

**Wild  
Oceans**  
For the future of fishing

# The Horizon

LONGLINE CLOSED AREAS REOPENED

## Trouble for Atlantic Bluefin

**"Success is never final."**

– George Starr White

On March 30<sup>th</sup>, NOAA Fisheries announced its final decision to eliminate the longline closed areas that protect Atlantic bluefin tuna. While the agency goal is to allow commercial longline vessels access to no-longline zones to increase swordfish, yellowfin tuna and bigeye tuna catch, the action will erode conservation successes by increasing bluefin tuna catch and bycatch of marlin, oceanic sharks and sea turtles.

To understand the gravity of this decision for the recovery of western Atlantic bluefin tuna, it is important to review the history of why the longline closed areas were originally implemented – a history that is closely tied to the history of *Wild Oceans*.

### Industrial Fishing Takes Hold in the Atlantic

The story of Atlantic bluefin tuna and humans have crisscrossed for millennia, beginning with hand lines, seines and an elaborate and age-old Phoenician

technique for trapping and catching bluefin tuna as they cross between the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean. In the early and mid-1900s, recreational fishing for Atlantic bluefin tuna became popular in the western Atlantic.

After World War II, commercial fishing for Atlantic bluefin tuna expanded using newfound technology and high capacity vessels, and longline fishing, thousands of baited hooks on miles-long line, was perfected. In the 1970s, the industry developed lightweight, high-strength polymers that were spun into drift nets. Before they were banned on the high seas in the early 1990s, hundreds of miles of them were often deployed in a single night. These advances in technology coincided with a surge in value for bluefin, with a single fish fetching thousands of dollars. Drift nets coupled with longline vessels that caught giant bluefin as they gathered in the Gulf of Mexico to reproduce, purse seine vessels targeting juvenile bluefin along the east coast, and high demand squeezed the population. The bluefin tuna population fell sharply.

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## Our Mission

*Wild Oceans* was founded by anglers in 1973. Like the sportsmen before us who pioneered wildlife conservation on land, we are passionate protectors of fish and the wild world we share.

**Our mission is to keep the oceans wild to preserve fishing opportunities for the future.** To do this, we bring conservation-minded fishermen and pro-fishing environmentalists together to promote a broad, ecosystems approach to fisheries management that reflects our expanding circle of concern for all marine life and the future of fishing.

So much of what we love about the sea, about fish, about fishing, is in the wildness. But that wild world, and the future of fishing, now hangs in the balance. Everything we do, every decision we make, must be guided by a clear vision of the future we want for our oceans and of how the fishing public and responsible consumers will fit into that future.

## Adapting to COVID-19 challenges

During these trying times in which we now find ourselves, I wanted to take a moment to reach out to you and say how grateful we are for your support. I also wanted to update you on how *Wild Oceans* is responding to these new challenges and how we continue to focus on accomplishing our goals for 2020.

As you might expect, many of the in-person fisheries meetings and conferences we were scheduled to attend have now been either postponed or switched to a web-based format. While this adaptation definitely presents challenges and takes some getting used to, the technology to conduct these virtual gatherings is quite effective. Most provide mechanisms for engagement through speaking or chat features. As such, we continue to research the important issues, submit public comment wherever possible and engage with fisheries managers.

In addition to continued participation in management meetings, we also have

increased our outreach efforts to other stakeholders. Maintaining the important relationships with key decision makers and partners that we have cultivated over years of interaction is critical to achieving success.

Not having to travel as much has also given us the time and opportunity to reflect on how we want to best utilize our limited resources. To this end, we have begun the process of developing a new 5-year strategic business plan that will help us improve and maximize the organization's impact on marine fish conservation and management.

In addition to our ongoing research, policy reviews, comment submittals, website updates, newsletter development and member/partner communications, *Wild Oceans'* staff remain actively engaged in the issues. (See "News and Activities," p. 6) Over the past four months, either in-person or via virtual meetings, we as a team have participated in:

- **6** Federal fishery management council meetings in **5** regions,
- **6** Advisory panel webinars,
- **8** Committee and technical working group meetings,
- **2** International forums for highly migratory species,
- **2** Interstate commission meetings,
- **2** Workshops, and
- **4** Meetings with policy-makers and political leaders.

