

**Wild Oceans**  
For the future of fishing

# The Horizon

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ATLANTIC MENHADEN ERPS ADOPTED, FULL IMPLEMENTATION WILL TAKE TIME

## ASMFC Moves the Line for Menhaden but is Not Ready to Get Behind It

by Pam Lyons Gromen, Executive Director

Atlantic menhaden management has reached a critical milestone. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Atlantic Menhaden Management Board voted unanimously to adopt ecological reference points (ERPs) as the basis for setting annual catch levels.

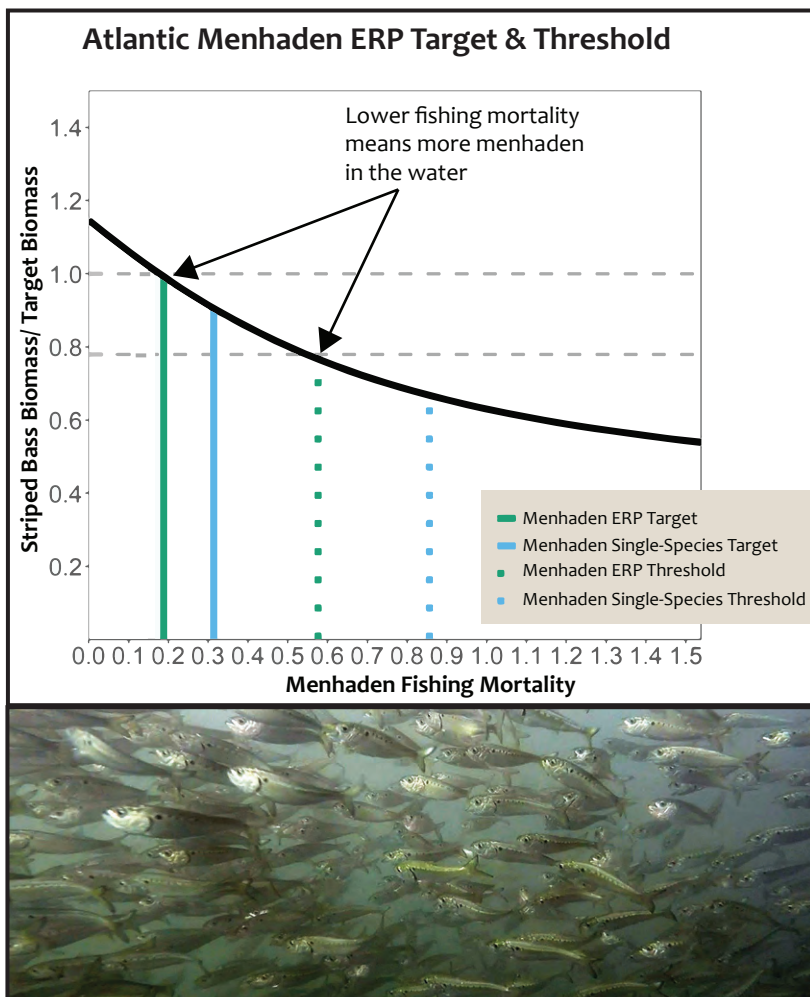
The vote was cause for celebration up and down the Atlantic Coast. *Wild Oceans* along with a broad coalition of fishermen and conservationists have fought for decades to protect menhaden's role as forage.

Numerous predators — from bluefish and striped bass to ospreys and humpback whales — depend on menhaden, and the new reference points are designed to account for menhaden's critical role in the food web.

ERPs are similar to traditional fishing reference points in that both set targets (where you aim to be) and thresholds (where you want to avoid) to meet management objectives.

The important difference is that ERPs are designed to meet ecological objectives. In this case, menhaden fishing mortality (F) is set to maintain the striped bass population. When striped bass needs are accounted for, the menhaden target and threshold are lower than traditional "single-species" reference points that are based solely on menhaden biology, leaving more menhaden in the water as forage.

(continued on page 4)



## Plotting the Course

As mentioned in our last edition of the Horizon, *Wild Oceans* has embarked upon a strategic planning process to help guide us into the future. All businesses, including nonprofits, should be operating with clear and measurable goals. Developing or updating a strategic business plan every three to five years is a great way to ensure this. By putting effort into developing a well-thought-out plan, we will be able to demonstrate the value and effectiveness of our efforts, and our organization's ability to sustain and continue delivering on our mission. It is also important that we not duplicate the efforts of others, but rather capitalize on our unique talents and assets developed over the past 47 years.

