



## BLUE MARLIN IN THE GULF OF MEXICO: THE FACTS

The Atlantic blue marlin (*Makaira nigricans*), one of the largest billfish species in the world, presents a formidable challenge to recreational fishermen. Many anglers consider catching a blue marlin to be the pinnacle of angling success. The International Game Fish Association's all-tackle record for this species is 1,402 pounds.

The fish has brilliant colors, with bright cobalt blue on top, a silver-white belly and a series of colorful vertical stripes along the length of its body. Females can live more than 30 years, while males generally live no more than 18.<sup>1</sup> A blue marlin weighing more than 350 pounds is probably female; males are smaller.<sup>2</sup> These fish are long-lived. They grow rapidly early in life, but it takes about 30 years for a blue marlin to reach 1,000 pounds.<sup>3</sup>

This species is widely distributed throughout the tropical and temperate waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Generally, these fish remain in offshore waters. However, blue marlin swim closer to the coast from July to September.<sup>4</sup> They spawn in the Gulf as early as May and continue to spawn throughout the summer.<sup>5</sup> Gulf oil spill disaster in April 2010 presented an additional threat to marlin in the Gulf.

As apex predators, blue marlin play a critical role in the ocean ecosystem. They typically feed near the surface but sometimes travel to great depths in search of prey. They feed opportunistically on flying fish, small tuna and squid.<sup>6</sup> Blue marlin are not schooling fish<sup>7</sup> and are considered a rare and solitary species.<sup>8</sup>



PHOTO: SCOTT KERRIGAN/AQUAPARAZI.COM

### STATUS OF THE STOCK

The blue marlin population declined during the last century and needs to be restored to healthy levels. In its most recent report to Congress, the National Marine Fisheries Service noted that "overfishing" is still occurring and that the species is "overfished."<sup>9</sup> Overfishing means fish are being caught faster than they can reproduce. Overfished means that the species population is depleted to an unhealthy level. One reason for the decline of blue marlin in the Gulf is commercial surface longline fishing in the region.

## INDISCRIMINATE GEAR

Surface longlines are a type of commercial fishing gear used in the Gulf of Mexico to target swordfish and yellowfin tuna. Longlines in the Gulf extend an average of 30 miles and can carry hundreds of hooks kept near the surface with buoys. In addition to catching swordfish and yellowfin tuna, the longlines also catch thousands of other game fish species such as blue marlin.<sup>10</sup> Unwanted fish are referred to as bycatch. Because the longlines are left unattended for hours, a blue marlin hooked on the line often dies in the water. Once these lines are retrieved, dead blue marlin and other bycatch are thrown back into the water because U.S. regulations do not allow commercial fishermen to keep this species.

## SOLUTION

The Pew Environment Group is working with a coalition of environmental organizations and recreational fishing groups to prohibit the use of wasteful and indiscriminate longline 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](http://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 Arocha, F., and M. Ortiz. 2006. International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. ICCAT Field Manual. Chapter 2.1.6. Last update: Sept. 4, 2006, [www.iccat.int/Documents/SCRS/Manual/CH2/2\\_1\\_6\\_BUM\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.iccat.int/Documents/SCRS/Manual/CH2/2_1_6_BUM_ENG.pdf).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Hill, K.T., et al. 1989. "A comparative analysis of growth zones in four calcified structures of Pacific blue marlin, *Makaira nigricans*." *Fishery Bulletin* 87(4): 829-43, <http://fishbull.noaa.gov/874/hill.pdf>.

4 Benfield, M.C., and R.F. Shaw. 2005. *Potential spatial and temporal vulnerability of pelagic fish assemblages in the Gulf of Mexico to surface oil spills associated with deepwater petroleum development*. U.S. Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, New Orleans. OCS Study MMS 2005-012, p. 70, [www.gomr.mms.gov/homepg/whatsnew/techann/2005/2005-012.html](http://www.gomr.mms.gov/homepg/whatsnew/techann/2005/2005-012.html).

5 Benfield and Shaw, p. 74.

6 Arocha.

7 Arocha.

8 Arocha.

9 National Marine Fisheries Service. 2010. *2009 Status of U.S. Fisheries*, p. 15, [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/sos\\_full28\\_press.pdf](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/statusoffisheries/sos_full28_press.pdf).

10 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](http://www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna).

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