

General Overview of Sport Fishing in Venezuela

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The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the general knowledge and understanding of Venezuelan sport fisheries. It is also a warning of a situation which is endangering some of Venezuela's game fishes.

Venezuela is a country closely related to the sea, having a coastline which extends for approximately 3,000km. This results in an index of 1km of coastline for every 316km² of territory. In addition, the climate is mild and allows for sport fishing throughout the year. Marinas are concentrated in three main areas (Fig. 1): (1) *Eastern Zone*: Puerto La Cruz, Cumaná, and Barcelona areas including Margarita Island; (2) *Central Zone*: La Guaira, Caraballeda and Carenero (Higuerote); the latter has the largest concentration of marinas and pleasure boats of all sizes and description; and (3) the *Maracaibo Area*.

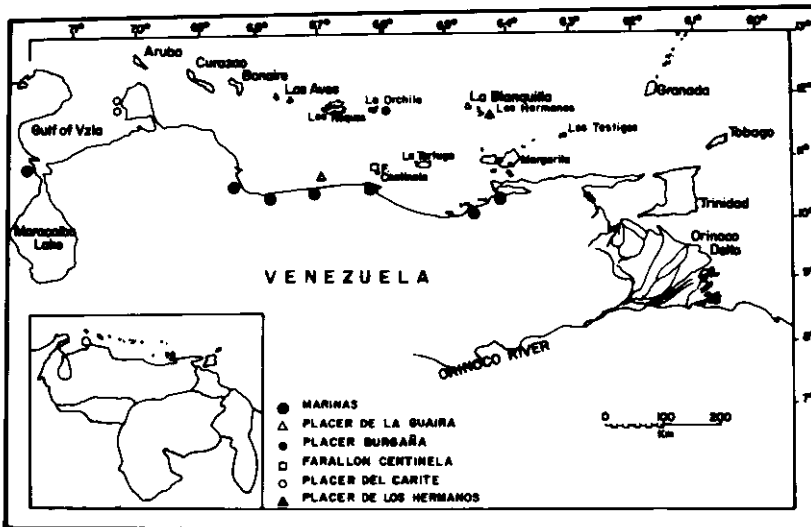


Figure 1. Map of Venezuela indicating approximate location of fishing marinas and well known fishing grounds.

Fish normally sought by sport fishermen are the same as those in Florida, The Bahamas, Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. They range from bonefish caught on very light tackle through blue marlin, swordfish, and yellowfin tuna, wahoo, kingfish, barracuda and tarpon caught on heavy tackle.

Marinas offer few facilities to fishermen without boats, with the exception of the Hotel Macuto Sheraton marina, which has several charter boats which fish the "Placer de la Guaira," one of the best white marlin (*Tetrapturus albidus*) grounds in the world. Visiting boats having the appropriate documents, obtainable at any Venezuelan consular office, should have no problem in obtaining docking space or any service required, including repair and maintenance services.

Sport fishing areas are well distributed all along the coast. However, there are important concentrations that most sport fishing boats frequent. One of these is the

Tablazo and Lake Maracaibo area, where snook (*Centropomus* spp.) and particularly tarpon are very abundant. The latter seems to thrive on the fauna associated with the oil derrick piles and other underwater structures. Since two world records have been landed from this area, it would seem that neither drilling and oil production activities nor the infrequent oil spills disturb these game fish.

Another area is the west coast of the Paraguana Peninsula, well known for its sailfish (*Istiophorus americanus*) and oversized kingfish, which feed on the abundant shrimp in the Gulf of Venezuela. Eastward of the Paraguana Peninsula large concentrations of sails and wahoo are found. Further on to the east and 19 km offshore north of the Caracas International Airport is an underwater platform known as Placer de la Guaira. This platform is approximately 19 km long and 10 km wide, and averages 30 m (56 fm) in depth, while surrounding areas are generally much deeper 360 m (200 fm) to the south and 1500 m (800 fm) to the north. It causes a considerable upwelling due to the strong currents that result from the trade winds, and this great increase in nutrients starts a trophic chain which leads to one of the most formidable concentrations of white marlin in the world (Fig. 2a).

