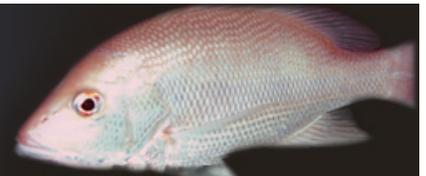
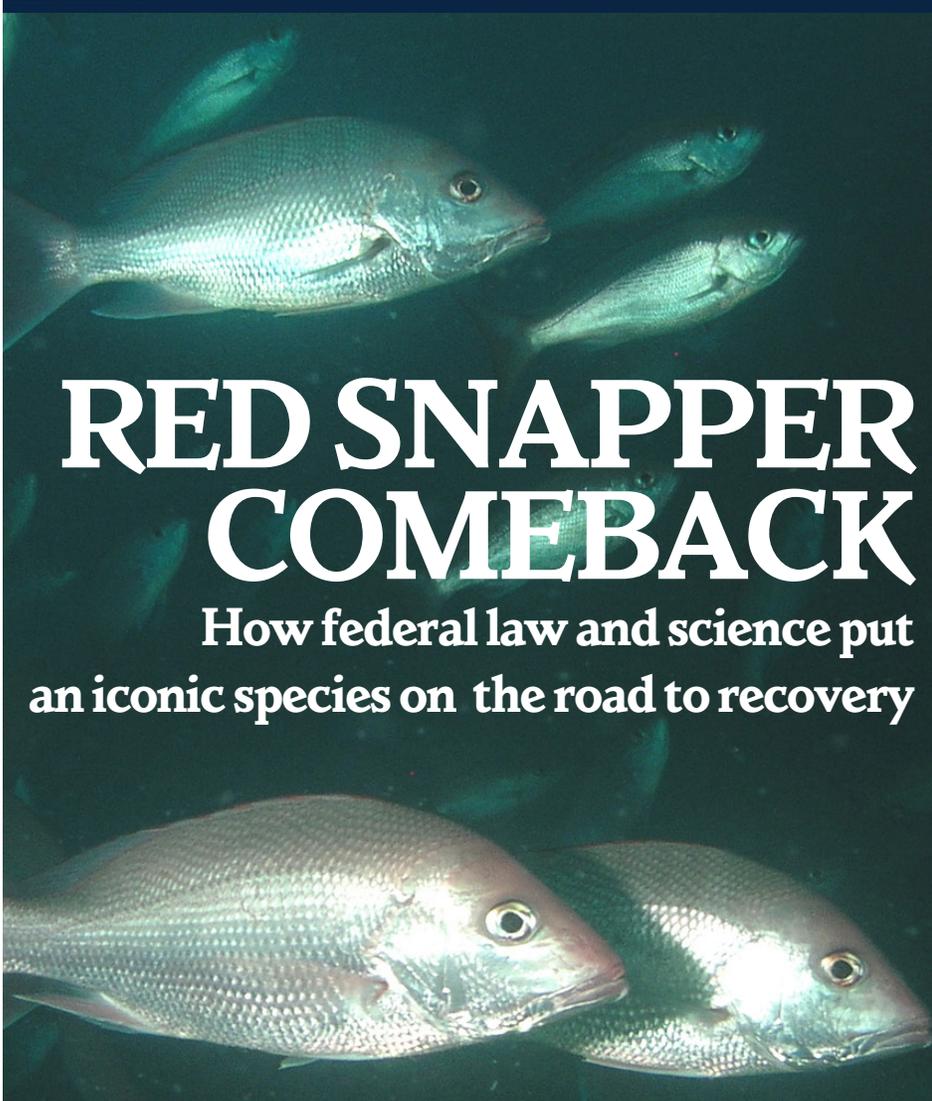


THE
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GULF OF MEXICO FISH CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

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RED SNAPPER COMEBACK

How federal law and science put an iconic species on the road to recovery

Gulf of Mexico red snapper may finally be on the mend.

After decades of severe overfishing—taking fish faster than they can reproduce—regulators in 2007 at long last set strict limits on numbers of red snapper caught annually.

A 2009 report shows the measures are working. Red snapper are more plentiful and have begun the long journey toward recovery. As a result, fishery managers raised allowable catch for 2010, and future increases are likely if the fish continue to rebound.

