



FishSmart Gulf of Mexico/South Atlantic Workshop Makes Breakthroughs

Fifty-five fisheries researchers, managers, communications specialists, recreational anglers, for-hire sector and representatives of the sport fishing industry gathered for 2-1/2 days of interactive discussions to develop information that could help anglers improve the survival of fish that they catch and release. The workshop focused on barotrauma but recognized a variety of issues that are critical to providing released fish the greatest chance for survival. This FishSmart workshop, held in St. Petersburg, Florida April 11-13, focused on the recreational fisheries of the Gulf of Mexico and South Atlantic.

Since 2008 anglers have been mandated by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and NOAA Fisheries to carry and utilize dehooking devices and venting tools on reef fish caught in the Gulf of Mexico. A similar measure was considered for the South Atlantic in 2010 but not implemented due to the uncertainty about the effectiveness of venting fish exhibiting barotrauma. During the workshop, current results of research on venting (removing swim bladder gasses from the fish's body to enable it to return to habitat depth on its own and recompress) as well as rapid release devices (sending a fish back down to deep water using weighted devices so it can recompress) were reviewed for each area. While venting was still considered to have potential benefits when conducted properly, workshop participants agreed that the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council should be encouraged to look at expanding the language in the current regulations to include not only venting devices but also add an allowance for anglers to use rapid descent devices in lieu of venting. To improve the effectiveness of these techniques in the South Atlantic, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council was encouraged to consider implementing a program which teaches anglers how to improve the survival of released fish.

Workshop participants also noted that the success of both venting and rapid recompression are affected by other factors that impact the fate of released fish. For example, descent devices may allow fish to get back down to deeper cooler waters more quickly in the summer thereby potentially increasing their survival, particularly in warmer Gulf of Mexico waters. Workshop participants also emphasized the need to reduce other stressors on fish, including the amount of time the fish is out of the water and physical handling of the fish. In addition, in the Gulf of Mexico, predation on released fish by dolphins may reduce the effectiveness of either method. Workshop participants encouraged greater integration of the NOAA guidelines on interaction with marine mammals in messaging to anglers to help them deal with these situations.

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A number of research needs were identified during the workshop, including:

- Determining the effectiveness of venting or rapid recompression using descent devices as they are actually conducted by anglers
- Quantifying the true extent of release mortality in the snapper and grouper fisheries
- The need to determine the degree of predation on released fish by marine mammals and predatory fishes
- Developing better data on survival rates based on species, size and age of the fish being released stressing the importance of large fish in the spawning population

Some of this needed research is already being planned but additional research will be dependent on funding.

The workshop was part of the larger FishSmart effort, a program lead by the sport fishing community to work with anglers and industry to improve the survival of caught and released fish. The initial phases of FishSmart are being funded by NOAA Fisheries through a grant to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission.

A full report of the workshop is posted on www.fishsmart.org.
