



# The Horizon

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SUMMIT REVEALS GAPS IN CURRENT POLICY

## NOAA REVISITS RECREATIONAL FISHERIES POLICY

by Rob Kramer,  
Wild Oceans President

NOAA Fisheries is in the process of updating its National Policy for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries (Policy). Extensive stakeholder input was gathered through fishery management council meetings, webinars and an online comment portal from August to December, and a draft revised Policy is expected to be released this year.

Originally published in 2015, the purpose of the Policy is "to provide guidance for Agency consideration in its deliberations pertaining to development and maintenance of enduring and sustainable high quality saltwater recreational fisheries." This was to be accomplished by integrating the Policy's goals and guiding principles into all agency "planning, budgeting, decision-making, and activities."

A policy is only as good as its implementation. Regional plans in support of the Policy almost entirely focus on constituent engagement, as opposed to specific ways to

incorporate the Policy's guidance into daily decisions being made by the Regional Offices and Science Centers.

Last April, I traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend the 2022 National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Summit. Initiated in 2010, these quadrennial summits are intended to provide anglers, scientists, and managers the opportunity to engage in direct dialogue to learn from one another.

The theme for the 2022 Summit was *Recreational Fisheries in a Time of Change*, and four distinct topics areas were identified: Climate Resilient Fisheries, Balancing Ocean Uses, Data Collection & Use, and Management Flexibility & Optimum Yield. After hearing from summit participants, NOAA Fisheries determined that there are important gaps in the 2015 Policy that need to be addressed.

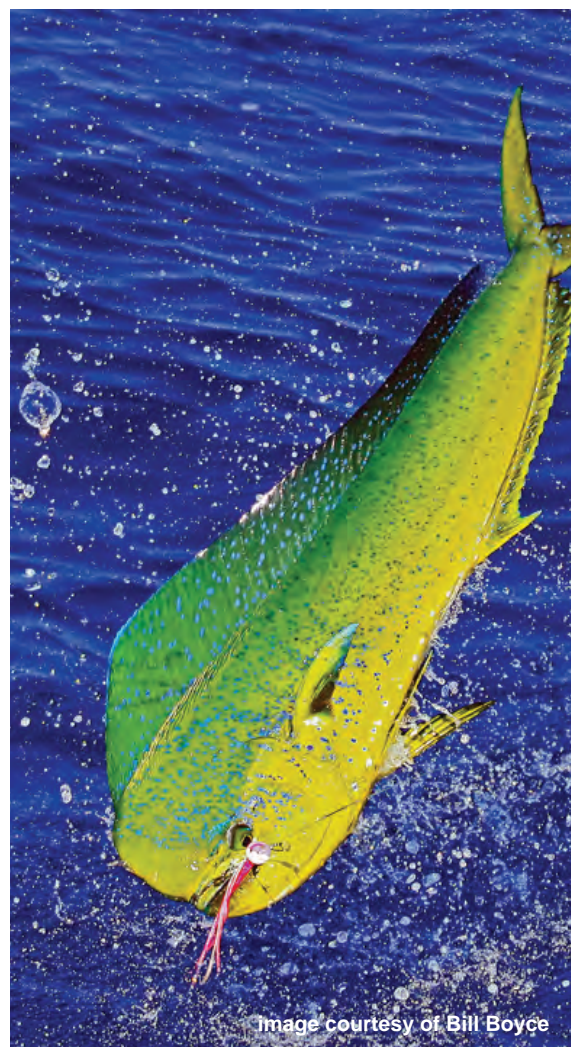


Image courtesy of Bill Boyce

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## Meeting the Challenges of Recreational Fisheries Management

Managing recreational fisheries in the marine environment has always been challenging, far more so than commercial fisheries.

To begin with, evolving from the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) came into existence in 1970 primarily to manage commercial fishing. The subsequent laws and policies that followed, most notably the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA), also focused on commercial fishing, not recreational fishing. Consequently, the management system itself was not originally designed with recreational fisheries in mind, thereby creating a distinct disadvantage from the onset. While much has changed in the last 50 years to better understand and properly manage recreational fishing, the fact still remains that this has mostly been reactive, responding to crises as they arose.