The federal Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act helped put red snapper on the right track. Following a lawsuit, fishery managers were ordered to abide by the federal law and follow scientific advice in setting catch levels. In the past, managers allowed fishermen to take amounts well above scientific recommendations.

Scientists working on the Gulf’s red snapper problem used much the same basic approach to data gathering and analysis that is used to assess fish populations in the South Atlantic and elsewhere. The in-depth peer-reviewed research provided a solid foundation for fishing rules that have quickly pushed red snapper toward recovery.

Early signs of success for Gulf red snapper are evidence that the fishery management system works.

POPULATION GAIN

Numbers of red snapper are projected to reach near record levels under a plan to rebuild the species.



Source: Southeast Data Assessment and Review, Red Snapper Update Panel



MILESTONES FOR RED SNAPPER

1872	1946	1962	1974	1983	1988	1990	1996	2002	2005	2008	2010	2020	2032
0.52 million lbs.	2.7 million lbs.	8.5 million lbs.	10.2 million lbs.	12.3 million lbs.		4.3 million lbs.		10.2 million lbs.		6.15 million lbs.		10.1 million lbs.	11.1 million lbs.
Fishing starts in earnest.	First year that data include recreational catch.	Catch reaches record high.	Catch sets new record high.	Catch climbs to all-time peak.	Scientists determine severe overfishing.	Catch begins dropping dramatically following new regulations.	Despite continued overfishing, catch limits increased.	Catch exceeds limits and again nears record levels.	Scientists again warn of severe overfishing.	Catch begins dropping, but still exceeds limits, as managers enact science-based quotas.	New assessment shows red snapper recovering; limits increased to nearly 7 million lbs.	Predicted catch allowed as fish recover.	Predicted catch at end of rebuilding.



Photo: Robert Cox

Source: National Marine Fisheries Service

1. ROAD TO RUIN

Signs of trouble for Gulf red snapper appeared decades ago, yet the species remained mostly unregulated—no federal rules on bag or size limits and a year-round fishing season. A 1988 scientific assessment

RED SNAPPER PLUMMET TO LESS THAN 5% OF A HEALTHY POPULATION.

showed that the species was significantly overfished, and that the population had declined to dangerously low levels—less than 5

percent of a healthy population.

The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council briefly limited annual catch to 4 million pounds in the early 1990s. But in 1996, believing the population appeared healthier, managers increased allowable catch to 9.12 million pounds, where it remained for years. Bag, size and seasonal limits were in place, but those restrictions weren't enough to help the population. Meanwhile, the target date for rebuilding the species to a sustainable level was postponed repeatedly—four times since 1990—and is now 2032.



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Red snapper remain a coveted catch for recreational and commercial fishermen.

2. PATH TO SUCCESS

The Gulf council finally acted strongly in 2007 and 2008 when it lowered allowable red snapper take from 9 million pounds to about 6 million and then again to 5 million. Drastic cuts were needed because overfishing hadn't been adequately addressed sooner.

FISHERY MANAGERS GET TOUGH AND SET SCIENTIFICALLY SOUND CATCH LIMITS.

Managers also dramatically reduced numbers of young red snapper killed in shrimp trawls—one significant cause of red snapper's decline. The new measures, along with several hurricanes that decimated the shrimp industry and reduced shrimp trawling, combined to help red snapper.

And although there are conflicting views over artificial reefs, many ships, oil rigs and other structures were

sunk to make fish habitat. It remains unclear whether the reefs have led to more abundant red snapper or only attracted existing fish, making them more available to anglers and seemingly more plentiful.

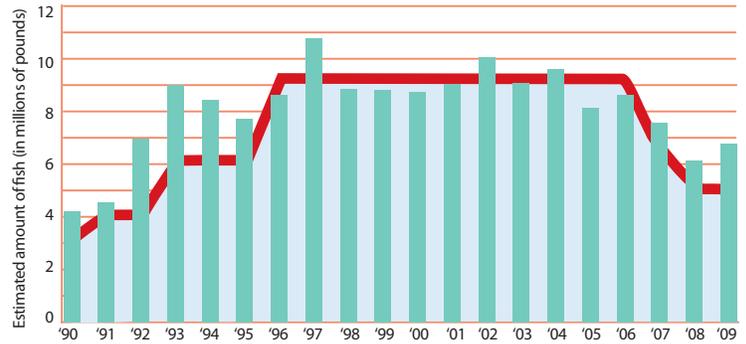
Additionally, the council began a catch share program in 2007 that included strict limits for individual commercial fishermen—a system deemed a success at keeping overall commercial quota in check, according to a 2009 National Marine Fisheries Service study.



