



**Wild
Oceans**
For the future of fishing

The Horizon

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- OCEAN VIEW: 2021 – LOOKING AHEAD 2
- I AM WILD OCEANS: WILD OCEANS BOARD MEMBER JODY BRIGHT 3
- 2020: OUR YEAR IN REVIEW 4
- 2020 OCEAN HONOR ROLL 5
- TURNING THE TIDE: WILD OCEANS NEWS AND ACTIVITIES 6
- FLORIDA FORAGE FISH COALITION SCIENCE CORNER 7

ADAPTING TO A CHANGING OCEAN

Rethinking Fisheries Flexibility

By Theresa Labriola
Pacific Program Director

As extreme cold poured into southern states in February, power failures followed and cast a spotlight on whether energy companies and regulators are adequately preparing for climate change. This echoes a similar concern in fisheries management. The extreme weather that scientists warn will become more common has strained power plants and has also caused ocean changes, shifted stocks and disrupted the supply of sustainable seafood. Experts agree we need to change our paradigm; we must think about worst-case scenarios to reduce our vulnerability.

As ocean conditions change and fish stocks shift, we must build durable responses that protect ecosystems while encouraging fisheries to adapt. Then we can avoid a black swan event and ensure ocean resources and opportunities thrive to their fullest extent.

Fishery managers are preparing by using climate scenario planning to identify potential challenges, worst-

case scenarios and potential solutions for responding to the effects of climate change. "Flexibility" continues to gain attention.

Flexibility is often construed as the ability to quickly change regulations to allow fishing activity in a new place, at a new time or for a new species. The focus has been on maximizing yield in response to unpredictable events and stock shifts. But, flexibility for the sake of maximizing yield comes at the expense of sustainability.

Discovering solutions to climate effects requires an understanding of ecosystem structure and function and how human actions might impact the changing ecosystem. We must ensure that new fishing activity will not undermine ecosystem health. Then we can ask, "Are our fisheries flexible and adaptable enough to operate in the new paradigm?"

For example, as West Coast forage fish shift northward, new fishing opportunities will arise for squid, sardine or anchovy. We must first understand the impact of these stock

shifts on predators that depend on this prey. Only then can we evaluate harvest strategies to preserve biodiversity and ecological relationships. Fisheries may need to adapt their methods, gear, vessels and markets to successfully target a newly-available species.

Adaptability relies on commercial and recreational fishing diversity. A diverse fishing community provides the infrastructure needed to seize new opportunities. Adaptability also relies on innovation. In Southern California, deep-set buoy gear was developed that not only targets swordfish with more than 80% efficiency, it steers clear of threatened and endangered species. Designing selective gear becomes more important in a shifting landscape where the ability to engage in new opportunities may hinge on avoiding non-target species.

The push towards flexibility must not pull attention away from the impact of human activities on the ocean. We can adapt our fishing practices to new opportunities that contribute to a sustainable future. ■

2021 – Looking Ahead

With a challenging 2020 in the rearview mirror and our new 5-year Strategic Plan complete, it's time to look to the coming year with optimism and focus. While we experienced a couple setbacks in two of our decades-long campaigns this past year, *Wild Oceans* is not about giving up. It is our perseverance that has allowed us to exist for nearly a half a century. So, 2021 holds the promise of progress by doing what we do best – “sticking with an issue until we get a win for the fish.” In addition to our on-going interaction with regional fishery managers, we will be working on the following federal priorities.

- **Gear Restricted Areas:** Despite strong recommendations from more than 60 groups and 16,000 public comments, in January 2020, NOAA announced that it would reopen the surface longline fishery in the Gulf of Mexico, including areas of peak spawning for the western population of Atlantic bluefin tuna. *In 2021 we aim to overturn this new rule by educating decision makers and working to reinstate these proven conservation measures.*
- **Drift Gillnet Legislation:** For more than 3 decades, *Wild Oceans* has worked to remove drift gillnets from U.S. waters.