Like the rest of us, fisheries managers have and will continue to adapt to this new world in which we live. Rest assured that as long as fish swim in our oceans, we will be there working to keep the oceans wild to preserve fishing opportunities for the future.

Thank you again for your support of *Wild Oceans*. I hope that you and your loved ones are all healthy and safe.

– Rob Kramer, President

## For the Future of Fishing

*Wild Oceans* is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to keeping the oceans wild to preserve fishing opportunities for the future.

### Our Goals:

- preventing overfishing and restoring depleted fish populations to healthy levels
- promoting sustainable use policies that balance commercial, recreational and ecological values
- modifying or eliminating wasteful fishing practices
- improving our understanding of fish and their role in the marine environment
- preserving fish habitat and water quality

### Officers and Staff:

**Tim Choate**, Chairman

**Tim Ervin**, Vice Chairman

**Rob Kramer**, President

**Pam Lyons Gromen**, Executive Director

**Theresa Labriola**, Pacific Program Director

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# Kick 'em while they're down

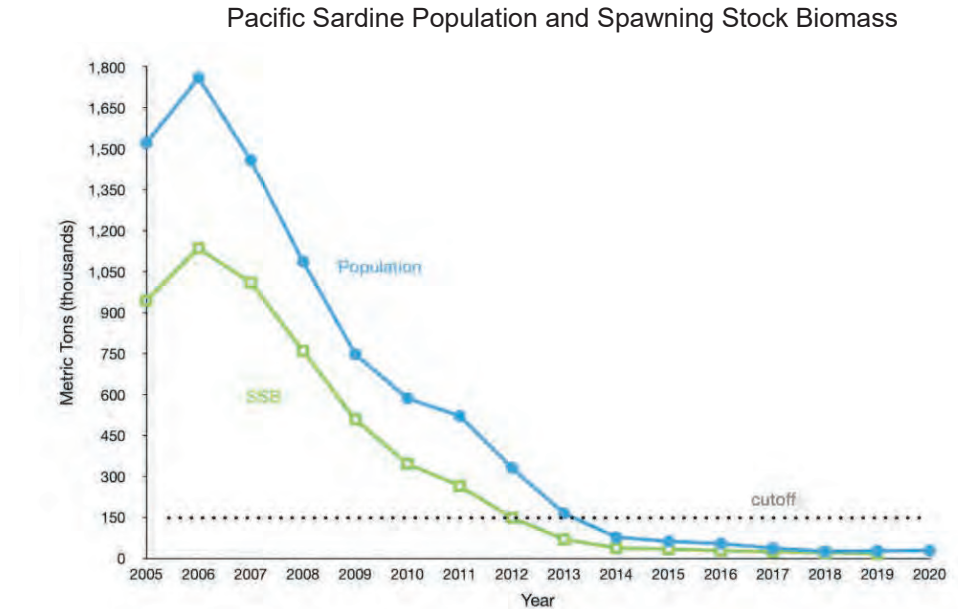


by Theresa Labriola  
Pacific Program Director

Pacific sardine has undergone large population fluctuations for centuries, and there is consensus that environmental conditions are the main factor driving the changes. However, maintaining continuous high volume fishing on the northern subpopulation of Pacific sardine when stock productivity is in rapid decline, has contributed to a stock collapse that is far greater than expected from natural fluctuations.

The continuous decline of sardine spawning stock biomass (SSB) reached historically low levels in recent years (2014-present) and 2011-2019 year classes have been among the weakest in recent history. Allowing fishermen to target and catch sardine until 2015, to kick 'em while they're down, has resulted in the continuous population decline. In 2018, the Pacific sardine population sank below 50,000 metric tons (MT), leading to a determination by National Marine Fisheries Service that the stock is overfished. The 2020 Pacific sardine stock assessment shows a sustained collapse in the population which has progressively declined to just 28,276 MT this year.