Robert Carriles III of Port O'Connor, Texas, hauls in a Gulf of Mexico red snapper.

OVER THE LINE

The amount of fish caught (green bars) has exceeded allowable levels (red line) for most years since 1990.



Sources: National Marine Fisheries Service; Southeast Data Assessment and Review, Red Snapper Update Assessment

3. BUMPS IN THE ROAD

The red snapper rebuilding plan shows early signs of success, although problems remain. In each of the last three years, anglers hauled in more than a million pounds beyond what was allowed—despite general compliance with seasonal closures and bag and trip limits. Fishery managers were forced to

PROBLEMS REMAIN IN KEEPING CATCH AT ALLOWABLE LEVELS.

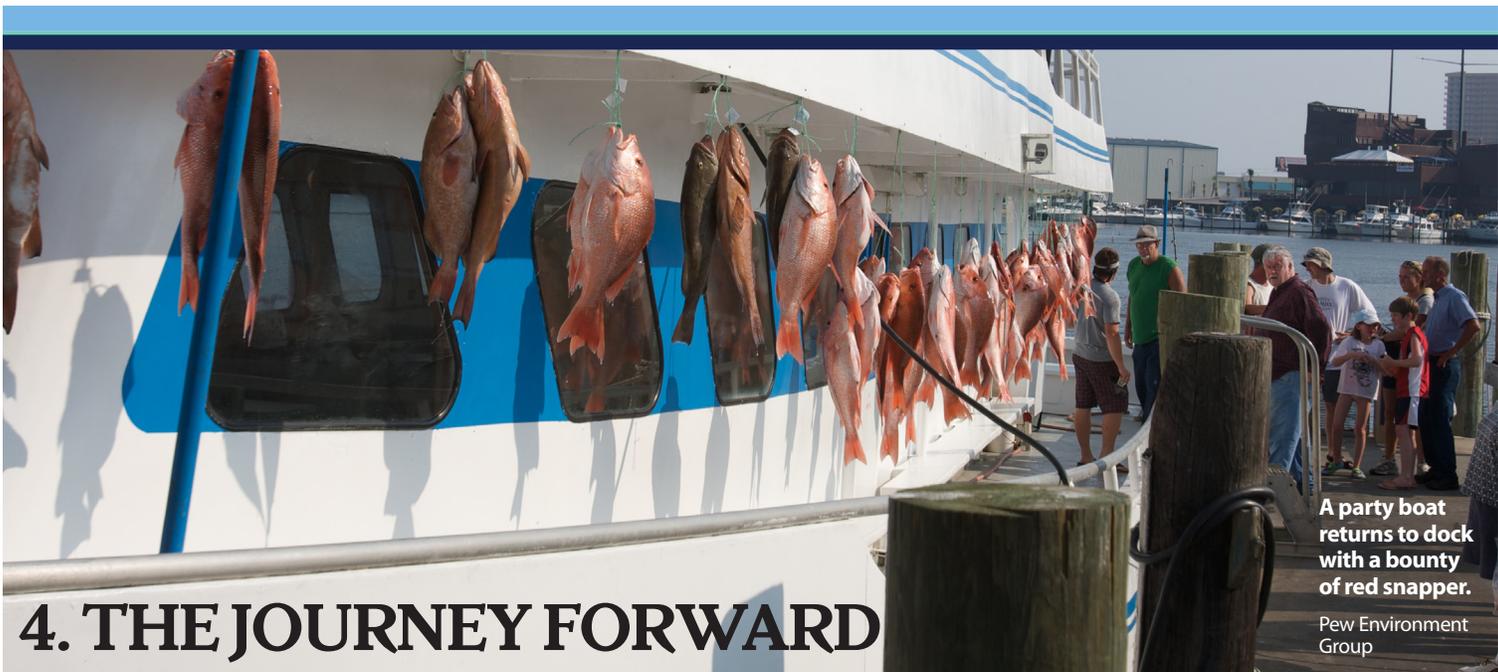
shorten the recreational fishing season to get better control.

