



CHANGING THE GAME

A new approach to prevent overfishing

Fishery managers are considering sweeping new rules to prevent overfishing and protect dozens of species in the U.S. Caribbean from Puerto Rico to the Virgin Islands.



Spanish hogfish



Queen Angelfish

AT STAKE

New fishing limits will be set for as many as 49 species, ranging from the popular spiny lobster to tropical reef fish such as honeycomb cowfish and queen angelfish. For most of these species, there are currently no fishing rules in place to adequately limit the overall amount of fish removed from the ocean. Some limits were set last year for about 30 dwindling species included in a separate plan.

WHY IT'S NEEDED

The proactive plan should help prevent overfishing by setting cautious limits before some fish populations potentially plummet to critically low levels. The strategy should avert tougher, more painful restrictions in the future by managing fish populations wisely now.

The idea is to avoid what happened with species such as Nassau grouper. The fish is in such severe trouble that a total fishing moratorium is in effect to save the species. Waiting for a crisis before acting is poor fishery management that has allowed overfishing to deplete too many valuable fish species, including 22 in the U.S. Caribbean alone. This new approach would put fishery managers ahead of the curve. They may better judge when species are declining so they can act in time. Limits can be adjusted as conditions change.

This strategy also helps address consequences of the protections approved in 2010 for dwindling species such as deepwater parrotfish and some snappers and groupers. Without those species to target year-round, fishermen probably will shift their focus to other fish, which could lead to unhealthy population declines. This comprehensive plan takes a big-picture look at fish and fishing, helps avoid problems in the future and sets the course for a healthy, balanced ocean ecosystem.



Spiny lobster



Scrawled filefish

Blue tang

HOW IT WORKS

KEEPING TRACK

The new system will keep a tighter rein on how many fish are caught. If fishermen catch more than permitted, managers may use a number of methods to keep future catch within permitted levels or make up for the excess, including reducing limits in the short term or establishing shorter fishing seasons. In the past, rules were weakly enforced for fisheries that had quotas and limits were routinely exceeded in some cases. With better control, the limits have a stronger chance of keeping fish populations healthy.



Photos from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

ISLANDS STAND ALONE

In the past, some bag, trip or other fishing limits applied to a handful of species. Those rules governed all fishermen in the U.S. Caribbean as a single group. But some fishermen complain it is unfair to have the same rules in different Caribbean regions because islands have varied ecosystems, ocean floor topography, species' conditions and fishing activities.

The new plan would consider the differences among the islands and set individual limits for Puerto Rico, St. Thomas/ St. John and St. Croix. The new method—also used last year in a separate plan to protect 30 dwindling species—would give fishermen more opportunities to catch available fish in their areas while also allowing managers to keep a tighter rein on limits so they can maintain healthy fish populations.

SETTING THE LIMITS

Little data exist on some species that will get new limits because it is impossible to count all those fish or sufficiently study each species. Healthy fish populations and a balanced ocean ecosystem require an overall management plan, however. With some species for which little data are available, scientists have recommended setting limits close to today's average catch with a cautious margin of error to ensure that enough fish remain for a healthy population. In some cases, fishermen probably will see little change.

For other species, determining the limits may be more complex and may mean reduced allowable catch. But as scientists complete more fishery studies, the limits will change to reflect the most up-to-date information and allow as much catch as possible while maintaining healthy fish populations.

HOW TO CONTACT US

For information, visit Pew at www.PewEnvironment.org/CaribbeanFish; Send e-mail to fishinfo@pewtrusts.org, or call project manager Holly Binns at 850-322-7845; or policy analyst Sera Harold Drevenak at 910-685-5705.

Send e-mail to the Virgin Islands Conservation Society at VI.Conservation.Society@gmail.com or call 340-773-1989.

THE U.S. CARIBBEAN FISH CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

The Pew Environment Group is leading efforts to work with the Caribbean 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. PEG is the conservation arm of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

THE VIRGIN ISLANDS CONSERVATION SOCIETY

VICS is a network of U.S. Virgin Islands conservation groups. VICS and its affiliates work to address a broad range of issues that impact coastal waters, coral reefs and fish populations, including pollution, development and energy projects.