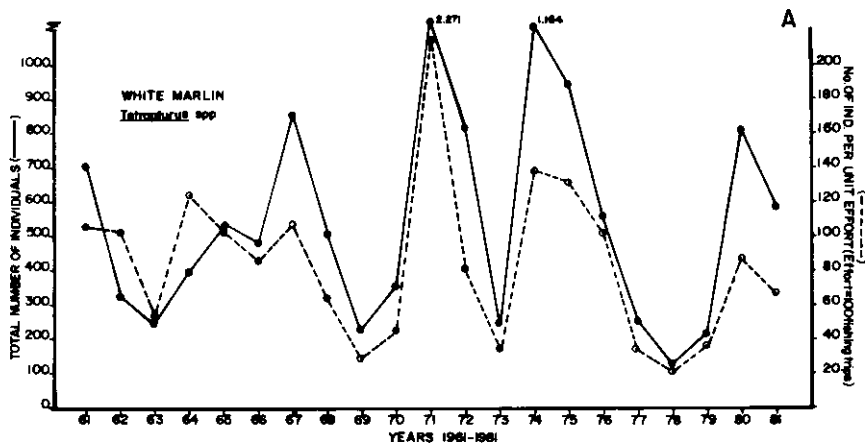


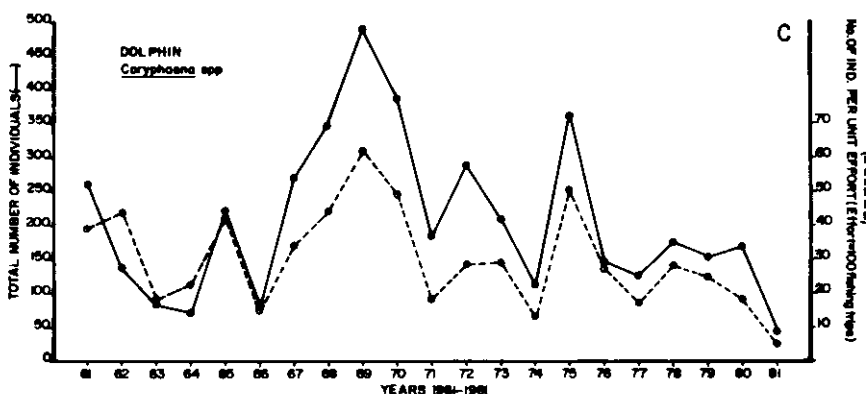
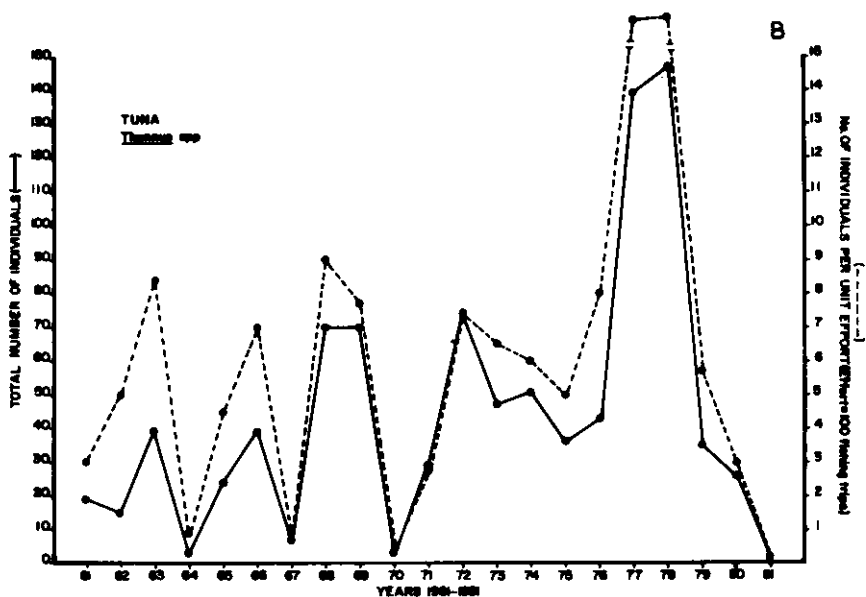
Figure 2. Yearly total number of individuals captured in the area of the Placer de La Guaira and number of individuals captured per unit effort (equivalent to 100 boat fishing trips) for the period 1961-81 for white marlin (a), yellowfin tuna (b), dolphin (c), blue marlin (d) and sailfish (e).