In 2020, The Driftnet Modernization and Bycatch Reduction Act passed the U.S. Senate unanimously and was approved by the House only to be vetoed by the President. *In 2021, we will work to again help pass this important legislation which will permanently (and finally) ban the use of drift gillnets in all U.S. waters.*

- **Magnuson-Stevens Act Reauthorization:** The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), the primary law governing fisheries in federal ocean waters, was last amended and reauthorized in 2006. In December 2020, a discussion draft was released that addresses many of our priorities by incorporating climate change science in fisheries management, adding new tools and procedures for attending to shifting stocks, strengthening essential fish habitat protection and conserving forage fish. *In 2021, we will continue to provide input on MSA reauthorization bills as they move through Congress to ensure that legislation advances conservation and responsible management of our nation's fisheries.*
- **Forage Fish Conservation Act:** As an organization that has spent decades advancing forage fish conservation, we

were pleased when the idea of this legislation was first mentioned. The Forage Fish Conservation Act, as introduced in the 116th Congress, had good provisions but was problematic, excluding important forage species groups such as squid. *In 2021, we will advocate for legislation that promotes ecologically-sustainable management of all forage fisheries through science-based best practices.*

- **Conserving Billfish at Home and Abroad:** *Wild Oceans* and the International Game Fish Association led the charge in the passage of The Billfish Conservation Act, which prohibits billfish imports and sales in the U.S., providing a limited exemption for traditional fisheries and markets in Hawaii and nearby territories. With the U.S. billfish market restricted to these local sales, we turned our attention to the domestic and international management of billfish, where limits on landings are needed. *In 2021, we will work internationally and domestically to adopt a permanent rebuilding plan for Pacific striped marlin. We will focus on research efforts to better understand billfish spawning grounds and will work to strengthen management measures to protect them.*

– 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

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WILD OCEANS BOARD MEMBER

I am Wild Oceans

When I told my Dad I was going to take “a year off from college” to go chase marlin, he was not pleased. I shook my head at that. I mean, it was his fault.

It’s not that I was one of those kids who couldn’t wait to get away from their parents. It was just that he’s the one who raised me fishing.

He was the guy who made me clean most of the fish while letting my brothers off to go swim. When I asked why, he said, “Because I think you like fishing more than they do.” I shook my head at that too.

My Dad was one in a group of buddies who founded the Poco Bueno tournament and the Gulf Coast Conservation Association (GCCA). GCCA is now the Coastal Conservation Association. They did a number of things that made a difference. Forty years later, I’d like to think that I’m now just doing the same sort of stuff I was raised around as a kid.

Dad was right about a couple of things though: That “one year off”

turned into a lifetime and, I probably would have made more money working on things that required a college degree.

But then I would have never become a “regular” on the Great Barrier Reef during the giant black marlin seasons. Nor would I have left the GBR after each season to join a salty old scalawag named Leo Wooten on Bora Bora, supplying fish to the legendary Bloody Mary’s restaurant. On The Reef I learned how to catch giant black marlin. This helped Leo and I catch the largest blue marlin of my life. From Leo I learned that storing tools in the oily bilge kept them from rusting, how to win at checkers while he cheated and about the moon.

I learned about *Wild Oceans* (then National Coalition for Marine Conservation) from Tim Choate (*Wild Oceans’* Chairman) while fishing all over the world, and about Pacific commercial fisheries from Paul Nichols, a British fisheries officer at Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) in Honiara. But it wasn’t until Gulf shrimp boats came to Hawaii and repurposed themselves into long liners that I called home and said “Gee, thanks. Now



how do I create a Hawaii Conservation Association (HCA)?”

With HCA we passed reef fish legislation in the State Capitol when the requisite State agency would take no administrative action. Armed with experience gained at FFA and from a gig Nichol’s got me with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, I once approached the Western Pacific Council on the subject of long line management.

I learned I could spend the rest of my life beating my head against the wall in there, walked out and swore I’d never return to fishery politics. I shifted to marine science field work, and helped deploy pop up satellite tags across the Pacific.

But I wake up in the middle of the night thinking of fishery issues and during the day I find myself pushing aside work that generates revenue when a marine science project is more interesting – even when it earns me not one single dime.

And yep. It’s all my Dad’s fault. Well, most of it is anyways.

I blame the rest on Tim Choate.

I am Wild Oceans.



