

**Sportfishing: a Complement to a
Balanced Tourism Program for the
Tropical Caribbean**

JOSE LUIS CAMPOS and OMAR MUNOZ-ROURE
Caribbean Fishery Management Council
Suite 1108, Banco de Ponce Building
Hato Rey, Puerto Rico 00918-2577

INTRODUCTION

Even though the Caribbean area is blessed with natural beauty and a very pleasant tropical climate, we lack many of the necessary conditions that support the strong economies of the world. Most of our development efforts are oriented towards agriculture, commercial fishing, light industries and tourism. Tourism is, in fact, the economic backbone of certain nations of the area and, in other cases, the source of an important segment of the national income.

Reports from the Barbados-based Caribbean Tourism Research Center indicate that there was significant growth in tourism in most Caribbean countries in 1984. According to the source of information, the magnitude of the growth in tourism in the case of the Bahamas was 9.4 percent, 25.6 percent for St. Marteen and 12.6 percent for the U.S. Virgin Islands. Several smaller tourism markets also enjoyed considerable growth. These included Anguilla (up 45.4 percent), Antigua and Barbuda (up 12.3 percent), Bonaire (up 29.4 percent), Grenada (up 36.7 percent), St. Kitts and Nevis (up 9.8 percent), St. Lucia (up 8.0 percent) and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (up 11.3 percent).

With very few exceptions, there are massive, well-planned efforts by the governments of the area to attract tourism to their respective countries. These campaigns are especially oriented to countries with inclement weather and intense life styles and to people who are subject to the continual stress of modern living activities. Spending a few days in the Caribbean certainly means relaxing and forgetting for a while the realities of day-to-day living.

Water related activities are a must for tourism. Most of our visiting guests love to sunbathe at the seashore, to swim, to snorkel or SCUBA dive, to surf, to boat and to fish our waters. Many of the species of sport fish familiar to the tourist and to the sportfisherman are caught in the area in relative abundance. Billfishes, including sailfish, tarpon, bonitos, dolphins, barracuda, jacks, sharks, bonefish, lady fish, snook, kingfish, are all present.

To serve the ever increasing demand from both tourists and natives, very modern sportfishing facilities have been constructed in the U.S. Virgin Islands (St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix), British Virgin Islands, Cuba, Dominican Republic, St. Lucia, Martinique, Trinidad and Tobago, Grand Cayman, Venezuela, Puerto Rico and others. These facilities include availability of charter boats, fuel, ice, marine and tackle

stores, etc., and most compare favorably with marinas in many other parts of the world.

In some parts of the Caribbean we have very sophisticated fleets of sport fishing boats, ranging from 21 ft center-console boats, powered by outboards, to the more sophisticated vessels of 30 to 70 feet in length. All these boats are equipped with the most modern technology and gear and many of them serve the tourist trade.

The blue marlin (Makaira nigricans) is probably the most important species in terms of deep water sportfishing in the Caribbean. The magnificent blue marlin is caught in our region throughout the year. However, the peak season is between late May and August, when the truly big fish are in abundance, but by early September, it starts tapering off and the size of fish is less.

Tournaments are held during the winter months in some Windward Islands, such as Trinidad-Tobago, St. Lucia and Martinique, with the target species being sailfish, blue and white marlins, dolphin, wahoo and yellowfin tuna.

Aruba has a very good sailfish tournament in October where 200 or more fish are taken. The Dominican Republic holds a white marlin tournament in the early part of June where 200 or more fish are caught during a five day span.

Reports from Grand Cayman Island regarding highly migratory pelagics, such as blue and white marlin, sailfish and yellowfin tuna are very promising and some tournaments are now being held with attractive cash prizes for record catches.

Most of the billfishes now caught in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are landed and used as food or as trophies. However, some fishing clubs and organizations are considering adopting more active conservation measures for these species by self-imposed restrictions such as requiring most fish to be released alive. Minimum catch size, with a 150 lb limit for blue marlins, 55 lb for white marlins and 40 lb for sailfish, may be expected to be the rule at some forthcoming tournaments.

