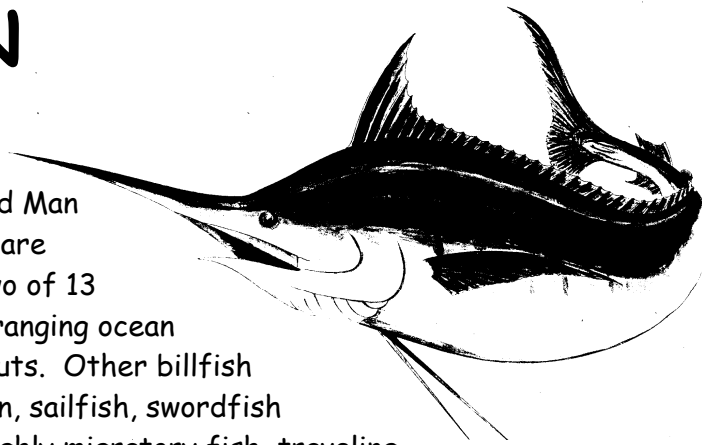


BLUE MARLIN

Perhaps best known as the fabled adversary of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," the blue marlin - there are Atlantic and Pacific varieties - are two of 13 species known as billfish; large, far-ranging ocean giants named for their spear-like snouts. Other billfish include black, white and striped marlin, sailfish, swordfish and spearfish. The blue marlin is a highly migratory fish, traveling across vast ocean areas to feed and spawn. Blues prefer tropical to sub-tropical waters offshore and feed on a variety of fish and squid. They are a fast-growing animal, reaching between 10-14 feet in length, with adult females growing to over 1,200 pounds. But these beautiful behemoths are disappearing from the world's oceans. Marlins are at the top of the ocean food chain, and have few natural enemies. They are not biologically designed to sustain the kind of heavy fishing pressure they've been subjected to for the last four decades.



MARLINS, "ACCIDENTAL VICTIMS" OF COMMERCIAL FISHING, ARE AMONG THE MOST THREATENED FISH IN THE ATLANTIC. Billfish are solitary animals that exist in relatively small populations. They are caught for sport and for food around the world. By far the largest number of marlin, however, are killed as "bycatch." Many thousands of these large ocean predators die as incidental catch on non-selective fishing lines and in nets set to capture other species. In 1998, 96 percent of the total catch of marlins and sailfish in the Atlantic was taken in commercial fisheries for tuna and swordfish, primarily on multi-mile drift longlines. Thousands are drowned each year in purse seine fisheries netting tuna. The situation is much the same in the Pacific.

ATLANTIC MARLIN POPULATIONS DEPLETED. According to a recent study by a panel of international scientists, the Atlantic blue marlin population is overfished and overfishing is occurring, reduced to about 40% of what's considered a safe and healthy level. (The status of Pacific blues is unknown.) White marlin are even more depleted, at about 12% of what fishery scientists believe it should be. Striped marlin, the white's Pacific cousin, has been severely reduced by overfishing, down to an estimated 25-50% of a sustainable population.

THE U.S. IS ONE OF A FEW COUNTRIES WITH STRICT BILLFISH PROTECTIONS IN PLACE. INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION IS JUST GETTING UNDERWAY. The U.S. outlawed the commercial sale of Atlantic marlin, sailfish and spearfish in 1989, in order to head off a rapidly developing market for the thousands of billfish caught accidentally by our tuna and swordfishermen. (Although swordfish are considered a billfish, in the U.S. they are the target of a major commercial fishery and managed separately.) The U.S. also has strict limits on the taking of billfish by recreational fishermen. In fact, anglers concerned about the fate of these big game fish have voluntarily reduced the number they bring to the dock by more than 90% since the mid-1980s, so that today American billfishing is virtually all catch-and-release.

OCEAN RESERVES ARE NEEDED TO PROTECT MARLIN FROM "FATAL INTERACTIONS" WITH LONGLINES. Even though the directed commercial fishery for billfish was shut down years ago, bycatch in the U.S. pelagic longline fleet is still responsible for 9 out of 10 marlin killed in U.S. waters, which in recent years has averaged over 3,000 fish a year. That's because fishing with longlines is like laying an underwater minefield. The average mainline used in the U.S. and foreign longline fisheries is 25-40 miles long. From these drifting lines hang thousands of hooks that remain in the water for 12 hours or more. Although the target species are high-value tunas and swordfish, any pelagic animal capable of taking a hook is a potential - and likely - victim, including sharks, sea turtles and marine birds. To reduce fatal longline interactions with non-target and protected species, the U.S., in response to a lawsuit by the National Coalition for Marine Conservation (NCMC), has closed over 130,000 square miles of coastal waters to longlining, although these no-longlining zones primarily benefit swordfish, sharks and sailfish. Additional areas are being put off limits to protect endangered turtles.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IS KEY TO PROTECTING BILLFISH WORLDWIDE. Any effective conservation program for highly migratory marlins must be international in scope. Because marlin are a byproduct of commercial fishing worldwide - kept and sold if it profits the vessel, thrown back if it doesn't - billfish conservation is not a high priority for most fishing nations. ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, is the body responsible for billfish management in the Atlantic. No comparable international body exists in the Pacific. In 2000, ICCAT, under pressure from the NCMC and others, recommended cutting landings of blue marlin by 50% and white marlin by 67%, while asking fishermen to release all live billfish. These measures remain in place, but it is still unclear as to whether these measures will be enough to restore depleted marlin populations in the Atlantic.

PROTECTING PACIFIC BILLFISH IS THE GOAL OF NCMC'S TAKE MARLIN OFF THE MENU CAMPAIGN. The National Coalition for Marine Conservation believes the biggest contribution the US can make to conserving Pacific billfish at this time - in addition to seeking international fishing agreements - is to close our markets. In 2008, NCMC joined the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) in launching Take Marlin Off the Menu, a campaign aimed at getting marlin and other billfish out of supermarkets and off menus. We're reaching out to chefs, restaurants, seafood vendors, consumers and anglers to go "marlin-free." The campaign's goals are to 1) carry out an educational and grassroots campaign to raise awareness of the threat of the continued commercial sale of Pacific billfish, and 2) prohibit the importation and sale of Pacific marlin and sailfish within the United States. NCMC and IGFA are currently working with Congress in 2011 for legislation to protect billfish.



For more information, contact the
NATIONAL COALITION FOR MARINE CONSERVATION
4 Royal Street SE, Leesburg, VA 20175
WWW.SAVETHEFISH.ORG