

SC Dolphin Tagging Study

April 2004

Taggers Asked to Note Presence of Sargassum

Offshore anglers are always on alert for sargassum weed lines that form along current rips. One of the first lessons that offshore fishermen learn is that if you want to catch dolphin, find a weed line. It does not take long to recognize the important role sargassum plays in the life of dolphin as well as most other bluewater gamefish.

Fisheries managers place a high level of importance on the role that sargassum plays in the life histories of oceanic fishes. This was reflected in the strong effort made by the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council to put in place a management plan to protect sargassum from potential exploitation. The resulting plan was largely based on the critical habitat role that the large sargassum mats and lines play in the lives of oceanic fishes.

Even with the sargassum plan approved, the Department of Commerce last fall refused to recognize the sargassum community as critical habitat for dolphin under the Dolphin/Wahoo Management Plan. Even though the Sargassum Management Plan specifically states that sargassum provides critical habitat for dolphin, the Dept. of Commerce did not approve a similar statement in the dolphin plan.

Anglers participating in the Dolphin Tagging Study are asked to document the importance of sargassum to the dolphin's occurrence. Fishermen are asked to note on each tag reporting card if the dolphin was caught in association with or in the proximity of sargassum, near a floating object (flotsam), or in open water. Taggers should write "grass", "open water" or "flotsam" in the comment section on the bottom of the tag report card.



Three Areas of Special Interest in 2004

Two years of studying the movements of dolphin along the east coast of the United States, have shown that fish present in three areas have the potential to answer major questions about movements and population structure for the species.

Large dolphin present during the spring on the eastern side of the Bahamas Islands, are a major focus this year. A theory held by this study is that this area supplies the large dolphin, 20 to 60 pounders, caught off Georgia and the Carolinas. Large numbers of these fish need to be tagged in order to determine if these fish cross the ocean to the east coast of the United States. This will only be accomplished if the fishermen from the southeast, who take their boats over to fish the Bahamas, actively support this study by tagging dolphin while there.

Defining the fall migratory route(s) for dolphin inhabiting the Mid-Atlantic Bight is a primary goal for the study. However, whether this goal is achieved will largely rest with the anglers who fish the waters from Oregon Inlet, North Carolina, to Nantucket, Massachusetts. It is up to the anglers and sportfishing clubs in these areas to support the study by encouraging the tagging of sufficient numbers of dolphin to help ensure subsequent recoveries.

The dolphin present in the Florida Straits during the summer represent the third area of special interest. With almost 300 of these fish tagged last year without even one recovery, they present a unique challenge. From a fisheries management standpoint, it is extremely important to establish whether these fish move northward up the east coast after they enter the Straits or if they use another route to access the Caribbean or Atlantic. The mystery will be solved only through the concerted effort of fishermen in the Florida Keys to tag large numbers of these fish.



Sargassum mats serve as critical juvenile habitat for many bluewater gamefish such as billfish, and are important to dolphin throughout their life cycles.

Shimano Reels and Star Rods Sponsor Awards

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Tagging Off to a Slow Start

Strong winds have plagued fishermen from Key West to the Bahamas to Hatteras during late winter and the first part of Spring. Weekend winds of 20 knots and higher have been a common problem throughout the Southeast that has kept anglers from getting offshore. Those who have managed to catch a good day of weather have been greeted with very few dolphin.

So far in 2004, a total of 37 dolphin had been reported tagged by the end of March. The best news is that due to the effort of one angler, 20 of the fish were tagged in the Bahamas. The second highest tagging effort occurred in Zone 2, the Florida Keys where eight dolphin were tagged. South Florida had two fish tagged, while central Florida had seven fish tagged.

Tagging activity will no doubt increase by the end of April when offshore fishing swings into high gear in the Southeast.



The SC Dolphin Tagging Study proudly announces the return of Shimano Fishing Tackle and Star Rod Company as sponsors of the year-end awards for the study. Through the generous donations of these two companies, the research project will once again feature a top quality big game rod and reel combination as the annual incentive award.

Shimano's Tiagra 50 reel along with Star Rod Company's standup rod will be offered to anglers participating in the study during 2004. This rod and reel combo is valued at over \$850, and could be yours at no cost.

The charter boat, private boat and individual angler who tag the most dolphin during the 2004 calendar year will each be presented with one of these outfits. Only one outfit will be presented to a single boat or individual. In case of a tie, the boat/individual tagging their fish first will receive the award.

One of the 2003 winners of one of these rods and reels had tagged only 29 schoolies. Can you tag more schoolies than this?

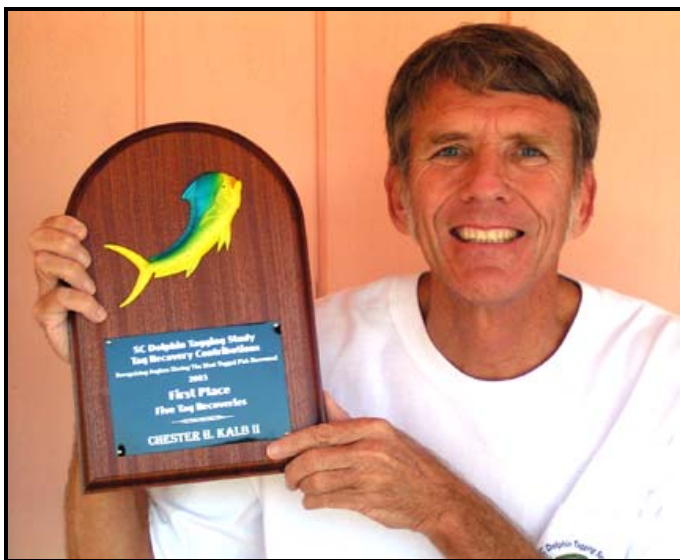
Photos Requested

We would like to receive photos of your tagging activities. Pictures of anglers releasing tagged dolphin, recapturing tagged fish (including photos of fish with tags in place), or good action shots of dolphin in the water are wanted for use in the newsletter and on the web site. Digital images are preferred but color slides or prints will be accepted as well. Be sure to identify people appearing in the photo and include a statement giving the SC Dolphin Tagging Study authorization to publish the photo.

Send all photos to the project director listed below.

For more information on the project, visit
<http://dolphintagging.homestead.com> or contact

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Chester Kalb, II of Key West, Florida displays his first place award for having generated the most tag recoveries in 2003. Kalb's boat was responsible for tagging 177 dolphin in 2003. Six of his tagged fish were reported recovered. These awards were donated by Chris Costello of Costello Studio in Titusville, FL.

