

Marine Recreational Fishing in the Bahamas — A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Marine recreational fishing or sportfishing plays a key role in tourist activities in the Bahamas. This is particularly true in the Family Islands where almost 60% of all stopover visitors arrive by yachts and boats. Boaters are attracted to the Bahamas by its clear, uncrowded waters, excellent shoreside facilities and close proximity to the southeastern United States. Marine recreational fishermen in the Bahamas are either visitors who fish using their own boats, visitors who charter local boats, or local residents. Sportfishing tournaments are one of the major marine recreational activities in the Bahamas with approximately 30 annual tournaments. The Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Fisheries work closely in regulating and managing the industry. The Ministry of Tourism's plans for the further promotion and development of sportfishing are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The Commonwealth of the Bahamas is situated between latitudes 20°N and 27°N and longitudes 72°W and 79°W and is bordered to the west by Florida and to the South by Cuba and Hispaniola. The Bahama Banks, with a total area in excess of 45,000 square miles, form a chain approximately 760 nautical miles in length oriented along a northwest/southeast axis. Twenty nine islands and numerous cays and rocks emerge from these shallow banks.

The 1980 census reported a resident population of 209,505 distributed over 18 islands or island districts. New Providence, with the capital city of Nassau, accounted for 64.6% of the population and Grand Bahama, on which the city of Freeport is located, accounted for 15.8% of the total population. The remaining 19.6% was distributed among the other 16 island districts with none of them accounting for more than 4.0% of the total population.

For reference purposes, the Bahamas is generally divided into New Providence, Grand Bahama, and the "Family Islands", a term used to describe the rest of the Bahamas.

Marine recreational fishing or sportfishing plays a key role in tourism activities in the Bahamas. Boaters are attracted to the Bahamas by its clear, uncrowded waters, excellent shore-side facilities, and close proximity to the southeastern United States. An activities survey taken by the Ministry of Tourism in the second quarter of 1981, shows that sailing and motor boating ranked second and third in water sports popularity with visitors in New Providence and the Family Islands. In Grand Bahama, sailing ranked second and motor boating fifth in water sports popularity with visitors.

Sailors and boaters have comprised a substantial percentage of all visitors to the Bahamas since 1979. During 1980, stop-over visitors, categorized by place of accommodation, indicated that 8.3% of total visitors (94,420) lived on boats

and yachts. Visitor nights by place of accommodation indicated that 13.5% of total visitor nights (1.14 million) were spent on boats and yachts.

Cruising/fishing visitors are extremely important to the Family Islands. During the first quarter of 1981, 59% of all stop-over visitors arriving by yachts and boats stayed in the Family Islands; 27% stayed in New Providence, and 14% in Grand Bahama.

Boaters represent an affluent market. The average yearly income of the boating family was estimated in 1981 as being in excess of \$25,000. The average length of stay for a boater in the Bahamas was 12 days.

FISHING ACTIVITIES

Few places can match Bahamian angling for variety of gamefish, year-round availability of gamefish, or for the accommodations for visiting sport fishermen. Marine recreational fishing in the Bahamas can be categorized as follows:

1. Tourists who fish using the facilities of their own boats.
2. Tourists who fish using the facilities of resorts and marinas on a charter basis. This group can be further divided into the person who joins a party of fishermen for a fishing trip during his vacation, but for whom fishing is not the main vacation reason and the enthusiast for whom fishing is the main reason for the trip and who will charter a boat or surf fish every day.
3. Local residents who fish using personal facilities or the facilities of their friends. This category will not be discussed further in this paper.

Tourists using their own boats normally are engaged in tournament fishing involving participation in one or more of the 29 tournaments held annually, non-tournament fishing involving repeated weekend fishing trips during the year, or a combination of the above. The activities of visitors participating in charter cruises are generally half-day fishing trips, full-day fishing trips, or trips of two or more days.

Fishing Areas

While sport fishing, by any standard, is excellent throughout the Bahamas, most activities are concentrated in the following traditional areas. The Bimini-Cat Cay area is generally known as the Sport Fishing Capital of the Bahamas. Activities are centered around the Bimini Big Game Fishing Club and Cat Cay Club. Sizable and competent charterboat operations, specializing in big game fishing (billfish, tunas) and bonefishing are present on North Bimini. Activities in Abaco are centered around the Walker's Cay Club and are complemented by charterboat facilities at Great Guana Cay, Green Turtle Cay, Hope Town, Man-O-War Cay, and Marsh Harbour. Berry Islands activities are centered at the well established Chub Cay Club and at Great Harbour Cay. New Providence/Nassau area activities are centered around the various marinas and charterboat operations connected with major hotels and resorts. There are about 22 charter boats fishing out of Nassau. This fleet includes both open boats and boats with cabins.

While Bimini and Cat Cay, Abaco and the Berry Islands cater primarily to accomplished, sophisticated anglers, Nassau and Grand Bahama cater primarily to "weekend anglers."