Ironically, although red snapper are becoming more plentiful and bigger, a shorter season is needed

to make up for the excess fish taken in previous years. This payback also affects whether fishermen can catch their full allotted amounts for any given year.

In addition to impacts from the Gulf oil spill, the shifting quotas and unpredictable fishing season are a hardship for charter boat captains forced to cancel tourist trips and for private anglers who favor red snapper.

The dilemma exists partly because managers set the fishing limit at the precise amount that is safe for the population—a method that doesn't leave any room for error. The theoretically safe quota can easily be exceeded because of difficulties in controlling how many fish are actually caught. A wiser strategy is a more cautious approach to setting future limits and a more effective system to control amounts of fish caught.



A party boat returns to dock with a bounty of red snapper.

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4. THE JOURNEY FORWARD

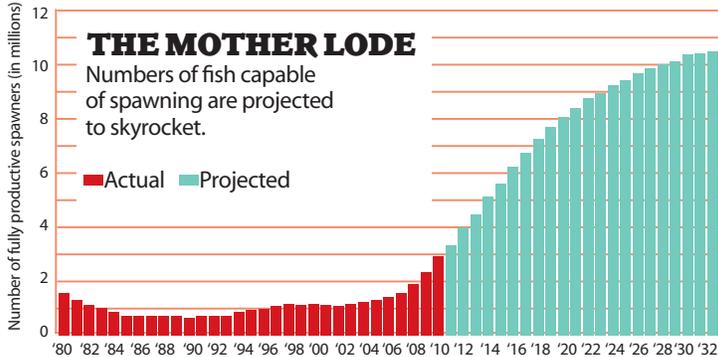
For the first time in more than 20 years, fishing for red snapper at unsustainable rates is ending. While the species still has not fully recovered, red snapper are more plentiful, bigger and are spreading over a wider area in the Gulf as they return to historic ranges.

IN 10 YEARS, CATCH COULD INCREASE TO MORE THAN 10 MILLION POUNDS A YEAR—A TESTAMENT TO SOUND SCIENCE AND SMART RULES.

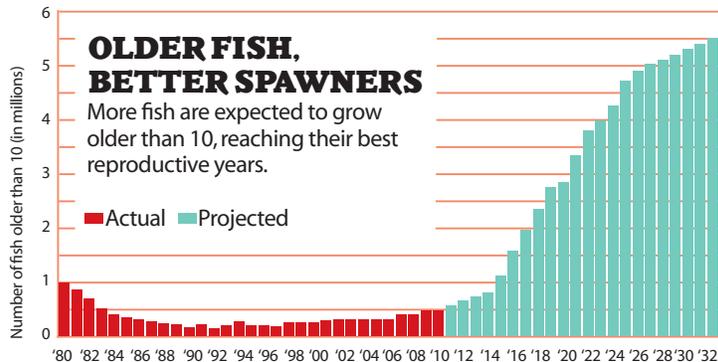
In 10 years, the red snapper catch is expected to increase by nearly 50 percent from current levels to more than 10 million pounds a year. Given enough time to grow older and reach their prime reproductive years, the red snapper

population could reach levels not seen in decades.

If managers stay the course, red snapper could become the ultimate success story for smart fishery management in the Southeast and an example of what strong science and the Magnuson-Stevens Act are meant to achieve.



Source: Southeast Data Assessment and Review, Red Snapper Update Panel



Source: Southeast Data Assessment and Review, Red Snapper Update Panel

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Visit www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfFish to learn more and join our e-alert network. Contact Sharon McBreen at smcbreen@pewtrusts.org or 321-800-6313 to sign up for fish news updates or join our cause. We need support from the public, fishermen, marine scientists, coastal businesses and conservation groups.
- **For more information**, contact project leader Holly Binns at fishinfo@PewTrusts.org or 850-727-8241.

PEW ENVIRONMENT GROUP'S GULF OF MEXICO FISH CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

Pew is leading efforts to work with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service to establish science-based annual catch limits by 2010 for species undergoing overfishing and by 2011 for all other species.

The campaign works to bring scientific expertise to bear on fishery management plans and seeks common ground with fishermen to find solutions that balance human and environmental needs and raise awareness about overfishing and potential remedies.

The Pew Environment Group is the conservation arm of The Pew Charitable Trusts.