2020: Our Year in Review

by Pam Lyons Gromen, Executive Director

The year 2020 will be one for the history books. We could not anticipate, much less plan for, the unprecedented challenges we faced. Agility and adaptability – two traits that have defined *Wild Oceans* since our inception – were essential to remaining effective. While the coronavirus pandemic has changed the way we conduct our work (fishery management and coalition meetings moved to webinar and video conference platforms), it has not changed the way we approach our work, with sound science, integrity, perseverance, passion and respect for the diversity of people reliant on healthy and sustainable marine fishery resources. These are the values at the core of our operation. Here are highlights from our work in 2020.

Wild Oceans Five-Year Strategic Plan Completed. The plan outlines clear and measurable goals, objectives and strategies for four priority conservation areas: 1) Large Marine Fish Conservation, 2) Sustainable Fishing Practices, 3) Ecosystems, and 4) Climate Change. As a road map for our future work, this plan will enable us to evaluate and demonstrate the value of our efforts and our ability to deliver on our mission.

Proposals to Recover Pacific Bluefin Tuna and Striped Marlin Progress at International Meetings. The 2020 benchmark stock assessment for Pacific bluefin tuna showed promising signs of recruitment in the stock, but bluefin still hover at historically-low levels. Striped marlin has languished at historically-low spawning stock levels for decades. Our Pacific Program Director, Theresa Labriola, is a member of the Permanent Advisory Committee for the U.S. Commissioners in the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). She successfully advocated for maintaining the current international bluefin tuna conservation and management measures even as Japan asked for increased quotas because of the uptick in recruitment. Theresa is also leading the charge for rebuilding striped marlin, and she worked with the U.S. delegation to advance a rebuilding plan at the December 2020 WCPFC meeting.

Ecological Reference Points (ERPs) for Atlantic Menhaden Adopted. The new reference points are designed to account for menhaden's critical role in the food web by setting menhaden catch according to the needs of striped bass, one of the predators most dependent on menhaden and therefore, a good indicator of impacts to other predators. The adoption of ERPs was a major milestone in our decades-long campaign to conserve menhaden and other key forage fish. *Wild Oceans* closely followed years of science and management meetings as the ERPs developed, holding the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) accountable for a promise it made to the public to maintain menhaden at levels that support predators.

Preparations Underway For Shifting Fish Stocks along the West Coast. The Pacific Fishery Management Council is in the third year of its Climate and Communities Initiative, a project exploring how climate-related shifting stock availability and other factors might affect west coast fishing communities over the next 20 years. *Wild Oceans* has participated in the project since it began, attending workshops to identify tools, products, and processes to help management entities and coastal communities navigate uncertainty and react to potential future states of the ecosystem.

Mackerels Added as Ecosystem Components to Dolphin Wahoo Plan. The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council approved an amendment to the Fishery Management Plan for the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery that adds bullet and frigate mackerel to the plan as ecosystem components. Bullet and frigate mackerel comprise 30-50% of the wahoo diet and are also important prey for blue marlin and yellowfin tuna. *Wild Oceans* worked on the amendment from its early beginnings in 2018, when we encouraged the Council to take up the issue and to reach out to the public for feedback. Support among the angling community was resounding. Because the Dolphin Wahoo plan extends along the coast, the designation supports action to protect the mackerels in the mid-Atlantic region where they are vulnerable to industrial trawling. ■



Photo courtesy of *Wild Oceans* Board member Bill Boyce

2020 Ocean Honor Roll

Wild Oceans extends a debt of gratitude to the foundations, companies, groups and individuals who support our work. Because of your generosity, we can celebrate another year of accomplishments for the future of fishing.