Other fishing areas, only lightly to moderately exploited at present, include:

1. Andros with its unparalleled bonefish grounds at Joulter Cays and the off-shore "deeps" of the Tongue-of-the-Ocean.
2. Eleuthera with charterboat services available at Spanish Wells and Harbour Island.
3. Exuma with excellent grounds at Norman's Pond, from Hawksbill Rock to Georgetown, and channels of the Ferry.
4. San Salvador with excellent fishing at Bonefish Bay, off Pigeon Creek, and between San Salvador and Rum Cay.
5. Cat Island with excellent fishing on Tartar Bank, off Columbus Point.
6. Acklins and Crooked Island with a very good fishing ground at the Bight of Acklins.

Gamefish of the Bahamas

Many experienced anglers consider blue marlin the aristocrat of Bahamian gamefish. Blue marlin are found in all open areas of the Bahamas from the western Atlantic through the Exuma Sound, the Tongue of the Ocean, northwest and northeast Providence Channels and the eastern Gulfstream. Blue marlin occur in the Bahamas year round but are most common during the warmer months. An average sized blue marlin might weigh around 200 pounds, but 500 pounders are not uncommon and several in excess of 800 pounds have been taken over the years.

White marlin seldom attain a size of more than 100 pounds and are found throughout the year in the Bahamas but exhibit seasonal variations, somewhat greater than blue marlin. April and May are the best months for white marlin.

Sailfish are one of the most popular game fish in the Bahamas and are found year around, with the best months being July and August. Sailfish average 35 to 40 pounds although much bigger ones are commonplace. They are known to reach a size of more than 125 pounds. Other billfish including the broadbill swordfish are caught in Bahamian waters.

Unlike most other species found in the Bahamas, bluefin tuna just pass through off Bimini, and Cat Cay, off Freeport, or off Chub Cay in the Berry Islands. This migration takes place during April and bluefin tuna disappear completely from the entire Bahamas during June. Bluefins average 300 to 500 pounds but in recent years some in the 600 pound range have been caught.

Blackfin tuna and oceanic bonito are common visitors to the Bahamas. They are found in all deep water areas with seasonal peaks from June to July. Both of these species usually weigh in at under ten pounds but fish weighing up to 20 pounds have been taken.

Allison or yellowfin tuna are also encountered, especially during the months of March to May. Dolphin are found in all open waters of the Bahamas. School dolphin usually weigh 10 pounds but big bull dolphins, usually found singly or in pairs, often exceed 50 pounds.

The most popular member of the mackerel family in the Bahamas is the wahoo. Wahoo can be caught year around, although a summer wahoo is a rarity. During the cooler months wahoo become plentiful. The usual size range is 30 to 50 pounds, but fish up to 150 pounds can be taken. King and cero mackerel are popular winter standbys. They too prevail throughout the year but reach a seasonal peak in the colder months.

Barracudas occasionally range far offshore, but are extremely common near all reef areas and quite often are found in very shallow inshore waters. They occur year round.

Bonefish are found on the very shallow flats of the Bahamas, particularly off Bimini, Andros, Exuma, and Abaco. The average size is 3 to 5 pounds; however, 10 pounders and heavier fish are frequently caught. Bonefish occur throughout the year. Large schools of average size fish are common during the summer months, while the biggest of the species are usually encountered alone or in pairs during March and April.

Another highly-prized gamefish of the Bahamian flats is the permit, a member of the jack family. The permit's feeding habits are similar to the bonefish but they are never encountered in very large numbers. Permits average about 10 pounds, although they often grow in excess of 30 pounds. Permits can be caught throughout the year but are more abundant during the summer months of April to July.

The most frequently caught reef species are the groupers, snappers and, to a limited extent, the amberjack. Most groupers can be caught throughout the year with little seasonal variance. An exception is the schooling of shallow water groupers during the months of November to January. Most shallow water snappers average less than five pounds and are plentiful throughout the year in the Bahamas with little seasonal variation. Amberjacks are found throughout the year but are most often caught from November to May. Average size ranges from 20 to 30 pounds, although 80 pounders are regularly taken in waters along the edge of the banks.

A summary of the occurrence of major gamefish species in the Bahamas by months is shown in Table 1.

Sportfishing Facilities

There are excellent fishing resorts, clubs, and marinas located throughout the Bahamas. Most of these have guides and boats available for deep-sea, reef or bone fishing. Deep-sea charter rates range from \$150 to \$250 per half-day and from \$250 to \$480 per day. Bonefishing rates range from \$60 to \$140 per trip. Marina and docking facilities available in the Bahamas are summarized in Table 2. There are a total of 49 facilities located on 12 island districts and with over 1,800 slips. Average daily docking rates range from \$0.35 to \$0.70 per foot per day. All of the major facilities offer services such as fuel, ice, water, showers, laundry, and electricity. Some also offer restaurant services and accommodation.

