Dolphinfish Research Program™

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By: Don Hammond

Tag Recoveries Continue

Five more reports of tagged dolphinfish being recovered were received by the end of August. This brings the number of dolphin reported recaptured to 46 fish. This translates into a recovery rate of 4.6 percent, which is almost twice the normal rate from previous years. Such a big increase in the reporting rate most likely results of an increased awareness among offshore fishermen of the importance of reporting tagged dolphin recaptures.

Interestingly, all of the recoveries involved fish tagged in the Florida Keys during June of this year. Three of the recoveries involved fish tagged by the crew of Don Gates' boat, *Killin Time,* fishing out of Marathon. One of the other recaptured fish was released by the crew of Carl Haas' boat, *Rosa Maria,* off Key Largo and the other by Capt. Zehntner Gay's charter boat, *Hooked Up* off Islamorada.

Only one fish was recovered instate. Tagged off Marathon by the *Killin Time,* this fish was at liberty for only two days but managed to travel to Elliott Key, just north of Key Largo, where it was caught by Jamie Pulmadore while fishing aboard the private boat *Schoolies*. The fish had traveled 121 miles from its release sight, which means the fish was speeding along at a rate of 60 miles per day.

The fish released off Islamorada by the charter boat *Hooked Up* was recovered by Steve Kinard 40 miles off Charleston, South Carolina, while fishing aboard his private boat. The fish had traveled 571 miles from its release site, but the time it took to make the trip is unknown because no date was given for the tagging. It is the first dolphin tagged off south Florida to be recovered in the normal recreational fishing grounds off South Carolina. This recapture challenges the hypothesis of Florida fish traveling the eastern side of the Gulf Stream as they pass South Carolina.

Two of the tag recaptures came from North Carolina. The first was a dolphin tagged by the crew of the *Rosa Maria* off Key Largo and recovered by Jimmy Hillsman, mate aboard the charter boat *Dream Girl* while fishing off Oregon Inlet. The fish had traveled 782 miles from its release sight in 49 days, for an average speed of 16 miles per day.

The second North Carolina recapture was originally tagged by the crew of the *Killin Time* off Marathon and was recovered by Richard Cooke while fishing off Morehead City, North Carolina, aboard the private boat *Shoal Skimmer*. The fish was at liberty for 72 days during which time it had traveled 739 miles, averaging 10.3 miles per day.

The last recovery involves another of the fish tagged off Marathon by Don Gate's crew on the *Killin Time*. This fish was recaptured by John Buhrman of Marlton, New Jersey, during a fishing trip to the Hudson Canyon aboard a friend's private boat. It was caught 1,167 miles NNE of its release sight following a liberty of 65 days. The fish averaged moving 18 miles per day northward

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during this period. This movement represents the second-longest documented distance traveled by a dolphin in U.S. domestic waters.

Judging from these recoveries, what the 2009 program has lacked in the number of fish tagged has been made up by the higher-than-normal tag recovery reporting rate.

Anglers Respond to Questions About Fishing Decline

The e-mail introduction for the August newsletter asked the question of why the tagging activity declined so precipitously in July. More than 50 anglers from Alabama to New York provided their observations and personal fishing experiences. Most anglers said that they had fished less this year than in previous years.

Several common themes emerged among the anglers' responses. As expected, the slow economy required many anglers to spend more time in the office, allowing less time for fishing. Charter captains reported their bookings were down as much as 50 percent because of the economy. Some fishermen reported that on the rare days when they could fish, the weather frequently kept them in port. Some experienced personal problems that kept them from fishing, while others cited the high cost of fishing offshore when there was a low probability of catching dolphin. Many Florida east coast anglers said they quit fishing because there were no dolphin to catch. Gulf of Mexico anglers reported that the large dead-zone waters from the Mississippi River kept the dolphin far offshore beyond their range during what should have been the peak dolphin season.

Florida fishermen reported that waters in the Florida Straits had warmed up fast and early. This was the number-one reason offered for the dolphin disappearance in that area. Conversely, Mid-Atlantic anglers reported not only an early arrival of dolphin in their region but an unusual shallow water appearance as well. Consider this in light of the earlier report this year from the commercial fisherman in Nova Scotia of the largest catches of dolphin in the North Atlantic in recent times.

These reports would suggest the waters off southeast Florida warmed up as much as a month earlier than normal. This caused the dolphin to either move northward earlier than normal or inhabit deeper levels where temperatures were cooler.

Early warming of the Atlantic offshore waters along the East Coast would also help to explain the reports coming from anglers in the Mid-Atlantic. Anglers from New Jersey, Maryland and New York are reporting one of their better years for dolphin. The fish arrived early, moved into shallower waters than normal and have been unusually large, 10 to 20 pounds. Canadian longliners, fishing the most northern range of the Gulf Stream in the North Atlantic, reported a surprising abundance of the 10 to 20 pound dolphin, in areas where they typically catch few dolphin. This early population shift northward could be the result of rising ocean temperatures from global warming.

Dolphin Tagging Progress by Zones, September 1, 2009.

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22N	28N	255
2	FL Straits	23N	25N	418
3	South Florida	25N	27N	197
4	Central Florida	27N	30N	13
5	North FL & GA	30N	32N	14
6	Southern SC	32N	33N	62
7	N. SC - S. NC	33N	35N	25
8	Northern NC	35N	36.5N	1
9	Virginia	36.5N	38N	2
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38N		6
11	Gulf of Mexico			5
12	W Central Atlantic			15
13	Caribbean Sea			5
	Total			1018

Regardless of the cause for the big decline in dolphinfish abundance in the South Atlantic Bight in July, the results were clear. Fishermen quit fishing when there is little likelihood of catching fish. With dolphinfish making up the vast majority of the fish brought home by the troll fishery, their abundance directly affects the fishing effort of offshore recreational anglers.

According to the national recreational survey, more than 1.4 times as many dolphin were harvested in 2008 by U.S. recreational fishermen in the Atlantic and Gulf as king mackerel, yellowfin tuna, blackfin tuna and wahoo combined. This clearly shows the importance of dolphinfish in the U.S. offshore recreational fishery.

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A juvenile dolphin approximately 1.5 inches long lights up in iridescent colors as it swims through the transom lights of the boat Summer Girl during a nigh time swordfishing trip in June 2007 off Charleston, South Carolina.

Juvenile Dolphin Photos and Sightings

The Dolphinfish Research Program (DRP) is seeking information on the occurrence of juvenile dolphin, fish up to 12 inches fork length. Fishermen are asked to report their sightings of schools of small dolphinfish to the DRP. Anglers should report the size of the fish, GPS location of the fish, date, and whether Sargassum or other floating objects were present. (Small dolphin are suckers for sabiki rigs.) A high-resolution digital image of the fish of at least 1MB file size should be e-mailed to the program to confirm the species identification. The photo should show a full side profile of the fish.

Capt. Bob Frevert provided this photo of a juvenile dolphin found in the Atlantis Canyon off New York on September 13, 2008.

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