*The Tim & Karen Hixon
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*Joseph & Catherine Johnson
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Gillian Wackowski

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Turning the Tide

Wild Oceans News and Activities

Bringing Back the Big Fish

- In December, *Wild Oceans* President Rob Kramer attend the Atlantic Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Advisory Panel meeting. Of particular interest were the dramatic increase in white marlin and round scale spearfish landings in 2020. In the 3rd quarter of 2020, landings of these two species were up 42% over the same quarter in 2019. Most of this increase was attributable to tournament catches. The harvest of Atlantic blue and white marlin is capped at 250 fish annually per the current HMS Fisheries Management Plan. The high landings in 2020 triggered the first-ever change to catch-and-release status for these species since the establishment of the cap. Various management alternatives and voluntary changes to tournament rules were discussed to prevent exceeding this cap in the future.
- Our Pacific Program Director, Theresa Labriola, attended the November meetings of the Pacific Fishery Management Council and its Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) to advocate for continued precautionary commercial catch limits for Pacific bluefin tuna. The U.S. commercial bluefin fishery did not catch its annual allowable quota in 2019 or 2020. In an effort to increase catch, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Council recommended raising the purse seine daily trip limit from 15 mt to 20 mt and removing a pre-trip notification. While these measures will incentivize fishing, they will not ensure the U.S. meets its conservation and management obligations in 2021. Subsequently, we expressed our concern in written comments to NMFS.

- At the end of 2020, Theresa joined the U.S. delegation at the annual meetings of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) and the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC), bodies that manage tuna stocks in the eastern and western Pacific respectively. The virtual meetings made consensus difficult. The IATTC meeting ended without an agreed upon management measure for tropical tuna stocks including bigeye, yellowfin and skipjack tuna, jeopardizing the sustainability of these stocks and the marine ecosystem. An extraordinary meeting was organized, and countries quickly resolved to carryover the 2020 management measures for 2021. The WCPFC agreed to rollover 2020 management measures for tropical tunas and Pacific bluefin tuna, which has seen positive signs of rebuilding. Unfortunately, little progress was made on advancing a rebuilding plan for western Pacific striped marlin.
- On January 26-28, Theresa joined several dozen international organizations to discuss collective priorities at regional tuna fishery management organizations (RFMO). While each RFMO has a specific geographic focus, priority issues such as establishing more precautionary tuna harvest strategies, reducing bycatch and increasing observer coverage are shared across boundaries.

Advancing Sustainable Gear Development

- Theresa attended a meeting of the Pacific Council's Highly Migratory Species Management Team (HMSMT) and Advisory Subpanel (HMSAS) on January 15th. The HMSMT and HMSAS met to provide clarification to the

deep-set buoy gear limited entry criteria that the Council adopted in September 2019. She urged the HMSMT to interpret the criteria broadly to be inclusive of and give priority to both researchers and commercial fishermen who developed, tested, modified, and fished the gear. An inclusive definition is consistent with public sentiment and is our best bet for maximizing the use of DSBG, increasing our domestic swordfish catch, building an economically viable fishery and improving the fishing community's access to resources while addressing unforeseen and unavoidable social, ecological or cultural conflicts.

Restoring a Depleted East Coast Forage Base

- The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Shad and River Herring Management Board (Board) convened on February 4th to hear recommendations from its Technical Committee (TC) and Advisory Panel (AP) for actions that should be taken to restore American shad, which continue to be depleted coastwide. As chair of the Shad & River Herring AP, Executive Director Pam Lyons Gromen presented the AP report, which emphasized the importance of genetic testing of shad caught as ocean bycatch.

American shad from different river systems school together at sea, and genetic testing is needed to determine the impact of bycatch on individual runs. The Board passed a motion tasking the TC to evaluate bycatch removals in mixed-stock fisheries in state waters (out to 3 miles from shore). In addition, a letter was sent to NOAA Fisheries requesting that shad sampling, in particular genetic testing, be prioritized in federal sampling programs.

- American shad were also a topic at the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's February meeting. The Council reviewed white papers exploring options to address river herring and shad bycatch in the Atlantic mackerel fishery. A river herring and shad bycatch cap for the mackerel fishery was first implemented in 2014 and is set based on median rates of historical bycatch. Concerns have been raised about the unknown conservation benefit of the cap and its impact on the mackerel fishery.

Pam attended the Council's River Herring and Shad AP meeting on February 8th to provide input on the white papers. The Council agreed to pursue a biologically-responsive cap and asked the Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) to explore approaches that could synthesize available surveys. The Council also asked NEFSC to investigate the feasibility of time/area closures to complement the cap.