Prior to initiating our effort to develop a new plan, our Board of Directors decided that it would be beneficial to better understand the current landscape in which we operate and how we fit into that landscape. To do this, we enlisted the aid of two highly respected veterans in the world of marine fish conservation

to assist us. The primary tool to accomplish this was an online questionnaire distributed to nonprofit conservation organizations and trade groups, fisheries management entities/agencies, select leaders in the field, and academics. A total of 83 individuals received the questionnaire, of which 60 participated, an impressively high response rate. The results were quite interesting.

Respondents indicated that fishery issues related to climate change is by far the single most important emerging issue. If you follow fisheries at all, you have undoubtedly heard how rising ocean temperatures and increasing acidity are presenting challenges to fish, fishermen and those who manage them. Distribution, forage fish availability, productivity and species composition of fisheries is changing, and both fishermen and fisheries managers alike are scrambling to adapt.

When questioned specifically about large marine fish, respondents were clear that gear impacts, fishing prac-

tices and bycatch reduction were nearly as equally important as climate change. With continued advancements in technology, wider use of fish aggregating devices and the growing global demand for commercially harvested fish, the problem is only getting more complicated. It reaffirms that now more than ever, we need to keep identifying new, cleaner gear types and continue transitioning to more sustainable ways to fish — something that has been a basic tenet of our organization for decades.

Our past success at *Wild Oceans* has come by remaining small, focusing on a few key issues, developing expertise around those issues, and forging coalitions to get results. This approach has allowed us to stick with issues over the years and sometimes even decades, yet still remain nimble enough to change focus when emerging threats or opportunities arise. Our future success will depend on maintaining this characteristic as well.

– 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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# Historic Bluefin Fishing Offers Hope for Tomorrow

by Theresa Labriola  
Pacific Program Director

This year brought another round of record-breaking recreational Pacific bluefin tuna opportunities to California. Scattered schools started showing in late February before pushing into Northern California. The record 364-pound tuna landed at Newport Landing in October was not an outlier, as large bluefin continued to reward patient anglers. Of course, this has fishermen wondering: Have bluefin tuna recovered from the historically low levels of just 4 years ago? What's keeping the big fish in California? How long will they stay, and what impact are we having on the future of the population?

Scientists are still piecing together the life history of Pacific bluefin tuna. The Sea of Japan is the only known spawning ground for Pacific bluefin. At a year of age, some bluefin journey 5,000 miles across the Pacific to the California coast where they spend several years feeding and growing. Scientists do not know the percentage of young bluefin that travel east, but once mature, they return to the coast of Japan to spawn. If a high number of Pacific bluefin make the trans-Pacific journey to our shores, then catch limits in the eastern Pacific — the United States and Mexico — have a greater impact on the spawning biomass as every fish caught off of California has not had a chance to reproduce. Catching a high number of juvenile fish can have a greater impact on future spawning stock biomass than catching the same weight of larger mature fish.

While we're witnessing seemingly historic bluefin schools, the most recent stock assessment doesn't point to an explosion in the spawning population,



Photo courtesy of Bill Boyce

but a slow growth to around 28,000 metric tons (mt) in 2018, a 3000 mt increase from 2016. This puts us on track to reach the first internationally agreed upon rebuilding target of about 7% spawning stock biomass (SSB) or 41,000 mt in 2021 — far from the ultimate goal of 20% of spawning biomass by 2034. We'll need to see many more cycles of big fish heading west, reproducing and sending small fish back our way.

Albert Einstein's advice, "Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning," inspires us to consider whether greater numbers of spawning bluefin correspond with a more resilient population that can rebound in a changing ocean and also a greater chance that yearlings will make their trip to the California Current. That's one reason we opposed the recent Japanese proposal to increase Pacific bluefin tuna quota by 20% in 2021. We supported the U.S. Delegation's decision to hold the catch limits

steady until we see at least a minimal stride towards rebuilding. At the Northern Committee meeting of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission held in October, bluefin fishing nations agreed and rolled over the 2020 catch limits to 2021, giving us hope that bluefin tuna will continue to rebound.