Proceeding eastward is the Cabo Codera area, in which, 19 km offshore, is a protruding rock called Farallón Centinela. Surface fishing near the rock is good, but its bottom fishing is exceptional. Further east is the Puerto la Cruz—Margarita region—important because it is one of the most productive areas for commercial sardine fishing, which in turn attract large predators. The abundance of sardines is due to a large scale upwelling, again resulting from the currents caused by the trade winds.

A very productive area for tuna, kingfish, wahoo and tarpon, as well as many other species, is the Orinoco Delta. This area is commercially fished by large fleets from the ports of Guiria and Pedernales, in which a fishing yacht may find all the required facilities and services. However, this area is very distant from most marinas, and for this reason it is seldom visited by fishing yachts.

Finally, a few words about the outlying islands located between 100 and 130 km north of and parallel to the mainland. From west to east they are: Los Monjes, Los Aves, Los Roques, La Orchila, La Tortuga, La Blanquilla, Los Hermanos, Los Frailes and Los Testigos. These islands possess abundant reef fishes, and in the deep surrounding waters numerous tunas, wahoos, swordfish, as well as other bill-

fish, are found. Two zones especially rich in all kinds of game fish are worth mentioning. One is the Burgano Bank, located about 15 km east of La Orchila. The other is a group of guano-laden rocks known as Los Hermanos, located east of La Blanquilla. These rocks create a great turbulence, concentrating large school of tuna and large billfish and mako sharks (*Isurus* spp.).



Among Venezuelan sport fishing grounds one of the most outstanding as well as best known among foreign anglers and fishing clubs is Placer de la Guaira. Every year between April and October an incredible aggregation of white marlin occurs on these grounds. The reason for this is not known, even though several biologists have studied the matter. A number of tagging campaigns have been conducted in the area by Frank Mather III from Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Results have been surprising, since tagged marlin have been recaptured as far south as South Africa and as far north as Cape Hatteras.

