

Recreational Fishermen and the National Fisheries Plan

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Marine recreational fishermen like myself are keenly interested in the development of some sort of National Fisheries Plan. Our reasons for such interest may be expressed simply. (1) We do not know who we are. (2) We do not know what we have available to catch, nor what we actually *do* catch. (3) We cannot always get to the places we would like to go. (4) Even when we do get there, we find competition from other groups.

Let me elaborate. Although the series of national surveys of fishing and hunting conducted by the U.S. Department of the Interior has been extremely helpful in determining at least some basic figure on the number of marine anglers in this country, these surveys have only scratched the surface. Far more sophisticated work must be done to determine just how many marine anglers there really are, where they come from, what they spend, how they spend it, what they fish for, and what their physical and economic profiles may be.

Interest in such statistics, I am the first to admit, has some measure of selfishness involved. It is easy to say that there are approximately 10 million recreational fishermen in this country today who fish salt water. Such a figure does little to impress a public official in, say, Destin, Florida, who is considering cost comparisons between new highway construction or the building of an artificial reef off the town's coast. He wants basic facts on what benefits will accrue to his town through each project. Such figures are rare in the sport fishing world and, when available, almost never are presented in standardized form.

Federal efforts to standardize survey approaches have started in the National Marine Fisheries Service and are an important factor in a National Fisheries Plan. In the past, unfortunately, there has been a feeling that marine fishing statistics should be compiled by those trained in marine biology, with the result that counting anglers' noses has been very costly, extremely varied in presentation, and often wildly inaccurate. Those trained in the disciplines involving statistics should be the ones to gather these statistics. With a federal matching grant approach as a carrot—or stick, depending on your viewpoint—a National Fisheries Plan can make tremendous strides forward in standardization of reports in the field of numbers and dollars.

As far as the fish are concerned, the ordinary angler has extraordinarily little knowledge about the scarcity or abundance of the species he seeks. Since all so-called game fish in the oceans are migratory to some degree, an individual taking no common mackerel whatsoever off a section of the New Jersey coast may blame everyone from the Soviets to the pesticide manufacturers, while his

fellow fisherman in eastern Maine will be exclaiming over his success in catching of the same species. The recreational angler depends to a large degree upon information furnished to him by fellow fishermen, local tackle shops, and boat skippers, either directly or through the news media. Needless to say, such information may be distorted to some degree by visions of the tourist dollar.

A National Fisheries Plan should provide for research on a species by species basis on those fishes of primary interest to anglers. Obviously this cannot be done overnight. Some such programs have been initiated already, but they are not moving forward rapidly enough at present. For example, the striped bass has been researched to death, yet we have very little more knowledge today on how stocks should be managed than we had a decade ago. The work has been fragmented, has not been standardized nor coordinated. With an overall research plan laid out, gaps in knowledge could be filled, duplication of effort would be avoided and there is a strong possibility that some of the answers to proper management, and predications on supply, would result.

What I have said concerning my first point—the number and profile of marine anglers themselves—holds equally true when the sportsmen's catches are considered. Lack of standardization among many surveys conducted at local levels has made interpretation of the various figures compiled difficult and even contradictory. Here again, an overall national plan would serve not only to make management more efficient, but also would give the fishermen facts upon which to base his trips.

When a trip is taken, particularly by the shore and estuarine fisherman, access to the water is often difficult. Private ownership, presumably public areas restricted to use by residents only, governmental installations closed to the ordinary citizen, all are only a few of the problems facing the angler. He is forced to become a law-breaker or to fish shoulder to shoulder with his fellows in the few areas available to him.

This problem basically is one involving state and local governments. Whether much can be done by adoption of a National Fisheries Plan is doubtful. Certainly federal action could be taken to open up portions of some governmental coastal installations, which are now closed simply because they always have been closed. Model agreements for controlled access could be exchanged among states and communities. Conferences among those who are involved might be helpful. Frankly, I think the best approach would be to set realistic goals for public access to shorelines, try to reach agreement at the local level on implementation of the access program and, in the meantime, insure that present access points do not disappear.

Finally, I reach the matter of competition among what the economists are pleased to call user groups. If implementation of a National Fisheries Plan moves forward as it should, there would be little difficulty in determining just where recreational marine fishing activity is bound to be concentrated. A good deal of such information is available even now. With a complete Plan in effect, two things would happen. First, areas of fishing concentration could be set aside—zoned if you will—for that purpose. Second, suggestions for greater utilization of under-exploited species could be made to disperse the angling effort in

crowded areas. Obviously management of any of the fisheries could be undertaken to furnish the best use of the resource for the greatest number of citizens.

To cover all points concerning a National Fisheries Plan is impossible in the time allotted. It is impossible even if I had all next week at my conversational disposal, for the Plan will be modified, changed and hopefully improved as time goes on. The skeleton has been constructed and the fleshing out of the bones may take years. If the project goes forward as I believe it will, all those connected with utilization of our marine fisheries will benefit.