The next few years are critical for Pacific bluefin. Recruitment may wane. Shifting climate may shift migration. Recruitment patterns may blur. For the past decade, the reported U.S. recreational landings have regularly exceeded 400 mt, exceeding the U.S. commercial fleet landings and even Taiwan's. While this represents a small piece of the pie, it's still imperative that we consider our impact on the long-term health and growth of bluefin. Remembering that every fish we catch in California has not had a chance to reproduce, to replace itself in the population, we would be remiss to ignore the impact of taking our small piece of the pie. ■

MENHADEN, continued from p. 1

Striped bass were chosen for the ERPs because they are more sensitive to menhaden abundance than most predators. When there are enough menhaden to satisfy striped bass needs, the needs of other predators are likely met as well, according to a multi-species model that was approved for management use earlier this year.

Of course, for the new ERPs to make a difference on the water, the Menhaden Management Board must do more than adopt them, it must implement them. This is the real test of the Commission's resolve to manage menhaden with an ecosystem-based approach.

All eyes were on the Menhaden Management Board when it met on October 20<sup>th</sup>

to set total allowable catch (TAC) for 2021 and 2022. TAC options were presented based on the probability of exceeding the new ERP fishing mortality target. Exceeding the target means that we have missed the mark of where we want to be in order to satisfy predator needs. In the words of one of ASMFC's stock assessment scientists, "If you consistently fish menhaden above the ERP F target, then you are going to jeopardize the recovery of striped bass to their target."

*Wild Oceans* and our many partners in the menhaden fight advocated for no more than a 50% probability of exceeding the new target, a standard of risk that is applied to many fisheries, including those managed by the ASMFC.

While a motion was put forward for a 50% risk with an eloquent rationale about the precedent-setting nature of the decision, what ultimately passed was a 10% reduction from the current TAC (194,400 mt), resulting in a 58.5% and 52.5% risk of exceeding the new ERP target in 2021 and 2022, respectively. The concept behind the approved motion was a phase-in of the ERPs. The Board was not ready to fully stand behind the ERPs this year.

Until TACs are set again in 2022, we cannot be assured of the Board's commitment to managing with ERPs and whether the phase-in approach will be effective. What is certain is that *Wild Oceans* will be there to advocate for the ecosystem. ■

FORGING A PATH TO CONSERVE UNMANAGED BULLET AND FRIGATE MACKEREL AS FORAGE

## Two Mackerels, Two Councils, One Agency at Odds with Itself and an Ecosystem-based Management Conundrum

On September 17<sup>th</sup>, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council voted unanimously to approve Amendment 12 to the Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for the Dolphin Wahoo Fishery of the Atlantic, a plan that ranges from Maine to the Florida Keys. Amendment 12 adds bullet mackerel (*Auxis rochei*) and frigate mackerel (*Auxis thazard*) to the FMP as ecosystem component (EC) species to recognize the mackerels' critical role as forage for wahoo.

Diet studies on large migratory fish conducted in the U.S. Atlantic have shown that bullet mackerel and frigate mackerel are key prey for these offshore predators, especially for wahoo, blue marlin and yellowfin tuna. Understanding the mackerels' ecological significance to economically-valuable highly migratory species (HMS) fisheries, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) sought to include both mackerels in the its 2017 Unmanaged Forage Omnibus Amendment (UFOA), an action that would have safeguarded the unmanaged mackerels from becoming targets of high-volume commercial fisheries operating in the Northeast. Current landings are low and are likely incidental catch.

When NOAA Fisheries excluded bullet

and frigate mackerel in the final rule implementing the UFOA, citing a lack of a connection to a MAFMC-managed predator, the Mid-Atlantic Council turned to the South Atlantic Council for assistance. The predator-prey link between wahoo and bullet and frigate mackerel is strong; the mackerels comprise between 30-50% of the wahoo diet. (Blue marlin and yellowfin tuna are managed by NOAA Fisheries Highly Migratory Species Division, and the agency claims that it does not have the authority to conserve the mackerels under its HMS plan.)

After initiating public comment on the issue of designating and protecting bullet and frigate mackerel as EC species, the South Atlantic Council received overwhelming support from the fishing public, its Scientific and Statistical Committee, and its Dolphin Wahoo and Habitat Advisory Panels.

Although regulatory measures can be put in place to protect the role of EC species in the ecosystem, the South Atlantic Council stopped short of including these measures in its plan after analyses indicated that the mackerels have largely been landed commercially in the Mid-Atlantic region with gear types not allowed under the dolphin wahoo plan.