One of the most important safeguards in the Pacific sardine control rule is "cutoff" which recognizes that fishing during periods of low abundance can exacerbate natural declines, cause a steeper retraction and stall recovery of the sardine stock. In order to protect the delicate balance between predator and prey and fishermen in the California Current, cutoff establishes a lower biomass threshold. If the population falls below the cutoff, currently set at 150,000 metric tons,



the fishery closes.

But, cutoff is set too low to protect the stock from a continued collapse. Even though there were troubling signs in 2012, 2013 and 2014 that sardine were declining, the biomass was above 150,000 MT, so we continued to kick 'em while they're down. Now, we are asking the Pacific Fishery Management Council to re-evaluate cutoff in light of scientific recommendations to leave 40 percent of unfished forage biomass in the ocean, or more than 400,000 MT of Pacific sardine.

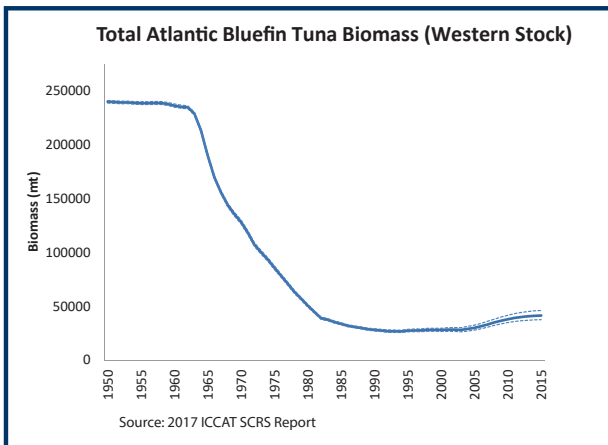
When the Pacific Council convened via webinar for its April meeting, Council members expressed concern about the sardine harvest control rule as well as the sardine stock assessment. Improving sardine management requires investment in both, but the Council is responsible for the harvest control rule, and it has the ability to modify it. We are encouraged by their interest in examining key components of the control rule to ensure we take the necessary safeguards to protect the population from collapse when it is

on the verge. Unfortunately, they did not schedule this review.

The state of the stock signals that it is time to reexamine our forage fish management to prevent irreversible damage to marine ecosystems and community harm that occurs when a forage fish population collapses. *Wild Oceans* will continue to urge the Council to adopt more precautionary management that will reduce the severity of natural forage fish cycles, protect dependent predators and safeguard recreational and commercial fisheries for the future.

In June, the Council will review a draft sardine rebuilding plan with a range of alternatives for rebuilding the stock. We will request the Council develop alternatives that are more conservative than status quo, including those that: 1) prohibit directed sardine catch under Exempted Fishing Permits; 2) reduce incidental catches allowances to levels below 20% (including 5% and 10%); and 3) limit the live bait fishery below current levels. ■





### Wild Oceans Becomes the Angler's Voice for Bluefin

Declining catches of Atlantic bluefin tuna led to the United States signing of the International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas in 1966 and the creation of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in 1968.

As government plans to protect bluefin tuna took shape, what was missing from the conversation was a voice for the many recreational fishermen who witnessed the alarming declines and wanted action. In 1973, *Wild Oceans*, then the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, was founded by anglers to advocate for international and domestic conservation of Atlantic bluefin tuna and other big fish, like swordfish and marlin, that had been decimated by the industrial fishing fleets.

*Wild Oceans* worked to secure the passage of the Atlantic Tunas Convention Act of 1975, which authorizes the Secretary of Commerce to implement and enforce all recommendations adopted by ICCAT. Frank Carlton, one of our co-founders, served as one of the first U.S. Commissioners to ICCAT.

Our founders were also active in the 1976 passage of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which established federal authority to manage and conserve the nation's fishery resources. *Wild Oceans* was a leading advocate for the first U.S. Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for bluefin tuna that NOAA Fish-

eries completed in 1999. Today, Atlantic tunas, swordfish, sharks and billfish are all managed under the Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Species FMP.