Another challenge is just the sheer magnitude of the physical space and number of participants that NMFS has to manage. The agency oversees marine fisheries (both recreational and commercial) within the entire U.S. exclusive economic zone. This is an area consisting of more

than 4 million square miles that extends from where state waters end out to about 200 nautical miles or less depending on international boundaries. This is larger than the *entire* land mass of the United States. Then looking at the number of anglers who fish for federally-managed species and how often they fish, things become even more complex. In 2017 alone, 8.6 million saltwater anglers took over 202 million fishing trips. That equates to over 550,00 trips per day when averaged out over the course of a year.

However, it is not just the origin of the NMFS, the number of individual participants, the vast area in which they fish, or even the diversity of species pursued that brings about the biggest challenge in recreational fisheries management. It's varying expectations by the fishermen coupled with the fact that recreational fishing is not simply about maximizing the pounds caught or achieving the Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY), as it is in commercial fisheries. Recreational fishermen are an extremely diverse group of individuals with differing interests in the species they pursue, the gear they use and what drives them to fish in the first place. There are also differing opinions on what is most important when managing the fishery.

Collectively, recreational anglers would likely agree that all participants want lots of fish, big fish, and the opportunity to go fishing. However, when questioned individually, it is quite possible that one of these things is more important than the other. For instance, I may be more satisfied with catching one or two trophy fish rather than catching a lot of smaller fish during an outing. Conversely, having access to a fishery (longer open season) is also often cited as the most important consideration when managing the recreational fishery. Accommodating either of these preferences requires managers to make decisions that are not simply based upon MSY. All of this is made even more complex as the technology being used by recreational fishermen becomes increasingly more sophisticated, making them more effective in their efforts to both find fish and catch fish.

Given these complexities, continuing to improve the science along with our consideration of ecosystem impacts is more critical now than ever and should be given greater attention when managing all of our fisheries, ...recreational or commercial.

– 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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# DRIFT GILLNETS GIVE WAY

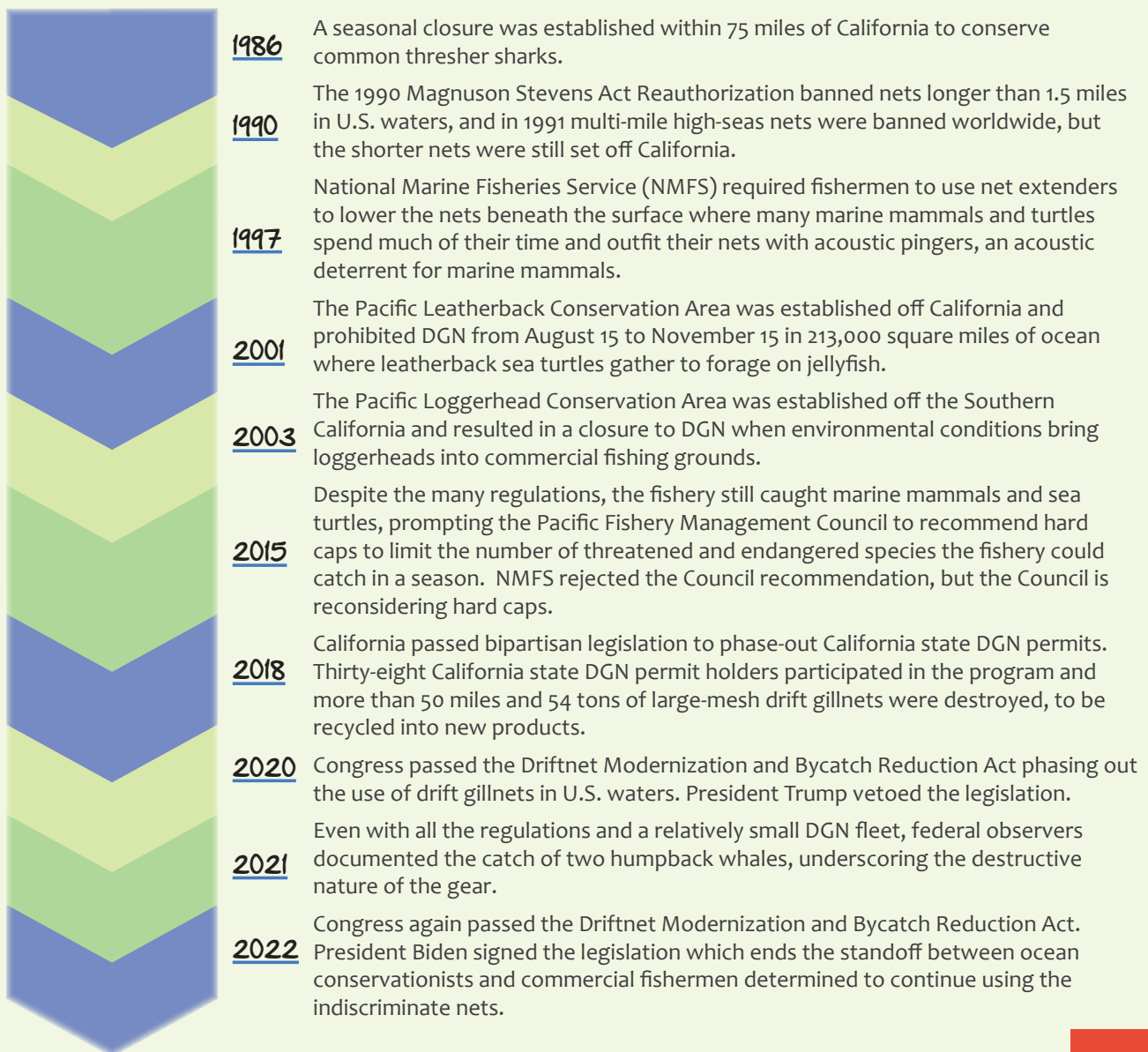
by Theresa Labriola, Pacific Program Director

