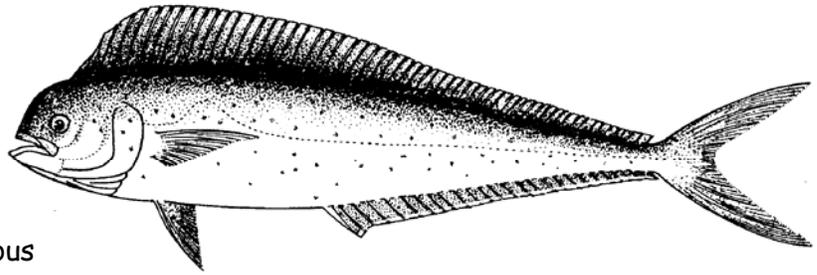


DOLPHIN

The name "dolphin" identifies two very different kinds of marine animal - the popular and playful porpoise, and the popular and pugnacious game fish. The common dolphin-fish



(*Coryphaena hippurus*) goes by other names, such as dorado and mahi mahi, which help distinguish it from the mammal of the same name, especially on restaurant menus where confusion between the two is most unsettling. Abundant in warm offshore waters around the world, the dolphin is a favorite of deep-sea anglers and seafood fanciers alike.

RAINBOW WARRIOR. The dolphin is one of the most beautiful fish in the sea, with brilliant, iridescent coloring. It is a greenish-blue on top (the part of this surface dweller that fishermen see), yellowish on the sides with scattered blue spots, and silver below. The colors change rapidly when the fish is under stress (e.g., when hooked on a fishing line), flashing from green to blue to yellow. To recreational fishermen plying the waters off both coasts of North America and around Hawaii, the dolphin ranks behind only the billfishes and tunas as a desirable catch, because it hits the bait hard, fights ferociously and takes to the air while trying to shake the hook. It is not nearly the size of the other big game fish, however, rarely exceeding 5 feet in length or 100 pounds. The fish typically caught by anglers are much smaller and probably only a year or two old. Dolphin are sexually mature as young as four to seven months and their maximum life span seems to be only 4 years. Most die of natural causes after two years. Like James Dean, dolphin live fast and die young.

The dolphin has been described as the "perfect fish" because it is fast-growing, short-lived and a prolific breeder (spawning year-round), which makes it difficult to overfish. Difficult, but not impossible. Its rapid growth - after their first year, many dolphin are already as big as they're ever going to get - is an evolved survival strategy for a hostile environment filled with hungry predators; among them tunas, sharks and yes, the "other dolphin." Nonetheless, the very same scientists who attest to the dolphin's resiliency under fishing pressure point out that the fish's biology only protects it up to a point. They warn that, given trends toward increasing catches in both commercial and recreational fisheries, overfishing is not only possible, but likely without strict catch limits.

PRECAUTIONARY MANAGEMENT NEEDED TO KEEP DOLPHIN POPULATIONS HEALTHY.

Historically, most fishing for dolphin off the southeastern United States has been for recreation, with an average of 9 out of 10 fish landed caught by rod-and-reel for the home table. Many more fish are caught and released alive. In the 1990s, as other pelagic species declined in number due to overfishing, dolphin became increasingly important to the charter boat industry; that is, the hundreds of thousands of people who visit Florida and other southern coastal states and hire boats to fish offshore. At the same time, commercial landings of dolphin have increased, chiefly because longliners (fishermen who set multi-mile, multi-hook fishing lines), unable to make do with declining catches of overfished swordfish and sharks, began adapting their gear to increase their

catch of dolphin. With hundreds of longliners active off the east coast, the potential for over-exploitation was very real.

Outside of regulations in some state waters (e.g., daily bag limits), the dolphin fishery was unregulated until 2004. As a fish that spends most of its time offshore in deep water, it comes under the jurisdiction of the federal Fishery Management Councils, eight regional bodies responsible for managing fisheries from 3 to 200 miles from shore. In 1998, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council responded to the concerns of conservationists and fishermen and began preparing a Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for dolphin (along with wahoo, a related but much less common species). The South Atlantic Council, which writes the rules for fishing from the Virginia/North Carolina border to the Florida Keys, completed its plan in 2003 and it became law a year later. (The Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Councils have yet to finish complementary plans to cover the fish stocks under their jurisdiction.)

A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF DOLPHIN AND DOLPHIN FISHING. The National Coalition for Marine Conservation (NCMC) began advocating for pro-active conservation measures when we first saw a discernible change in the commercial fishery targeting dolphin that, if unchecked, did not bode well for the future. The purpose of the South Atlantic plan is to "take a precautionary and risk-averse approach" to protecting the southeast's dolphin fishery. It features a mix of regulations to limit harvest in both the recreational and commercial sectors to recent levels, while maintaining the historic shares of the catch (87% recreational and 13% commercial). Anglers are held to bag and size limits and a cap of 1.5 million pounds is placed on commercial fishermen. The plan prohibits surface longlining for dolphin in the large areas off Florida, Georgia and South Carolina closed to longlining for swordfish and tuna.

By developing measures to maintain this important resource in a healthy and sustainable condition, the South Atlantic Council has gotten ahead of the curve, preventing overfishing instead of waiting until it happens and then reacting.

THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR MARINE CONSERVATION (NCMC) SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS TO CONSERVE DOLPHIN:

- Monitor implementation of the Dolphin Fishery Management Plan to ensure the plan's goal of preserving a healthy resource for the predominately-recreational fishery is achieved.
- Include comparable conservation measures in the plans being developed by the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Councils, and initiate similar pro-active plans for the Pacific region.
- Conduct an assessment of the dolphin stock (from North Carolina and Bermuda at the northern edge to Puerto Rico in the south) using the best scientific information available.



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