

The Center for Marine Conservation (CMC) is a non-profit organization dedicated wholly to the marine environment—its health, diversity, and productivity. CMC's Fisheries Conservation Program works to ensure proper management of marine fisheries. We advocate the conservation of fish stocks for their long term use and for maintaining the ecological integrity of the oceans.

During the reauthorization of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act, CMC will play an active role in representing the conservation community and bringing new voices into the management process. The Magnuson Act must work to sustain the ocean's abundance and the livelihoods it supports. It is the right of all Americans to expect their public resources will be managed to their benefit. And it is the duty of government to sustain our public fishery resources for the future.

Contact CMC at the address below for more information, to be added to our activist mailing list, and to find out dates and locations of public council meetings.



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Not Enough Fish In The Sea:

Marine Fisheries At Risk

Once thought to be a limitless supply of food, the world's fish resources are now the subject of critical environmental and economic concern. Even species such as cod, flounder, tuna, swordfish, and red snapper, which are deceptively abundant in grocery stores and fish markets, suffer from severe declines. In the United States, more than *half* of our commercially valuable fish stocks are fished to their maximum potential or are overfished. And, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, the status of another



34% is unknown and may be in serious decline. Even species that were once "underutilized" can rapidly reach an "overutilized," or overfished, state. With the growing demand for shark steaks and shark fin soup, Atlantic shark catches have increased fifteen-fold over the past decade, faster than the government can develop a management plan for these species.

In the coming year, Congress will debate, and perhaps reform, the law that governs how we manage U.S. fisheries. There has never been a more critical time for our officials to consider new management strategies and to ensure that marine fisheries conservation is a priority on our national agenda.

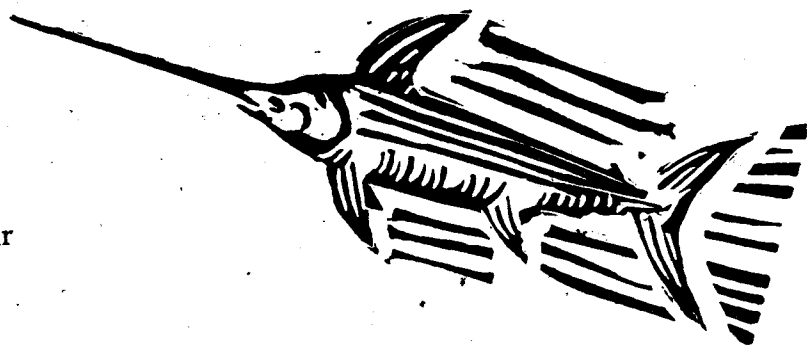
A Public Resource

Fish are a public resource. We all have a stake in the bounty or scarcity of our oceans' resources, and we all have a say in how those resources are used or not used. But fishery managers and regulators rarely hear the voice of the general public. Almost without exception, those who express their views to government officials about fishing regulations are those who fish, commercially or for recreation. Consequently, our fisheries are usually managed to accommodate the immediate economic and recreational desires of fishers. Unfortunately, this strategy will not sustain both fish and fishers over the long term.



A Free Resource

For anyone with gear, fish are generally free for the taking. Fishing grounds are not treated like public lands, which require a fee for grazing, timber cutting, and mining. In fact, taxpayer dollars subsidize the U.S. fishing industry—through loans, tax exemptions, and other support programs. Fishers do not nurture the resource the way that farmers cultivate their crops. Instead, the economic incentive is to catch as many fish as possible—before someone else does.



Major Concerns

- ◆ **Overfishing**—Overfishing occurs when, over time, more fish are taken from the population than can be replaced through natural reproduction. Experts estimate that the New England region would be catching another 137 millions pounds of groundfish every year if stocks were only fished at their long term sustainable potential. This lost catch is worth at least \$350 million and 14,000 jobs.

A stock can also suffer from "growth overfishing," caused by taking the larger individuals and forcing the average size of the fish to decrease. With fewer and fewer pounds caught per trip, the catch becomes less and less valuable. The average weight of gag grouper in the South Atlantic has decreased from 19 pounds to 7 pounds since 1974.



- ◆ **Bycatch**—Fishers can rarely catch only the species they are fishing for. Fishing gear varies in its ability to select out non-targeted species, but incidental catch, or bycatch, is a major problem in many fisheries. Shrimp trawls are an example of a non-selective gear type. They have a small mesh size and catch most organisms in their path. The U.S. Gulf of Mexico shrimp fishery alone catches, on average, 10 pounds of bycatch (finfish, shellfish, sea turtles) for every pound of shrimp caught.

- ◆ **Overcapitalization**—When too many boats go after too few fish, a fishery is overcapitalized and more prone to overfishing. The profits to be gained from fishing are spread among so many fishers that each one does not make as much as he or she could if there were fewer participants. The fewer the fishers, the more fish there are, and the easier and *less costly* it is to catch them. As an extreme example of overcapitalization, several thousand vessels participate in a derby-like fishery for Pacific halibut and catch the entire annual quota in two 24-hour periods.



- ◆ **Habitat Loss and Degradation**—The nation's wetlands and coastal habitats are disappearing at an alarming rate. The United States has lost over 50% of its wetlands in the past century. California alone has lost more than 90% of its coastal wetlands. Yet, wetlands and coastal areas provide necessary nursery areas for fish and shellfish. Species that depend on estuaries for part of their life cycle make up 75% of U.S. commercial landings. Dams block the paths of fish that migrate up rivers to lay their eggs; four salmon populations are now threatened or endangered with extinction. Coastal and marine habitats that have not been dredged, filled, or destroyed by seawalls and other constructs are often polluted by contaminants and toxic metals. In the Gulf of Mexico, 74% of shellfish beds are restricted due to sewage effluence and urban runoff.

Depleted Species in the United States

North Atlantic: cod, haddock, flounder, Atlantic halibut, pollock, redfish, Atlantic salmon, swordfish, bluefin tuna, sharks

Mid-Atlantic: swordfish, striped bass, summer flounder, bluefin tuna, sharks

South Atlantic: Spanish mackerel, Nassau grouper, jewfish, red drum, red snapper, spiny lobster, swordfish, bluefin tuna, sharks

Gulf of Mexico: king mackerel, Spanish mackerel, red snapper, croaker, jewfish, red drum, Nassau grouper

Pacific: blue marlin, chinook salmon, coho salmon, pink salmon, sockeye salmon, chum salmon

North Pacific: albacore tuna

Because of the difficulty of collecting scientific data on fish population size, sustainable yield, and bycatch levels, there is not always a clear direction for fisheries managers to take. Consequently, managers are often reluctant to take the necessary steps to conserve fish populations—until the stocks decline to critical levels and drastic measures, such as closing the fishery altogether, are needed.

Responsible fishing is essential to the success of fishery management plans. But responsible *management* depends on the involvement of fishers, fish processors and dealers, recreationists, environmentalists, consumers, and anyone concerned with the marine environment. The depletion of our nation's fisheries is a public problem—the public *must* be part of the solution.

The Management Process

Fortunately, there exists a public process designed to prevent overfishing and to give fishers and consumers alike a say in conserving our fisheries. The system centers around **management plans**, developed by eight regional fishery management councils. The councils set regulations such as catch limits, gear restrictions, and size limits. These regulations ultimately must be approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce.

Each management plan is subject to several public hearings and a 45-day (at minimum) public comment period. Council meetings also are open to the public and are conveniently held in coastal communities in various states of each region. However, members of the fishing community do most of the commenting, and managers rarely hear the voice of the general public. As a result, not all sides of the issue can be heard.

