008 Annual Review of Environment and Resources; 80% of forage fish caught are fed to animals. That includes fish farms and livestock farms. The im-

Waterloo

Rod Company U.S.A.

pact of depleting forage fish stocks hits close to home for all of us as sport fishermen. Sailfish in South Florida feed primarily on threadfin herring and pilchards. In Florida, 29,365 pounds of pilchards were harvested in 2012. Also in Florida, 1.7 million pounds of threadfin herring were harvested. Neither of these species have accurate stock measurements and there are few rules capping how many are harvested. The International Game Fish Association is working in collaboration with the Florida Wildlife Federation, The Pew Charitable Trust, and the Snook and Gamefish Foundation to raise awareness about the danger of depleting our forage fish stocks. The depletion of forage fish stocks can lead to the collapse of billfish and other sport fish stocks, so it's important for recreational and commercial fishermen to take notice.

CONSERVATION IN LEGISLATURE AND THE POLITICAL ARENA

Let's take a look at a piece of legislation that helped restore billfish stocks. In the mid to late 1970s, South Florida supported a strong swordfish fishery. 1977 was a record year and marked the first year of the Miami Swordfish Tournament with over 85 fish caught. It was all downhill after that year. Commercial longliners seemingly took over the fishery and decimated the population of swordfish, and caught massive amounts of bycatch that included sailfish and marlin. In 2001, after years of lawsuits and political pressure, the National Marine Fisheries Service stepped in and banned longliners off Florida's coast. I have seen firsthand the difference after the ban was put into place. In 2003, my team, Get Lit Fishing Team earned 2nd place in the Miami Swordfish Tournament. In 2004 we won 1st place in the Islamorada Swordfish Tournament and 2nd place in the Miami Swordfish Tournament. In 2005 we earned 2nd place in the Islamorada Swordfish Tournament again. To this day, we are still witnessing a healthier fishery and it's our responsibility to maintain that.

LOOKING FORWARD

If we look at the last half century, we have taken many steps in the right direction and a few steps backward, in regards to billfish conservation. I think the most impactful initiative for conservation is monitoring billfish migration patterns by groups such as The Billfish Foundation. This research helps raise international awareness and influence legislature that will prevent overfishing, as well as prevent fishing in spawning areas.

- To learn more about The Billfish Foundation (TBF) visit: www.billfish.org
- To learn more about our forage fish and protecting them visit: www.floridaforagefish.igfa.com
- To learn more about the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) how you can help preserve our world's sportfish visit: www.igfa.org 



Sydney Taylor
PRO STAFFER

SALINITY

MIGHT AS WELL FISH THE BEST!

WaterlooRods.com

phantom

2310 N. Navarro Suite B
Victoria, TX 77901
Phone: 361.573.0300
Fax: 361.573.0304