### NOAA Fisheries Gets Rid of What Works

Longlines are notorious for high levels of bycatch. A 1998 *Wild Oceans* report, *Ocean Roulette*, revealed that in 1993, "1 out of every

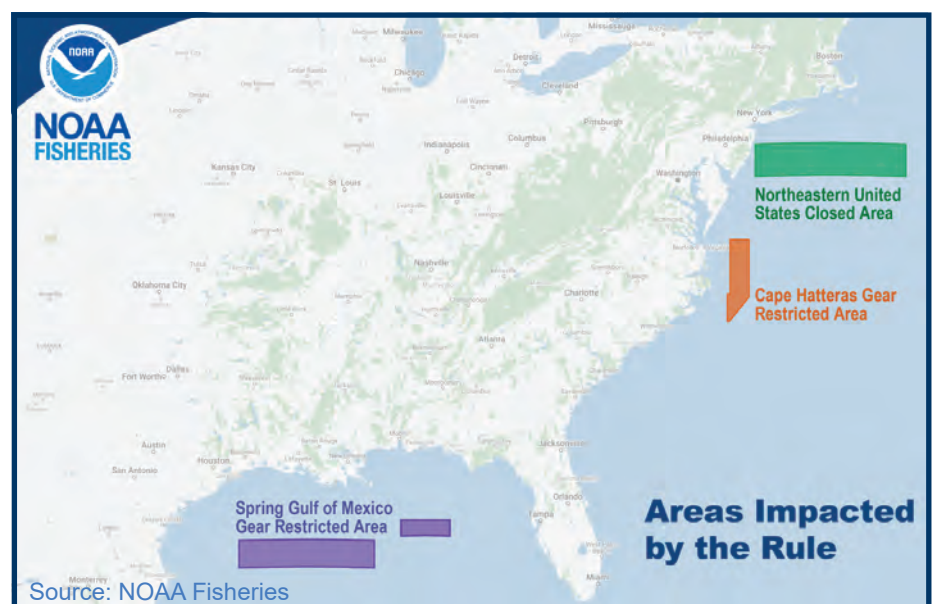
2 fish hooked and brought to the boat, were unwanted, unmarketable or non-legal and were thrown overboard." Sharks, billfish and undersize swordfish and tunas comprised a large portion of the dead discards.

Mandated to minimize bycatch by the Magnuson-Stevens Act, NOAA Fisheries, established a checkerboard of closed areas and gear-restricted areas (GRAs) to protect overfished Atlantic bluefin tuna, as well as juvenile swordfish, marlin and sharks. The most recent additions to the network of longline area closures were adopted in 2014 to protect spawning bluefin tuna in the Gulf of Mexico and safeguard the species' recovery. The regulations worked. Atlantic bluefin tuna bycatch mortality in the Gulf of Mexico longline fishery decreased by more than 80%.

However, just five years later in 2019, NOAA Fisheries proposed opening the Gulf of Mexico GRAs even though the western Atlantic bluefin tuna population remains severely depleted, at as little as 45% of its already depleted 1974 level and 18% of the 1950 level. (See graph) NOAA is also opening up a GRA off the coast of New Jersey and permanently eliminating a closed area near Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. (See map below) All three zones were originally established to reduce fishermen's interactions with bluefin tuna.

*Wild Oceans* and dozens of recreational and conservation organizations opposed these efforts. Thousands of concerned citizens signed petitions and letters. Despite this and the scientifically-proven success of the closed areas, NOAA Fisheries published a Final Rule to give longliners access starting this year.

We, along with other concerned partners, have now shifted the focus of our efforts to key U.S. Senators who have oversight of the Department of Commerce, where NOAA Fisheries resides. The goal now is to amend, modify or roll back this Rule, restoring much needed protections. Nearly five decades after our initial engagement, the quest to protect the iconic western Atlantic bluefin tuna continues. ■



## Balancing act

In March, NOAA Fisheries gave itself authority to waive observer coverage requirements for fishing vessels in response to the COVID-19 crisis. International fishery managers have taken similar steps by lifting human observer requirements onboard fishing and carrier vessels. *Wild Oceans* joined with 20 other NGOs to support protecting the health of observers, crew, inspectors and onshore communities during this crisis. However, we called on NOAA Fisheries and international managers to mitigate the loss of valuable scientific and compliance information and to take steps to reassure consumers of the traceability and accountability within our global seafood supply.