Because river herring and shad bycatch is a problem shared by multiple federally-managed fisheries deploying small-mesh trawls (e.g., Atlantic herring, longfin squid and whiting), action taken for the mackerel fishery alone is bound to fall short. *Wild Oceans* continues to advocate for a federal management plan for shad and river herring. We support provisions for federal

management in the Forage Fish Conservation Act and the recent Magnuson-Stevens Act Reauthorization Draft introduced by Representatives Huffman and Case. (See *Ocean View*, p. 2)

Managing Forage Fisheries to Provide for Predator Needs

- An action to implement a possession limit on bullet and frigate mackerel is now part of the Mid-Atlantic Council's 2021 Implementation Plan. Bullet and frigate mackerel are prey for many species, especially blue marlin, yellowfin tuna and wahoo. Because bullet and frigate mackerel are the main prey for wahoo, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council unanimously voted to recognize their importance by designating them as ecosystem component species in its Dolphin Wahoo Fishery Management Plan.

Bullet and frigate mackerel are bycatch in commercial fisheries operating in the mid-Atlantic region, and there are no limits in place to protect them from commercial exploitation. *Wild Oceans*, the International Game Fish Association, the American Sportfishing Association, the Virginia Saltwater Sportfishing Association and the American Saltwater Guides Association submitted a letter to the Mid-Atlantic Council's Executive Committee for its October 5th meeting, requesting action to prohibit the development of directed

fisheries for the unmanaged mackerels until science is available to assess ecosystem impacts.

The issue came before the full Council on December 14th, when Pam voiced support for a motion to add a bullet and frigate mackerel possession limit action to the 2021 work plan. The motion was approved by the full Council, and the action is now on the Council's schedule for the October 5-7 meeting in New York City.

Promoting Ecosystem-based Approaches to Management

- The Pacific Council's Ad Hoc Ecosystem Workgroup continues its work to edit the Fishery Ecosystem Plan. Theresa attended their January meeting to discuss how to bring ecosystem science into the Council process.

On February 2-3, Theresa participated in the Pacific Council's Climate Scenario Planning workshop, which sought to identify specific challenges that West Coast fishing communities could be facing and to formulate potential solutions and actions to respond to the effects of climate change. She focused the discussion on maintaining ecosystem structure and function, considering adequate forage for predators, and preserving diversity of coastal fishing opportunities including small-scale commercial, recreational, charter, indigenous and subsistence fishing. ■



Despite COVID-19 restrictions at Universities and in Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) sampling, our two current Florida Forage Fish Research Program fellows have made tremendous progress with their projects. Emily Farrell and Dakota Lewis were awarded fellowships in June 2020, marking the fourth year of the fellowship program.

Emily Farrell is a doctoral student at the University of Central Florida. Emily

FELLOWS PRESS ON DURING PANDEMIC

has been collecting environmental DNA (eDNA) samples from the Indian River Lagoon to augment traditional gear-based sampling techniques that may miss a number of important species. eDNA is DNA passively shed by organisms into their environment. Using eDNA to determine the species composition in marine and freshwater systems has proven to be highly accurate without the need to directly observe or capture organisms. We look forward to learning more about the new techniques associated with eDNA research on forage and sport fish and are excited about the species hotspot maps Emily is constructing from her data.

Dakota Lewis is pursuing a Master of Science in Biology at the University of Central Florida. She is applying advanced statistical models to discover the effects of disturbance, specifically algal blooms resulting in fish kills, on estuarine fish communities. Dakota has found these algal blooms affect both sport and forage fish with the latter being affected more rapidly. She recently submitted the first of her fellowship manuscripts for peer review, and we look forward to seeing her work published. ■

The Florida Forage Fish Coalition supports the Florida Forage Fish Research Program by funding fellowship awards. Visit floridaforagefish.org to learn more about our work.



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.

Wild Oceans kicked off 2021 with a new five-year strategic plan that articulates our vision and mission and establishes clear and measurable goals and objectives to guide our work. Read the complete *Wild Oceans* 2021-2025 Strategic Plan on our website, WildOceans.org.

Vision

Keeping the oceans wild for the future of fishing

Mission

To keep the oceans wild to achieve a vibrant future for fishing by building coalitions and engaging in marine fisheries management using science, law and ecosystem-based solutions