Under advice from the NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office, the South Atlantic Council decided the best course of action would be for the MAFMC to take up regulatory measures, believing that the EC designation would help the MAFMC's justification for protecting the species under the UFOA.

That plan does not seem to have the support of the NOAA's Greater Atlantic Regional Fisheries Office (GARFO) to the north, leaving stakeholders baffled as to why the two NOAA offices are not on the same page. When the MAFMC Executive Committee convened on October 5<sup>th</sup> to discuss work priorities for 2021, GARFO's Regional Administrator spoke against including a bullet and frigate action that would follow on to the South Atlantic Council's work. The Executive Committee decided that additional information is needed and will revisit the issue with the full Council in December.

It's a perplexing problem that demands a solution — applying ecosystem approaches across regional boundaries to better manage our migratory fish that do not stay within the lines we have drawn in the ocean. *Wild Oceans* is committed to forging this path. ■

# Help us Keep the Oceans Wild

Photo courtesy of Bill Boyce

During these trying times in which we now find ourselves, I wanted to take a moment to reach out to you and say how extremely grateful we are for your support. Despite the impacts of the current pandemic, we have been able to make great strides in eliminating destructive gear like drift gill nets, garnering greater international attention and support for the Pacific's largest predatory fish, like striped marlin and bluefin tuna, and protecting critical forage fish stocks in the Atlantic, like menhaden and herring.

**But these accomplishments have only been possible because of the past generosity of you and others.**

We have much planned for 2021. The *Wild Oceans* team will be working to:

- Rebuild Pacific bluefin tuna & striped marlin through participation in international fishery management bodies.
- Prevent the development of commercial fisheries on bullet and frigate mackerels that are important forage for species like wahoo, tunas and marlin.
- Keep longlines out of the Pacific and restore longline closures in the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.
- Address climate change impacts and forage fish management within the next reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Your donation today will help ensure *Wild Oceans* continues to play a leading role in keeping the oceans wild for the future of fishing. Thank you and wishing you a healthy and safe Holiday season and 2021.

Rob Kramer, President

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I want to help *Wild Oceans* continue to fight for the future of fishing!

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# Turning the Tide

## Wild Oceans News and Activities

### Protecting Critical Habitat

- This past October, *Wild Oceans* President Rob Kramer worked with several other recreational angling groups to petition the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to implement new protections for an important multi-species spawning aggregation site 12 miles southwest of Key West known as the Western Dry Rocks. Protecting spawning aggregation areas such as the Western Dry Rocks is a scientifically proven method to maintain sustainable fisheries. Several recreationally and/or commercially-valued species have been directly or indirectly observed forming aggregations in this area, including permit, several species of snapper, spadefish and black grouper. While permit are already prohibited from being harvested during the proposed closure of April-July, research has shown that depredation from sharks is exceptionally high, thereby reducing the efficacy of a catch and release fishery. Implementing a no entry closure during these four months will add much-needed protection while still allowing anglers access in the fall and winter.

### Bringing Back the Big Fish

- Pacific bluefin tuna have continued to grab the attention of domestic and international managers again this year. From August 12-19, *Wild Oceans* Pacific Program Director Theresa Labriola attended the Western and Central Pacific Fishery Management Commission (WCPFC) meeting of the Scientific Committee (SC) where scientists discussed the merits of the 2020 Pacific bluefin tuna stock assessment. While there has been a slow increase in the stock

biomass since 2011, Pacific bluefin tuna have not yet reached the initial rebuilding target of about 7% spawning stock biomass (SSB), leaving scientists to advise WCPFC to take a precautionary approach to management, especially in relation to the timing of increasing catch levels, until the stock rebuilds to higher biomass levels.

Theresa joined the WCPFC Northern Committee (NC) meeting on October 5, 6 and 7. In response to the uptick in bluefin tuna biomass, Japan proposed to increase bluefin quota. The United States discouraged any increase until the initial rebuilding target is met, and the NC recommended continuing the current management measures.