Observers play a critical role in contributing to the science, conservation, and management of fisheries. Fisheries observers are professionally-trained biologists who provide data on bycatch, catch composition, protected species interactions, discards and gear configurations. Their work supports compliance with fishing and safety regulations. Observers are a vital component in ensuring the accuracy of the data used for management, and in some fisheries, observer records may serve as the only data source.

Removal of human observers, along with bans on at-sea transshipment, port inspection, and high seas boarding and inspection, weakens the links that maintain the verifiability of fishing-related activities throughout the seafood supply chain. The absence of observers can also undermine the recovery and resilience of many fish stocks and protected species.

Therefore, we are urging fishery managers to balance the removal of onboard observers with vessels requirements to record and report all the data that observers usually collect. Furthermore, we are asking managers to prioritize development of electronic monitoring (EM) and electronic reporting. Standards and programs for the use of EM on fishing and carrier vessels would enable this technology to complement human observers, or if necessary, replace them when observers cannot be deployed for safety reasons. While not a substitute for human observers, enhanced EM, together with stricter reporting requirements, can help alleviate health concerns while at the same time providing a good degree of oversight to ensure we continue our decades-long path to more sustainable fishing. ■



### SCIENCE CORNER: 4<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL DATA WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHTS ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON FORAGE FISH

On April 27<sup>th</sup>, *Wild Oceans* President Rob Kramer and Executive Director Pam Lyons Gromen attended the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Forage Fish Data Workshop hosted via webinar by the International Game Fish Association (IGFA). Workshop participants included scientists from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Research Institute, Florida university professors and graduate students, and representatives from the Florida Forage Fish Coalition (FFFC) that includes the IGFA, the Florida Wildlife Federation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the American Sportfishing Association, the Snook & Gamefish Foundation, and *Wild Oceans*.

Through the Florida Forage Fish Research Program, the FFFC helps fund graduate student research fellowships that allow fisheries scientists to answer important questions regarding factors that drive forage fish abundance and the linkages between forage fish and recreationally-important species.

Students who were awarded fellowships in the third year of the program presented their research at the data workshop for discussion and feedback.

Ph.D. student Dylan Sinnickson from the University of Florida is investigating freshwater discharge in the Suwannee River Estuary and how this discharge impacts anchovy and its predators. Dylan found that anchovies comprised the third largest fish biomass within the estuary and so contribute a substantial amount of biomass to predators.

Michelle Shaffer is working toward a Masters' degree at the University of Central Florida. She is constructing a food web model for the Indian River Lagoon in order to answer questions about the state of the ecosystem and how ecosystem shifts such as seagrass declines impact the abundance and distribution of predators, including red drum spotted sea trout and snook, and their forage fish.

We are inspired by the work of these young scientists who are already making a positive difference for our fisheries. The Florida Forage Fish Research Program will award two new fellowships this year. By contributing to the FFFC fellowship fund, you can help us support budding careers in fisheries science and management.

Visit [floridaforagefish.org](http://floridaforagefish.org) to learn more. ■



# Turning the Tide

## Wild Oceans News and Activities

### Preserving Healthy Oceans

- **The largest seagrass meadow in Gulf of Mexico is now protected.** Thanks to the Florida Legislature, a bill was passed creating a new aquatic preserve on the west coast of Florida spanning about 800 miles. This preserve holds the largest seagrass meadow in the entire Gulf of Mexico (about 400,000 acres) and provides critical habitat for many gamefish and the forage species they depend on. It also fills a gap between two existing aquatic preserves to the south and north. Prior to the bill's passage on February 4<sup>th</sup>, *Wild Oceans* President Rob Kramer and other coalition partners met with the bill's sponsor in the House, Representative Ralph Massullo, R-Lecanto, to provide input and support for this key piece of legislation. The bill was passed by the House on March 9 and the Senate on March 11 and now awaits the governor's signature.

