

An Assessment of Marine Recreational Fisheries in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the Marine Recreational Fishing (MRF) opportunity in the Caribbean Basin and the Bahamian Archipelago. A brief introduction and overview of the fishery are presented with attention drawn to deep sea, reef and near shore fisheries. The results of a Caribbean Marine Recreational Fishing Questionnaire are discussed and the economic importance of MRF to the Caribbean Region is suggested.

In the early decades of this century, Ernest Hemingway killed the first giant bluefin tuna ever taken on rod and reel. He caught this fish in the western Bahamas, as the annual migration of bluefin swept past Bimini and Cat Cay. Later, Hemingway moved to Key West where he continued to write for a living and fish with a passion. At the time of his death, he owned property on the north coast of Cuba, which he used as a base of operations for sorties against blue and white marlin. There is an annual white marlin tournament out of Havana which still bears his name.

During the 1950's, Venezuelan recreational fishermen invited United States anglers to their shores to help them develop a white marlin fishery. John Rybovich, Bob Gill and Garr Wood demonstrated angling techniques to these South American anglers that have carried them to the forefront of competitive fishing. Names such as Jaen, Machado, Riggs-Miller and Ortiz are respected at world class tournament events to this day.

The 1950's also saw the development of small fishing camps, usually privately owned, throughout the Caribbean. These camps served fishermen who were primarily interested in catching smaller gamefish such as tarpon, bonefish, permit and snook. Scattered throughout the Bahamas, the Isle of Pines in Cuba and the Central American mainland, these camps accommodated as few as 8 and as many as 40 fishermen at a time. Anglers fished river mouths and surrounding shallow banks or flats from small skiffs for bonefish and permit. Occasionally, trips were made to nearby coral reef or hard ground areas for attempts at grouper, snapper, stray king mackerel or bonito. Fishermen gathered from all parts of the world to try their luck at these gamefish. Nowhere could anglers find such consistently good weather, good accommodations, easy access, relatively stable political climate and an abundance of fish as the Caribbean Basin offered. As fishing effort increased and as these fishing camps and shoreside accommodations became more established, many offered improved facilities for both angler and boat. Soon a more formal fishing program developed between anglers in the form of competitive fishing tournaments. In the beginning, small numbers of anglers (6-12) competed against each other for a specific species of fish: e.g. blue marlin. As the number of anglers grew over the years, so did the number of tournaments and the complexity of the event. Different line strengths earned more or less points, depending on the species caught or released.

THE FISHING TODAY

This basic scenario has changed little over the years. These same four fishery elements exist: (1) Offshore, deepwater tuna, billfish and migratory pelagic fishing from large fishing vessels greater than 20 feet. (2) Inshore, shallow water bonefish, permit, tarpon and snook fishing from small skiffs less than 20 feet. (3) Reef fishing

for grouper-snapper from a combination of fishing platforms and locations (cities, towns, villages and fishing camps). (4) Formal competition in the form of highly structured fishing tournaments.

To determine the current status of the above elements, a one-page questionnaire was sent to various recognized sportfishermen throughout the Caribbean Basin, asking them about the fishing in their area. We asked how many boats were in each area; their size; what did people want to catch; were there any tournaments in their area and, if so, how many boats fished these tournaments. We asked these sportfishermen if they believed their governments recognized the importance of sportfishing to their area and, if so, how did that particular government go about encouraging and/or assisting recreational fishing and tournament efforts. Thirty-one questionnaires were mailed out and we received 16 responses or a return of 52%.

Please keep in mind the data we present represent an informal survey of the marine recreational fishery. The numbers and assumptions generated do not reflect the total impact of recreational angling in the Caribbean; however, it is safe to say that the data do provide us with a fairly accurate estimate of the marine recreational fishing in the basin and the economic importance of the sport to the region. No attempt was made to extrapolate the data; the following numbers, therefore, represent only the data reduced from the 16 responses.

For the purpose of this paper we have arbitrarily defined the region as all land mass which comes in contact with the 1,049,500 square mile suboceanic basin which is known as the Caribbean Sea (Bonnet, 1979) and the 700 island Bahamian Archipelago. We received responses from 16 areas within the region. As several responses were duplicated from the same area (i.e. Puerto Rico, Bahamas, etc.), we have reduced the total number of responses from 16 to 10. From the responses we find that of a total number of 4,151 fishing boats in the Caribbean Area, 2,402 (58%) are under 20 feet and 1,749 (42%) are 20 feet or greater in length. Of these, only 178 (4%) are involved in charter fishing. The average number of fishing days per year for boats under 20 feet in length was 1,062 or 133.25 days per boat per year (1,066 divided by 8 respondents). The average number of fishing days per year for those boats 20 feet or larger was 1,501 or 167 days per year (1,501 divided by 9 respondents). Our data indicate that 2.62 anglers fished on those boats which were 20 feet or less and that 4.22 anglers fished on the larger vessels. Personal experience would verify that these numbers are accurate.

Although the data are not complete, those areas of highest development seem to have the greatest number of tournaments. The responses to our questionnaire indicate that 73 tournaments are held each year with an average number of 117 anglers per tournament. If we wish to develop some numbers to assess the economic impact of fishing tournaments on the Caribbean Basin and the Bahamian Archipelago on an annual basis, it is probably reasonable to say that these tournaments generate directly and indirectly at least \$21.4 million (Bell et al. 1982; Milon et al., 1982). The total dollar value spent on marine recreational fishing is obviously much higher as the above numbers only reflect expenditures during fishing days and not monies spent traveling to or from tournament areas nor do they reflect monies spent on nontournament fishing.

As we mentioned earlier, we felt it was important to know what sort of fish anglers wanted to catch. Billfish earned top priority with other migratory pelagics such as wahoo, tuna and bonito high on the list. Inshore fishery anglers placed importance on bonefish, barracuda, snook and jack crevalle. It is interesting to note that 22% of the all-tackle world records which stand today were caught in the Caribbean Region (1982 World Record Game Fishes).

What does all of the above mean? To me it indicates that marine recreational fish-

ing is a vital part of the quality of life of the Caribbean Basin. Sportfishermen continue to travel from diverse parts of the world to fish these tropical waters. As the governments of these territories and nations devote more attention and funds to the promotion of sportfishing events and sportfishing in general, recreational angling will flourish, producing tangible results to participant and host.

What has not been addressed in this paper is the value of the fishing experience to the angler in the tropics. It is difficult to describe the smells, pain and thrill of hooking a lightning fast white marlin along side a breaching whale on the north coast of Venezuela; how does one describe looking through a wave at three billfish, competing for a double hooked mullet off Havana Harbor? Can one really describe the smell of shark, while wading for bonefish in back of Ambergris Cays? Can the frenzy of activity involved in bringing a giant bluefin tuna to the wire ever be understood? I hope not.

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