Decades ago, when the California legislature first permitted drift gillnet (DGN) gear, recreational fishermen marched on Sacramento, demanding that the legislature “Ban the Nets.” They had heard the story of destruction that lay in the gear’s wake, and they worried about its impact on California’s oceans and sportfishing. The stand-off continued for four decades until, in the final days of 2022, Congress sunsetted the last remaining drift gillnet fishery in the United States.

For decades, *Wild Oceans* worked with recreational fishermen and ocean conservationists to constrict and constrain and eliminate the destructive drift gillnets that discarded more than half of their catch. Ken Hinman, former President of *Wild Oceans* who initiated our work to ban drift gillnets back in the 1980s, commented, “with this legislation, U.S. coastal waters are finally free of this destructive gear. It’s one more big step toward our goal of clean, eco-friendly fishing.”

*Wild Oceans* has not merely focused on the elimination of the bad, but the adoption of sustainable commercial fishing gear. We have supported authorization of deep-set buoy gear and the prioritization of research into innovative gear development, specifically gear that reduces the needless waste of ocean resources. As a result, DGN is giving way to species-specific gear that makes management easier and less costly and allows fishermen to target fishery resources with less impact on ocean structure and function, thus maintaining ecosystem resiliency. ■

## Milestones to the Drift Gillnet Ban



## 2015 National Policy for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries

### Policy Goals

- Support and maintain sustainable saltwater recreational fisheries resources, including healthy marine and estuarine habitats
- Promote saltwater recreational fishing for the social, cultural, and economic benefit of the nation
- Enable enduring participation in, and enjoyment of, saltwater recreational fisheries through science-based conservation and management

### Guiding Principles

- Support ecosystem conservation and enhancement
- Promote public access to quality recreational fishing opportunities
- Coordinate with state and federal management entities
- Advance innovative solutions to evolving science, management, and environmental challenges
- Provide scientifically sound and trusted social, cultural, economic, and ecological information
- Communicate and engage with the recreational fishing public

The first thing one notices when looking at the original Policy's goals and guiding principles (see box above) is what is missing – the admitted recognition that recreational fishing is inherently different than commercial fishing and must be considered as such in agency actions from the onset. This means managing not just based on the maximum number of fish that can be harvested without the stock collapsing (Maximum Sustainable Yield or MSY), but managing to ensure that an abundance of fish and the prey they feed on is left in the water. This fundamental difference is reflected in the desire of recreational anglers to maintain fishing opportunities (i.e., the experience) over landing amounts (pounds) of target species.