### Bringing Back the Big Fish

- In February, the NGO Tuna Forum convened leading organizations focused on global tuna stock sustainability in Monterey, California. *Wild Oceans* Pacific Program Director Theresa Labriola gave a presentation describing the impact Pacific longline tuna fisheries have on billfish (excluding swordfish) and mitigation measures that can be taken to reduce mortality of striped marlin, blue marlin, black marlin and shortbill spearfish.
- In April, Theresa remotely attended the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council meeting when the Hawaii longline fishery and its impacts on overfished striped marlin

and protected species, such as false killer whales and sea turtles, were discussed.

- Later in April, Theresa attended a meeting of the Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to advise the U.S. Commissioners to the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). This year, the WCPFC will review a Pacific bluefin tuna stock assessment and consider catch limits along with retention, release and gear requirements, and other tools for rebuilding North Pacific striped marlin. Theresa advocated for continued U.S. leadership on rebuilding bluefin tuna and advanced alternatives for rebuilding striped marlin such as gear modification, mandatory release of live striped marlin and protections for spawning habitat. Striped marlin were also on the agenda for the Western Pacific Council's Pelagic Team Meeting webinar, May 6-8. Theresa asked the Team to consider whether and how the WCPFC conservation measures could reduce catch of striped marlin by the Hawaii longline fishery to hasten rebuilding of this overfished stock.

### Rebuilding Striped Bass

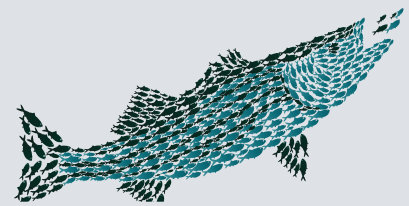
- Atlantic striped bass were declared overfished with overfishing occurring in 2018. Last year, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) approved an action to end overfishing and bring the fishing mortality down to target levels in 2020, which requires an 18% reduction in total coastwide removals from 2017 levels. Commercial quotas were cut by 18% and for recreational fisheries, a 1 fish bag

limit and a 28"-35" recreational slot limit was approved for ocean fisheries, and a 1 fish bag limit and an 18" minimum size limit was adopted for Chesapeake Bay. Although all the states comprising the ASMFC Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board (Maine through North Carolina) unanimously approved the recreational coastwide measures, a few chose to submit conservation equivalency (CE) proposals in order to design their own regulations. *Wild Oceans* Executive Director Pam Lyons Gromen attended the ASMFC February meeting in Arlington, Virginia and the May meeting held via webinar when the CE proposals were reviewed. Unsurprisingly, the patchwork of CE proposals combined with some states implementing the adopted coastwide measures missed the mark, resulting in an aggregate reduction of just 15% and lowering the probability that fishing mortality will be reduced to the target this year. Biomass projections show that the striped bass stock is not likely to recover within the 10-year time frame required by the Interstate Fishery Management Plan. A new striped bass amendment is in the works, and *Wild Oceans* will be following this action closely and fighting for a sound rebuilding plan.

### Promoting Ecosystem-based Approaches to Management

- In March, the Pacific Fishery Management Council completed a review of its Fishery Ecosystem Plan mission, goals and objectives. This wrapped up four years of Theresa's work with the Council and the Ecosystem Work Group to deliver ecosystem goals and

## Commission poised to link menhaden management to striped bass



We are closing in on a major achievement for the future of fishing. At its May webinar meeting, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's Atlantic Menhaden Management Board (Board) committed to an August vote on new reference points for menhaden that account for menhaden's role as a forage fish.

Ecological reference points (ERPs) for menhaden were identified as a Commission priority in a 2009 Action Plan. Since that time, *Wild Oceans* has been working on the frontline, pushing for ERPs to be adopted in the Atlantic Menhaden Interstate Fishery Management Plan. We have had setbacks along the way. In 2017, the Board rejected a broadly supported ERP alternative we helped develop in favor of waiting for additional research. (See "The Year Looked Good on Paper," *Wild Oceans Horizon* Winter 2018, Issue 155) Now armed with a new Ecological Reference Point Stock Assess-

ment that was approved for management use in February, Commissioners appear eager to move ahead.