- Theresa attended the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) meeting of the Scientific Advisory Committee (October 26-28) where scientists reviewed the Pacific bluefin tuna stock assessment and provided IATTC managers with conservation advice consistent with the WCPFC-SC. For more on bluefin, see *Historic Bluefin Fishing Offers Hope for Tomorrow*, p.3.
- Theresa has participated in a bundle of meetings with Western and Central North Pacific Ocean striped marlin on the agenda. Last year, the WCPFC adopted an interim rebuilding plan for striped marlin that aims to rebuild the stock to 20% SSB by 2034. Theresa attended a series of Western Pacific Fishery Management Council and Scientific and Statistical Committee meetings, June 9-11, 23-25 and September 9-10, 15-17, where managers and scientists discussed alternatives for reducing

international and domestic catch of striped marlin. The Hawaii longline fishery is responsible for more than 95% of U.S. striped marlin landings.

- From October 14-16, Theresa participated in a meeting of the Permanent Advisory Committee to the U.S. Delegation to the WCPFC. She was able to gain unanimous support for recommendations that included annual striped marlin catch limits and practical conservation and management measures, such as the required use of circle hooks in all longline fisheries, to ensure annual catch limits are not exceeded and to increase the survivability of released striped marlin.
- Proposals to experiment with longline gear off California continue. On August 27<sup>th</sup>, Theresa attended a public meeting regarding NOAA Fisheries notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement to analyze the issuance of exempted fishing permits to fish with longline gear off the West Coast. In public comment, she urged NOAA Fisheries to focus on authorizing deep-set buoy gear and exploring other sustainable swordfish gear. Recreational fishermen and ocean conservationists overwhelming oppose longline fishing off the Pacific Coast. On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, *Wild Oceans* joined the Coastal Conservation Association of California, the International Game Fish Association and the American Sportfishing Association in a meeting with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife to oppose longline experimentation and to ask the department to take a stand against the use of longlines off California.

## Promoting Ecosystem-based Approaches to Management

- On July 16<sup>th</sup>, *Wild Oceans* Executive Director Pam Lyons Gromen attended a special meeting of the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council when final action was taken to approve an amendment to the Mackerel, Squid, Butterfish (MSB) Fishery Management Plan (FMP) that revises the plan's goals and objectives. The revisions include the plan's first ecological objectives that recognize the importance of MSB to the food web and to other fisheries that depend on MSB as forage for their target species.

## Managing Forage Fisheries to Provide for Predator Needs

- At the June 10-18 Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) meeting, the Council reviewed a draft Pacific sardine plan with a range of alternative for rebuilding the overfished stock. Theresa attended the Council meeting and a meeting of Coastal Pelagic Species (CPS) advisors, and she requested the Council develop alternatives that are more conservative than the status quo.

During its September meeting, PFMC reviewed the range of Pacific sardine rebuilding alternatives and unfortunately chose to move forward with status quo management. Theresa expressed concern about the effects of the depleted sardine population on the recreational fishery that relies on live sardine bait, on the commercial CPS fishery that has historically targeted sardine, and on the ecosystem and many predators that rely on sardine as forage. While status quo management allows for more fishing now, it increases the risk of continued overfishing and could require deeper quota cuts down the road.

## Restoring a Depleted East Coast Forage Base

- The week of June 2-5, Pam joined the peer review workshop webinar for the new American shad benchmark assessment. The assessment passed peer review and was presented to

the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) Shad & River Herring Management Board on August 4<sup>th</sup>, when it was approved for management use. Shad remain depleted to historically-low levels, and there are no strong signals to indicate that the coastwide stock is recovering. The Board tasked its Technical Committee (TC) with identifying potential paths forward to improve shad stocks given the discouraging results of the stock assessment. As Chair of the ASMFC Shad & River Herring Advisory Panel (AP), Pam facilitated an AP meeting on October 26<sup>th</sup> to review the initial draft of TC recommendations. Additional meetings of the TC and the AP will be held to finalize a suite of recommendations ahead of the next ASMFC meeting scheduled for February 2021.