In keeping with themes identified at the 2022 Summit, priority areas that would serve to put the National Policy for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries into practice include:

- **Focusing on adaptability, but not at the expense of the fish or the ecosystems in which they depend upon.** Fish are moving, fishermen are switching target species, and the technology being used by recreational fishermen has become increasingly more sophisticated. Coupled with other effects of climate change, this all adds up to dynamic fisheries that need to be recognized as such when making decisions.
- **Recognizing that an abundance of well-managed forage fish is critical to an “enduring and sustainable high quality recreational fishery” and giving this more prominence in the policy and subsequent decision-making.** Commercial fisheries have a direct financial incentive to take advantage of shifting stocks of forage fish or forage stocks that are improving due to warming water. Policy decisions need to better incorporate the importance of forage fish monitoring and conservation, leaving more in the water for predator needs, and managing in way that creates ecosystem resilience.
- **Better understanding and incorporating the recreational community's values when determining Optimum Yield (OY) – the amount of fish that will provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation.** Emphasis

should be placed on how the specification of OY impacts the Policy goal of achieving a “high quality” and “enduring” recreational fishery. In commercial fishing, OY typically correlates to pounds (pounds landed = revenue), whereas the recreational definition of OY may vary from fleet to fleet, species to species, even angler to angler, but “time to fish” and leaving more fish in the water than what is minimally necessary to sustain a stock always matters.

Certainly, in the updated National Policy for Saltwater Recreational Fisheries and regional implementation plans, more attention needs to be paid to how the Policy will be used to make a meaningful difference for recreational fisheries. The inclusion of measurable actions that can be taken throughout the fisheries management system – from the regional councils, to NOAA Fisheries' Regional Offices and Science Centers, all the way to the office of the Assistant Administrator – would ensure the Policy guidance is utilized when budgeting, planning and executing activities. Ultimately, designing policies is one thing, acting on them is quite another. ■

# 2022 Ocean Honor Roll

*As Wild Oceans launches into our 50<sup>th</sup> year of working for the future of fishing, we are humbled by the generosity of the individuals, businesses and foundations that have enabled us to make an enduring impact in the field of marine fisheries conservation.*

The Tim & Karen Hixon Foundation

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West Palm Beach  
Fishing Club

# Turning the Tide

## Wild Oceans News and Activities

### Large Marine Fish Conservation: Strategies that Rebuild and Sustain Big Fish Populations

- Theresa Labriola, our Pacific Program Director, attended the Western Central Pacific Fishery Commission (WCPFC) - Northern Committee (NC) meeting, September 3-5, as a member of the U.S. Delegation and expressed support for continuing the current catch limits for Pacific bluefin tuna while the stock rebuilds. The WCPFC-NC agreed to maintain catch limits despite a Korean proposal to increase quota to address their unexpected catch of bluefin in their set-net fishery. This proposal contradicts a cornerstone of fishery management which requires fishing nations to take steps to reduce their catch to meet conservation needs instead of increasing catch to meet fishery needs.
- Theresa is a member of the Permanent Advisory Committee (PAC) to the U.S. Delegation for the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC). She attended the PAC meeting on October 27 and 28 in Honolulu, Hawaii and gained PAC support for developing strong international rebuilding plans for Western Pacific striped marlin and Pacific bluefin tuna, which are both well below historic levels. She also advocated for precautionary management of North Pacific albacore through adoption of a Harvest Control Rule (HCR) to ensure we have the rules in place to allow fishing when the stock is healthy, as it currently is, and to curb fishing if biomass falls in the future. WCPFC met in December, adopted a harvest strategy for North Pacific albacore and will review a HCR in 2023. In addition, WCPFC maintained the cur-

rent catch limits for Pacific bluefin tuna and committed to develop a harvest strategy, a proactive, adaptive framework for taking the best available information and applying an evidence and risk-based approach to setting harvest levels.

### Sustainable Fishing Practices: Selective Gear that is Compatible with Ecosystem Health

- Theresa attended the November Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) meeting (November 2 - 8) in Garden Grove, California as well as meetings of the Highly Migratory Species (HMS) Management Team and Advisory Panel. She prepared a joint comment letter with recreational partners and provided public comment in support of drift gillnet hard caps, which are a necessary guardrail to minimize the fishery's interactions with threatened and endangered species until the federal permit is phased out in 2027. The Council scheduled final action for DGN hard caps for June 2023. She also commented in support of a swordfish management workshop that focuses on developing input criteria and performance criteria for deep-set buoy gear innovation.
- In December, *Wild Oceans* President Rob Kramer and Theresa traveled to Orange County, California to meet with long-time supporters of *Wild Oceans* as well as Chugey Sepulveda and Scott Albers at the Pflieger Institute of Environmental Research. They discussed *Wild Oceans* current work to monitor the health of the California Current Large Marine Ecosystem and protect its ecological integrity, our interest in identify gaps in our understanding of HMS behavior and habitat, opportunities for collaborative research in order to

promote conservation of stocks and spawning habitats, and the research and development of innovative, sustainable, science-driven HMS gear.