The use of the new artificial lures known as konas, yaps, soft-heads, etc., has taken some pressure off other valuable recreational species such as mackerel, bonefish, small tarpon and others, which are commonly used as bait for billfish.

To give an idea of the magnitude of the blue marlin fishing activities in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, let us examine the results of data collection efforts that were undertaken jointly by the Caribbean Fishery Management Council and the National Marine Fisheries Service during 1983. A total of 1,458 blue marlins were hooked in the waters off Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands during the twelve month period from January to December, 1983. Some were caught in waters under British Virgin Islands jurisdiction. Out of the total, 549 (38%) were weighed and measured. The average weight was 195 lb with a maximum of 930 lb and a minimum of 19 lb. In Puerto Rico, 497 blue marlins were hooked and all of them were boated, whereas in the U.S. Virgin Islands 514 were hooked and only 83 were boated. The results of data analysis related to hook per unit of effort (HPUE) shows that it will take about 50 boat/hours to hook a

marlin in waters off Puerto Rico. In waters off St. Thomas and the British Virgin Islands (which are closer to the Anegada Passage), the effort to hook one fish is about 12 boat/hours.

During the same period of time, 87 white marlins were hooked, of which 73 (84%) were weighed and measured. The largest one weighed was 143 lb, and the smallest one 25 lb, for an average of 57 lb. Also, a total of 116 sailfish were hooked, the highest individual weight was 99 lb. It is interesting to note that the catch of spearfish was insignificant in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, with only 8 fish hooked.

Some experimentation is going on in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands regarding the use of fish-attracting devices (FAD's) for highly migratory pelagics. One of the most recent efforts was a FAD placed by the Club Nautico of San Juan in about 350 fathoms of water off San Juan, Puerto Rico. It demonstrated to be a very efficient device. Small fishes such as file fish and porcupinefish, small bonito, scad and other baitfish congregated in huge numbers and attracted the much larger pelagics, such as billfish, wahoo, dolphin and tuna.

Recent development of longline fishing for large pelagics in the Caribbean Sea may have an adverse impact on the availability of game fish in the area. The Caribbean Council has joined efforts with four other fishery management councils of the USA east coast to address this issue through adopting a Swordfish Fishery Management Plan, and the preparation of another plan for the administration of the billfish resources.

In considering the importance of sportfishing and other water related activities to a solidly founded tourism program in our respective areas of interest, we should create the necessary awareness in our respective governments to a tourist-oriented service that is missing in most of our respective countries. We are referring to a properly organized system by which small boats, operated by qualified captains and assistants, are made available, at reasonable rates, to visitors preferring nearshore fishing for such game species as bonefish, tarpon and snook. Snorkeling, SCUBA diving and other water related activities would be also enhanced. Most of the time, such a service is not available in our respective countries or, if available, it is not properly advertised or organized and, thus, our visitors never know of their existence. We have made it a point of personal concern to check with visitors about their impressions on the availability of such a service. As a rule, they have been looking for such facilities, but were never able to get the proper contacts or to find out from hotels, tourism agencies, etc., as to the availability of such services.

The development of such services in your respective areas will place several of your regular commercial fishermen in a more lucrative job or, at least, will help the involved fishermen to increase their regular incomes.

We are of the opinion that such an activity should be regulated by government to assure minimum safety standards, and that it should be properly advertised through hotels, tourism agencies, taxi cabs, etc., so as to establish the initial demand for them.

This idea is not new and is taking place already in many of our countries. The availability of some of these services is being advertised even in international magazines and newspapers. These advertisements are addressed to both the avid sportfisherman and to the tourist trade.

All indicators tend to demonstrate an increasing trend for tourism in the Caribbean. Water-related activities and sportfishing will keep playing an important role in any intended tourism program for the area.