- A June benchmark assessment concluded that Atlantic herring are overfished at just 29% of the established biomass target. Over the summer, Pam followed meetings of the New England Fishery Management Council and its Herring Plan Development Team, Scientific and Statistical Committee and Herring Committee as catch specifications were set for the next three years (2021-2023) based on the stock assessment findings. The specifications package, which was approved as Framework 8 to the Atlantic Herring Fishery Management Plan on September 29<sup>th</sup>, sets catch levels in accordance with a control rule that addresses herring's critical role in the food web. *Wild Oceans* and our partners advocated for the control rule that was approved last year by NOAA Fisheries.
- At the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council's August meeting, long-fin squid specifications were set for 2021-2023, and Atlantic mackerel and butterfish specifications were decided for the 2021 and 2022 fishing years. Atlantic mackerel remains overfished with a new stock assessment expected in 2021. The butterfish stock is declining steadily and is well below the target biomass. River herring

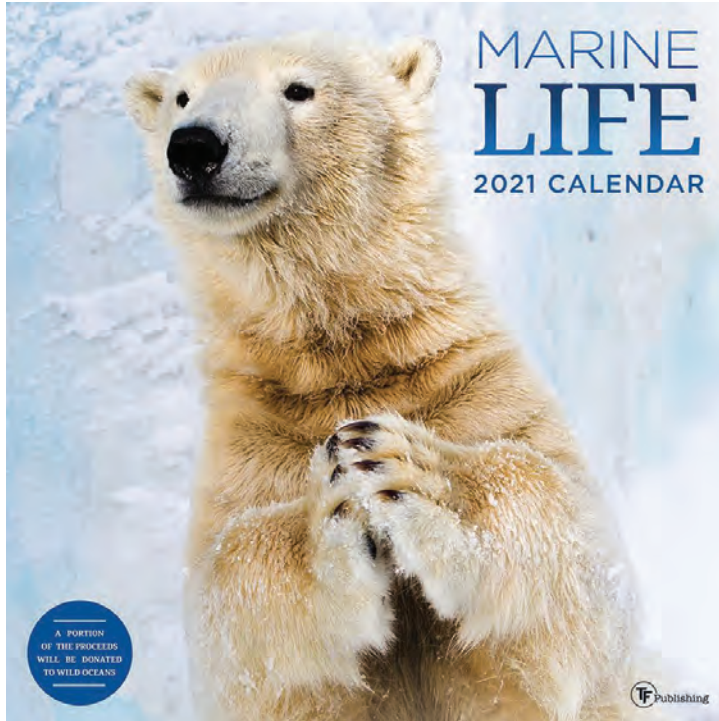
and shad caps were set for the mackerel fishery, and Pam testified in support of strengthening conservation measures because of the bleak 2020 American shad assessment.

## Rebuilding Striped Bass

- On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, the ASMFC Atlantic Striped Bass Management Board voted to begin a new amendment to the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (ISMFP) for Atlantic Striped Bass. Pam followed working group meetings in July when issues to include in the scoping document for the new amendment were debated. These issues include goals and objectives, biological reference points, management triggers, stock rebuilding, regional management, conservation equivalency, recreational release mortality, recreational accountability, and commercial quota allocation. The scoping document (called a Public Information Document or PID) was reviewed at the ASMFC annual meeting on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. The Management Board recommended edits and additions to the document, and it will be revisited in February. Once approved, the document will be disseminated to the public for feedback, and this feedback will be used to construct the amendment.
- Circle hooks are required when fishing for striped bass with bait, no exceptions. In October, the Management Board affirmed the mandatory circle hook provision that was approved last year as part of a plan to end overfishing. Discard mortality in the striped bass fishery is significant. An estimated 9% of fish that are released alive die as a result of being caught. Circle hooks can reduce rates of "gut-hooking" (i.e., the hook is swallowed and internal organs are punctured). Maine and Massachusetts submitted proposals to allow for limited exemptions from the circle hook requirement, but these were denied. ■



## TF Publishing's Marine Life Calendar Supports Wild Oceans!



For the past five years, TF Publishing has generously supported *Wild Oceans* through the sale of its Marine Life Calendar, a full-color wall calendar that features spectacular photographs of the most wondrous creatures in the sea.

The new 2021 calendar shines the spotlight on some of the ocean's most charismatic animals — from tropical dolphins to Antarctic penguins. This 12-month calendar is printed on premium 12" x 12" glossy paper and includes thirteen images combined with monthly calendar grids and a bonus 4-month view of January 2022 - April 2022.

TF Publishing shares *Wild Oceans'* vision of a healthy and sustainable planet. The company is deeply committed to reducing the production of waste and its impact on the earth. Their eco-conscious efforts both small and great include: workplace recycling and composting, powering the corporate office with a wind turbine, and removing plastic from most of its products.

Calendars are on sale now and make a great gift for the holiday season! Visit the *Wild Oceans* website (<https://wild-oceans.org>) to make your purchase.

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