### Ecosystems: Food Webs, Habitat and Biodiversity

- *Wild Oceans* Executive Director Pam Lyons Gromen attended a number of meetings concerning Atlantic herring hosted by the New England Fishery Management Council from September to December. The Council and its Herring Committee deliberated over setting catch limits for the next three years. A troubling new assessment found herring biomass was at just 21% of the target in 2021. The stock rebuilding trajectory has been extended from 5 to 7 years, and historically-low recruitment continues. The Council chose to follow the advice of its Scientific and Statistical Committee and apply the current catch control rule designed to account for herring's role as forage. Concern for the health of the herring resource prompted the Council to prioritize herring work in 2023. The Council will revisit the Atlantic Herring Inshore Midwater Trawl Restricted Area (Inshore Buffer Zone) that was vacated by the U.S. District Court last year. In written and oral comments, *Wild Oceans* strongly supported prioritizing a new buffer zone action, pointing out that the original measure was widely supported by the Council and hundreds of stakeholders who depend on herring as forage.
- The Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC) hosted a Pacific Sardine Stock Structure Workshop from November 15 -18 in response to renewed interest in Pacific sardine stock delineation used in the assessment and hence how survey and catch data are assembled for

assessment purposes. Theresa attended the workshop to discuss what historic and new information tell us about stock structure and delineation methods and whether there is agreement on modifying how we define stock structure or delineate catch and survey data. We expect the SWFSC to present a summary report to PFMC this spring. The PFMC may consider whether to manage Pacific sardine as two stocks instead of one, which could result in significant increase in catch and shift forage abundance in the Pacific.

- Pam traveled to Long Branch, New Jersey for the 80<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) held November 7-10.

➔ Striped Bass: There was good news for Atlantic striped bass. An updated assessment determined that overfishing is no longer occurring. Projections estimate a 78% chance that the stock will be rebuilt by the 2029 deadline.

➔ River Herring: Terms of Reference (TORs), statements that describe work to be undertaken, were adopted for a new river herring benchmark assessment. A TOR requested by the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council (MAFMC) to investigate a biologically-based method for establishing a bycatch cap was added. While bycatch caps are in place in the Atlantic herring and mackerel fisheries, the cap values are based on historic catch and are not tied to restoration objectives.

➔ Atlantic Menhaden: Addendum 1 to Amendment 3 to the Atlantic Menhaden Interstate Fisheries Management Plan was approved, and many of the options that *Wild Oceans* supported were selected. The primary goal of the addendum was adjusting commercial state allocations to better align with the menhaden resource, and more quota was allocated to New England states where menhaden availability has increased since the adoption of Ecological Reference

Points (ERPs). In addition, all catch will now be counted against the annual total allowable catch (TAC) where prior to the addendum, small-scale fisheries and incidental catch were not accounted for in this important biological limit. The Menhaden Management Board also removed purse seines as a small-scale fishery gear. Since purse seines target menhaden and can remove large volumes of fish, this gear reclassification closes an important loophole.

The Atlantic menhaden TAC for 2023-2025 was increased by 20% to 233,550 mt. An updated single-species assessment found that the stock was well above the ERP targets, and quotas as high as 350,000 mt. were discussed. Citing caution about the status of Atlantic herring and the lack of an updated multi-species model that includes information about other forage species and menhaden predators – points we emphasized – the Management Board approved a quota on the conservative side of the range with a low probability of exceeding the ERP targets.

### Climate Change: Resilient Ecosystems and Fishing Communities

- For the past several years, we have been participating in the Pacific Fishery Management Council (PFMC) Climate and Communities Initiative (CCI) which resulted in a list of projects that can help the PFMC build climate resilient fisheries. In September, working with partners, we attended the PFMC meeting in Boise, Idaho (Sept. 8 -14) and presented the PFMC with a new Fishery Ecosystem Plan Initiative that could effectively incorporate the CCI priorities. The Council selected to begin work on our proposed initiative - Ecosystem and Climate Information for Species, Fisheries, and FMPs - that engages NMFS, specifically the Integrated Ecosystem Assessment team, and the Council advisory bodies and management teams, in developing ways to bring climate and ecosystem

science into harvest setting of each FMP (groundfish, salmon, highly migratory species, and coastal pelagic species). This initiative could result in development FMP-specific indicator reports that would help the Council and stakeholders better understand climate change impacts on Council-managed species.

