



Angler Survey Needs YOU!

By Jeff Brust, Research Scientist

Are you frustrated with current recreational fishery management regulations in New Jersey? If so, you are not alone. The increasing discontent over the fishery management process is no secret to fishery managers. It seems as if everywhere I go, when I mention my position with New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife's Bureau of Marine Fisheries, I get the same negative reaction.

Case in point: Last June at my kids' dentist office, the receptionist requested basic information for my file such as name, Social Security Number, occupation. After telling her I am a fishery biologist for the state, she glared over the top of her glasses and snarled, "Are you responsible for these @#*&! fluke regulations?" I took a step back—just to be safe—before admitting I am involved in the process of setting regulations for many of our species. She recounted a recent fishing trip with her son where they caught a large number of "shorts" but not a single keeper, and how the regulations are killing the fishery. Conversations like this one are not uncommon. More and more people are vocal about their dissatisfaction with the marine fisheries management system.

The Federal Survey

Much of the concern stems from the types and amount of data collected in the federal recreational survey, the primary source of recreational data since 1981. The limited number of samples collected each year can lead to large swings in results from year to year, making it difficult for anglers to have faith in the data being used to set regulations. In addition, although the federal survey data is used for state-specific management, the original intent of the survey was for broad-scale purposes. As such, the survey was not designed to collect data to support state-specific applications.

This leads to data gaps and uncertainty in the management process. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has undertaken a major redesign of their recreational data collection program to address these concerns. The new system, the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), will improve survey design and



performance to improve estimates of participation, fishing effort and catch. [Another useful tool improving on the old survey is the creation of the National Saltwater Angler Registry. In 2010, all saltwater anglers in New Jersey—and other certain coastal states—must register online (www.countmyfish.noaa.gov) or by phone (1-888-674-7411) before fishing for marine or anadromous species.] Yet even with these improvements, the Program still will not collect certain information necessary for state-specific fisheries management.

New Jersey's Own Angler Survey

Because of these limitations, in 2008 New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife implemented an online Volunteer Angler Survey (Survey) to collect information on saltwater fishing trips, including some not collected by the federal survey. Data collected through our voluntary survey will be used to increase our understanding of New Jersey's valuable marine resources and to investigate alternative management strategies that could improve recreational fishing opportunities here. The open access design of the Survey means you don't have to wait for someone to ask you about your fishing trip. Everyone with Internet access can submit their information anytime by accessing the Survey Web page at NJFishandWildlife.com/marinesurvey.htm.

A Proven Management Tool...

To demonstrate the value of the state Volunteer Angler Survey, data from 2008 and 2009 were used to investigate New Jersey's 2010 summer flounder management options, including seasons and bag limits for minimum sizes as small as 16 inches. This type of analysis

would have been impossible without our Survey data because the federal survey has not collected information from New Jersey anglers on fluke smaller than 18 inches in recent years. Also, the New Jersey Survey can improve our understanding of participation, catch rates and fish lengths from early season fisheries such as tautog, scup and winter flounder during January and February when the federal survey is not conducted. These are just two examples of the many ways data from the Survey could benefit Garden State anglers.

...Only If Many Anglers Participate

But in order for the Volunteer Angler Survey to be really successful, we need your help! After being available for 18 months, Fish and Wildlife doesn't have the level of participation we need from anglers. To put things into perspective, the federal survey conducts about 350 to 400 dockside angler interviews per month in New Jersey. This represents a very small sample among anglers. Consider that the same survey estimates that New Jersey has approximately 1.2 million anglers who take nearly 6.5 million fishing trips per year. In comparison, Fish and Wildlife received only about 100 Volunteer Angler Survey entries per month between June and December 2008 (the first year of our Survey). This is only about one-quarter of the anglers sampled by the federal survey. In 2009, our participation dropped to just 37 submissions per month; more than two-thirds of those submissions were from just 11 anglers—a far cry from 1.2 million! Such a miniscule sample size makes it next to impossible to justify the results of any analysis based on that data, such as the fluke management options mentioned above.

We know you are dissatisfied with the current fisheries management process. You've been telling us for years—and we listen. The Volunteer Angler Survey has the potential to improve the process, but you hold the key to making it work. This is a *volunteer* angler survey. No staff from our Marine Fisheries office will question you to collect data about your fishing trip as you walk back to your car. No calls at home to ask you how many trips you've taken in the last few months. No, this survey will only work if you voluntarily go to our Web site survey page and provide accurate data about your trip. If every angler in New Jersey submitted information on just one fishing trip annually, Fish and Wildlife would have 300 times more data than we do now—and much more confidence in our understanding of the fishery. Imagine the strength of our data if anglers completed the survey for multiple trips.

Increased Confidence in the Regulatory Process

Anglers now have a greater opportunity to be part of the marine fisheries management process. Submitting your fishing trip data is simple, free and entirely confidential. Accurate catch, effort, and length data reported through the Survey will help fill data gaps and provide a better understanding of our valuable marine resources. It's up to you to provide sufficient and accurate data to make this process succeed. Your confidence in the regulatory process will climb when it's based on your data and not an unknown sample of anglers. On the other hand, if anglers don't participate, biologists' understanding of the fishery will be limited to the federal survey data as in the past.

Improve Fishing Opportunities

So what are you waiting for? Spread the word about the New Jersey online Survey and encourage other anglers to submit their data. Remind your friends. Send them an e-mail with a direct link to the survey page once you've completed your own. Remember, data submitted through the Volunteer Angler Survey has a fantastic potential to improve our management capabilities and your recreational fishing opportunities. 

The New Jersey Volunteer Angler Survey is entirely separate from both the federal survey and the National Saltwater Angler Registry.