ERP options that will come before the Board in August are derived from a limited ecosystem model that incorporates prey groups (menhaden and Atlantic herring) and predator groups (striped bass, weakfish, spiny dogfish and bluefish). The most sensitive link in the model, which will be of no surprise to striped bass anglers, is the link between menhaden harvest and striped bass abundance. Menhaden fishing mortality targets and thresholds that are set to maintain the striped bass population would be lower than traditional single-species reference points, leaving more menhaden in the water to serve as forage.

**Stay tuned to our website, [WildOceans.org](http://WildOceans.org) for how you can weigh in to help us cross the finish line in August. ■**

objectives that more accurately describe the state of the ecosystem we aspire to create and objectives that lay a path for how to achieve these goals.

- Shifting fish stock distributions in the Atlantic are causing a conundrum as the three Atlantic regional councils and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission wrestle with how to manage stocks that cross management boundaries into new jurisdictions. Pam attended the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's April webinar meeting as the Council laid the groundwork for a future Climate Change Scenario Planning Workshop that will address shifting stocks and other climate change impacts. A core team comprised of representatives from all three council regions on the East Coast will be formed this spring to plan the workshop.
- To learn more about shifting stock distributions, on April 22<sup>nd</sup> Pam attended a webinar hosted by the Mid-Atlantic Ocean Data Portal. The presentation highlighted a new series of data maps illustrating how important commercial and recreational species have moved north and further offshore since the 1970s. Black sea bass and summer flounder were among

the species with significant distribution shifts. Forage fish as a group also exhibited a pronounced northward shift.

### Managing Forage Fisheries to Provide for Predator Needs

- In June 2019, NOAA Fisheries declared Pacific sardine overfished, and the stock continues a trend of low growth. In order to better understand the status of the stock and its impact on the ecosystem and fishing communities, Theresa remotely attended the Pacific Sardine Stock Assessment Review Workshop held February 24-27 in La Jolla, California. The Pacific Fishery Management Council took up the sardine assessment at its April meeting held via webinar. Theresa participated in discussions of the Coastal Pelagic Species Management Team and the Scientific and Statistical Committee and provided written comments and testimony to the Council asking for a comprehensive look at our sardine management plan to ensure we take adequate measures to rein in fishing during periods of decline to prevent a deeper collapse. (See "Kick 'em While They're Down," p.3)

- Pam was in Jekyll Island, Georgia March 3-5 for the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council meeting. The Dolphin and Wahoo Committee advanced a single action for Amendment 12 to the Dolphin/Wahoo Fishery Management Plan (FMP) that would designate bullet and frigate mackerel as ecosystem component (EC) species because of their importance as prey. Options for regulatory measures to conserve the mackerels were removed from Amendment 12 in anticipation that the Mid-Atlantic Council will be able use the designation as grounds to add them to its Unmanaged Forage Omnibus, preventing the mackerels from being targeted by the pelagic trawl fisheries that operate in the region. Pam testified in support the EC designation but also expressed concern for leaving bullet and frigate mackerel unprotected in the South Atlantic where they are known to comprise 40% of the wahoo diet. She asked the South Atlantic Council to establish a plan to monitor and report commercial catch, so an escalating fishery could be detected early and proactively addressed. ■





# Bring Back the Big Fish

By removing too many of the sea's keystone predators, we weaken an entire tier at the top of the food chain. This may have dire biological consequences throughout the ecosystem, far beyond the social, economic and **moral costs of depleted ocean fisheries.**

*Wild Oceans* has a long record of accomplishments **working to protect and restore marlin and sailfish, swordfish, bluefin and other tunas, and sharks. Our** activities cover a broad range of issues critical to the **future of large ocean fish, among them: implementing recovery plans for overfished species; reducing bycatch** by promoting changes to more selective, sustainable **fishing gears; and promoting catch-and-release fishing** among sport anglers.

Support our work at  
[WildOceans.org/donate](http://WildOceans.org/donate)

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