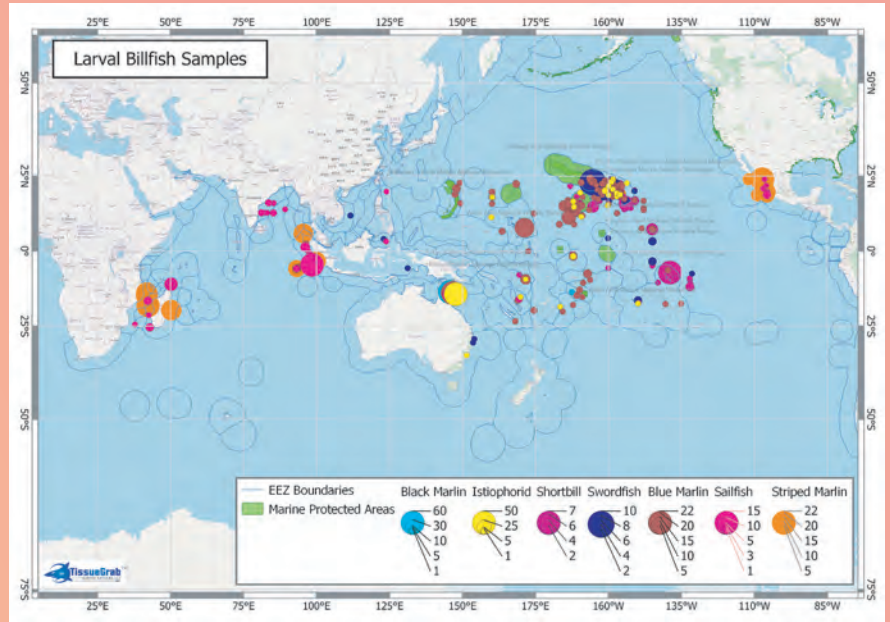
- In October, Rob attended the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic Fishery Management Councils joint workgroup meeting in Tampa, Florida to address Section 102: Fishery Management Measures of the Modernizing Recreational Fisheries Management Act of 2018 (Modern Fish Act). Rob provided comments on updating the National Saltwater Recreational Fisheries Policy. He then followed up with an in-person meeting with Russell Dunn, NMFS's National Policy Advisor for Recreational Fisheries, where he further elaborated on recommended changes to the policy to include important considerations like better addressing climate change effects, forage fish needs and ecosystem-based management requirements (see cover article and Ocean View). After the meeting, Rob followed up with written comments outlining *Wild Oceans'* suggestions for the Recreational Fisheries Policy.
- Pam attended East Coast Climate Scenario Planning workshops at the ASMFC meeting on November 8 and at the MAFMC meeting on December 14 to provide recommendations for operationalizing ecosystem resiliency, including conserving forage fish to safeguard food web connectivity. She stressed the need to emphasize ecosystem-based management strategies that are effective across jurisdictional boundaries. The intent of the workshops, which were also held during the December meetings of the South Atlantic and New England Fishery Management Councils, was to develop a set of ideas and recommendations from each management body to be considered at a summit meeting in February. ■



# Year One of Kona Project Yields Tremendous Results

As we close out the first full year of the *Wild Oceans* Kona Project, we celebrate what we have accomplished with your support.

- ▶ The database we have compiled is the largest repository on the distribution of larval billfish (istiophorids and swordfish) in the Pacific. It has served to identify several potential spawning and larval habitats (previously unknown) and it will act as a baseline for future studies.
- ▶ By methodically searching literature sources, we discovered approximately 6,000 reports that potentially list details of larval collections.
- ▶ From reports dating from 1928-2018, the Project compiled data on 5,423 larval billfish samples from 17,684 research tows.



The first few months of 2023 will be devoted to data analysis, writing, and coordinating with oceanographic modelers to begin work on Phase 2 of the Project. We will wrap up Phase 1 of our research (the meta-analysis using the information from the literature search) with a peer-reviewed submission to a scientific publication, detailing the study and the possibility of discovering new spawning sites in the Pacific. ■

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