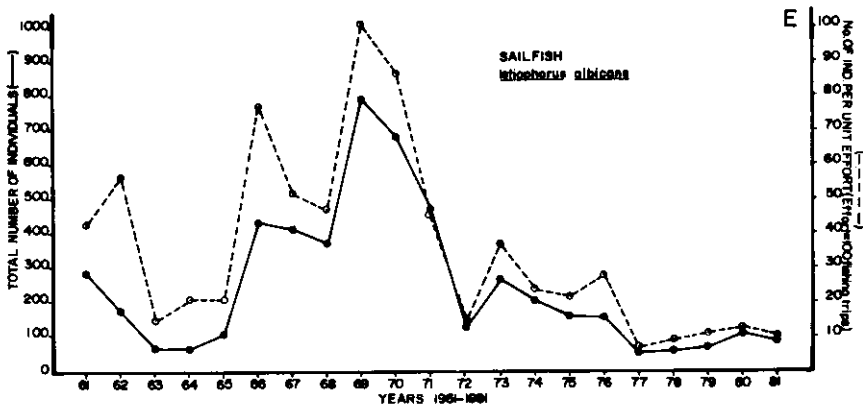
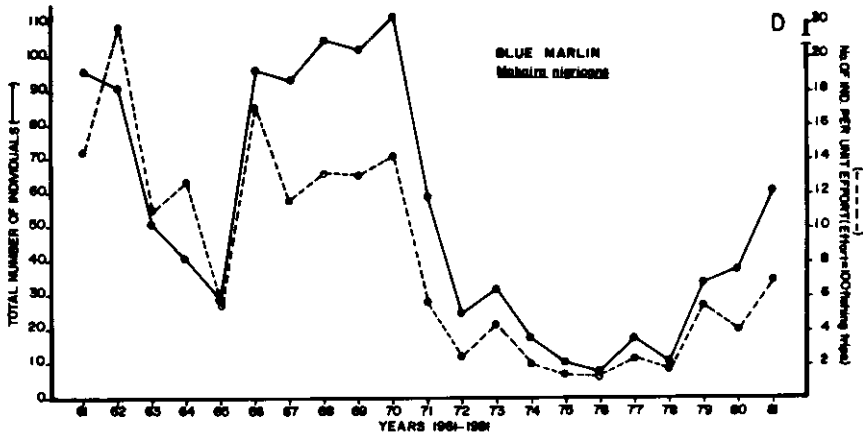
Fortunately, Jose Acosta, controller of the weighing station at Playa Grande Yachting Club, one of our largest sport fishing marinas, has methodically kept records of those fish caught in Placer de la Guaira from 1961 to the present, and also of the

boats and anglers involved. This allowed us to prepare and present the tremendously interesting Figures 2a through 2e.

Figure 2a shows a very definite cyclical phase for white marlin catches with peaks appearing approximately every 3 to 4 years. The Placer de la Guaira apparently is not being fished out, because the white marlin population is seemingly recruited from other areas in the Caribbean and the Atlantic.

This incredible abundance was shown during the 1982 Venezuelan International Tournament in which the 42 participant boats, fishing for 3 days with three anglers on board each, fought and released 959 white marlin. This beats all international light tackle tournament records ever held, and is what has made the Placer de la Guaira so famous.

Figure 2b shows a cyclical pattern of catches for tuna species, with peaks corresponding to the troughs in the white marlin occurrences. This suggests that in years of poor white marlin catches the tuna do not have competition for the bait, or the reverse might be also correct. What actually happens is not known. Anglers always use the same bait: ballyhoo or squid. Dolphinfish or dorado (*Coryphaena hippurus*) are also nomadic and show this same periodicity (Fig. 2c).



Figures 2d, 2e show the decline of blue marlin and sailfish after years of abundance and evident overfishing, with perhaps blue marlin only recently showing some sign of recovery.

There is a theory that white marlin are not vulnerable to longlines, which would explain why its stocks have not been depleted. On the other hand, blue marlin are

vulnerable to longlines, and the reason for the recent increase in blue marlin catches might be that Venezuela recently requested Japan and other countries to stop their longlining activities in the La Guaira area.

The present situation is exacerbated by the lack of laws or regulations concerning sport fishing in Venezuela. Most anglers are not conversation-minded or motivated in the least by the sad lessons learned elsewhere by overfishing.

We sincerely believe that the time to protect gamefish has come, by taking immediate protection measures such as the ones adopted by several nations with regard to the giant bluefin tuna (*Thunus thynnus*). Anglers must show a sense of responsibility and promote the voluntary release and protection of the fish they are after. And if the worst comes, they must support the implementation of the legislation required to protect those species threatened as much by irresponsible sport fishermen as by commercial fishing boats which indiscriminately use purse seines and longlines in areas where such gear should be banned.

A true sportsman owes it to himself to protect the sport he likes best, and owes it to these fish which give him such incredible pleasure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are most grateful to Mr. José Acosta, controller of the weighing station at Playa Grande who for more than 20 years has kept meticulous records of game fish landings, to our fellow anglers whose interest, observations and friendship have made this paper possible, and to Pablo Rodríguez for the illustrations. Scientific Contribution No. 15 of the Fundación Científica Los Roques.