PHOTO: BRIAN SKERRY

SAILFISH IN THE GULF OF MEXICO: THE FACTS

The Atlantic sailfish (*Istiophorus albicans*) is one of the most recognizable saltwater game fish in the United States. Graceful and acrobatic, it is prized by recreational anglers for its power and elusiveness. When hooked, sailfish fight vigorously by leaping out of the water and sometimes diving to great depths.

Recognizing the sailfish's importance, the state of Florida adopted it as its official saltwater fish in 1975, and the town of Stuart, Fla., has proclaimed itself the "Sailfish Capital of the World."

PHOTO: WILL DROST

Sailfish have brilliant colors with dark, iridescent blue on top, silver on the belly and purple stripes on the back. Its name derives from the large, sail-like dorsal fin that rises when the fish is excited, comes to the surface or feeds.

Sailfish are voracious feeders. Swimming in schools, the fish corral baitfish by using their dorsal fins to form a wall to confine their prey.[1] One by one, sailfish dart in to feed and then return to the perimeter to await the next opportunity. Sailfish eat squid and octopus as well as small bony fish such as flying fish, mackerel, halfbeaks, mullet and needlefish.[2]

Like other billfish, females grow larger than males. In the Western Atlantic, spawning may occur as early as April. However, most spawning activity occurs from May to September. In the southeast Florida spawning grounds, a large female sailfish may release as many as 4.5 million eggs.[3]

New research indicates that the Gulf of Mexico is an important spawning ground for this species. Before the Gulf oil spill disaster, scientists had observed large concentrations of sailfish larvae in the Gulf during the summer. The amount of larvae indicates that July is the peak of the sailfish-spawning season there. This shows that the Gulf is probably a critical spawning area for the Atlantic sailfish.[4]

The Gulf oil spill in April 2010 presented an additional threat to sailfish in the Gulf.

STATUS OF THE STOCK

The sailfish population declined during the past century and needs be restored to healthy levels.[5] In its most recent report to Congress, the National Marine Fisheries Service noted that "overfishing" still occurs. Overfishing means that fish are being caught faster than they can reproduce. One of the reasons for the decline in sailfish populations is commercial surface longline gear.

INDISCRIMINATE FISHING GEAR

Surface longlines are a type of commercial fishing gear used in the Gulf of Mexico to catch swordfish and yellowfin tuna. Longlines in the Gulf extend an average of 30 miles and carry hundreds of hooks kept near the surface with buoys spaced at intervals along the lines. In addition to catching swordfish and yellowfin tuna, the longlines also hook thousands of incidental game fish, including sailfish.[6] The unwanted fish caught on longlines are known as bycatch. Because the longlines are left unattended for hours, sailfish often die on the line. Once the lines are retrieved, the sailfish and other bycatch are thrown back because current U.S. regulations do not allow commercial fishermen to keep them.

THE SOLUTION

The Pew Environment Group is working with a coalition of environmental organizations and recreational fishing groups to prohibit the use of this wasteful and indiscriminate fishing gear in the Gulf of Mexico. And because there are more selective alternative types of fishing gear, fishermen can still keep fishing.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

We need your support now. Please visit **www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna** to tell Dr. Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to prohibit surface longline gear in the Gulf of Mexico.

1 Voss, G.L. 1953. "A contribution to the life history and biology of the sailfish, *Istiophorus americanus* Cuv. and Val., in Florida waters." *Bulletin of Marine Science of the Gulf and Caribbean* p. 232, www.ingentaconnect.com/content/umrsmas/bullmar/1953/00000003/00000003/art00004.

2 Jolley, J.W. Jr. 1977. "The biology and fishery of Atlantic sailfish, *Istiophorus platypterus*, from southeast Florida." *Florida Marine Research Publication* 28: 1-31, http://research.myfwc.com/publications/publication_info.asp?id=37108.

3 Voss, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

4 Simms, J. 2009. *Early Life Ecology of Sailfish,* Istiophorus Platypterus, *in the northern Gulf of Mexico.* Master's thesis. Texas A&M University. Pp. 48-9.

5 National Marine Fisheries Service. 2010. *2009 Status of U.S. Fisheries*, p. 15, www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/sos_full28_press.pdf.

6 Personal communications with Dr. Lawrence Beerkircher and Dr. Kenneth Keene of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

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For additional resources, visit us at **www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna**.

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