Tournaments

Sportfishing tournaments are one of the major marine recreational fishing activities in the Bahamas. Approximately thirty major tournaments are held each year. The name and location of tournaments planned for 1987 are shown in Table 3. Twelve of these tournaments will be held in Bimini, six in Abaco, five in Exuma, and four in the Berry Islands.

The resorts are responsible for organizing tournaments and many of them employ tournament coordinators. The Ministry of Tourism publicizes the tournaments through its tourism offices.

The Bahamas Billfish Championship is held in five different resorts located on four different islands. In 1987, a sixth resort, Treasure Cay will be added to the championship. There is a formal championship awards banquet and this,

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Table 1. Summary of the occurrence of major gamefish species in the Bahamas by months.

Species	Months											
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Blue Marlin	O	O	G	G	E	E	G	F	F	O	O	O
White Marlin	O	O	G	G	E	G	F	O				O
Sailfish			G	F	G	F	F	O	O			
Broadbill												
Swordfish	F	F		F	G	F	F	E	E			F
Dolphin			G	E	G	F	F	O	O	O	O	
Wahoo	E	E	E	F	O	O	O	O	O	F	E	E
Kingfish	F	F	F	F	F	G	G	F	F	F	F	F
Mackerel	G	G	E	E	F	F	F	F	F	F	F	F
Allison Tuna		O	E	E	E	F	F	O				
Blackfin Tuna			F	F	G	E	E	F	O			
Oceanic Bonito			F	F	G	E	E	F	O			
Bluefin Tuna				G	E	G						
Bonefish	GE	GE	E	E	GE	GE	GE	GE	GE	GE	GE	GE
Permit	O	O	G	E	E	E	E	G	F	F	O	O
Tarpon				F	G	G	F	F	O			
Amberjack	F	F	E	E	E	E	E	E	F	F	F	F
Grouper	G	G	G	E	E	E	E	E	E	G	G	G
Snapper	G	G	G	E	E	E	E	E	E	G	G	G
Barracuda	G	G	G			E	E	E	G	G	G	G
Shark	G	G	G	E	E	E	G	G	G	G	G	G

KEY: E = Excellent GE = Good to Excellent G = Good
 F = Fair O = Occasional Blank = None

Modified from Ministry of Tourism official Gamefish Chart of the Bahamas.

coupled with prestigious trophies, has led to an increase in popularity of this championship. It is estimated that each of the yachts participating in each four to six day leg of this championship spend between \$5,000 and \$10,000. This is definitely an important market monetarily, especially for the resorts.

All of the tournaments are attended by representatives from the Ministry of Tourism. The National Marine Fisheries Services (U. S. Department of Commerce) collects data on major tournaments. Data collected on major tournaments held during 1984 are summarized in Table 4. Average weights for blue marlin, white marlin, and sailfish were 183, 107 and 40 pounds respectively. Average weights for blue marlin and white marlin caught in the waters off Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and reported by Campos (1985) were 195 pounds and 57 pounds respectively.

Regulations

All foreign vessels entering the Bahamas for sportfishing purposes are required to clear at a "Port of Entry" before any fishing is attempted. At the Port

Table 2. Summary of marinas and docking facilities available in the Bahamas.

Island	# Marinas and Docking Facilities	# Slips	Average Rate 4/ft/day
New Providence	6	554	50
Grand Bahama	4	345	70
Abaco (including Cays)	14	477	35
Andros	4	-	-
Berry Islands	2	170	50
Cat Cay	1	60	60
Bimini	4	129	55
Cat Island	2	8	50
Eleuthera/Harbour			
Island/Spanishwells	5	40	45
Exuma (including Cays)	5	22	45
Long Island	1	12	-
San Salvador	1	6	50
TOTAL	49	1,823	-

of Entry, the operator of the vessel would be issued a transire or cruising permit that enables the vessel to cruise freely throughout the Bahamas. Up until March 1986, there were no further requirements relating to sport fishing.

Over the years there were numerous abuses of this situation by unscrupulous commercial fishermen operating under the guise of sport fishermen. Some fishermen went even a step further and dispensed with the clearing requirement. They simply traveled to the fishing grounds, collected as much fish as possible and returned home.

It was therefore decided that, in addition to the clearing requirement, some form of bag limit, as well as other measures, was required to allow for the proper monitoring, management, and control of the sportfishing industry. Regulations governing marine recreational fishing in the Bahamas were introduced during March, 1986 and are expected to be enforced beginning January, 1987.

The regulations which form a part of the Fisheries Resources (Jurisdiction and Conservation) Regulations, 1986 are reprinted below:

Sportfishing

Minister's permission for sportfishing 46.-(1) No person shall, without the prior written approval of the Minister, organize or hold a sportfishing event or tournament.

(2) In this part sportfishing means foreign fishing within the exclusive fishery zone for sporting purposes or purposes other than commercial.

Vessels engaged in sportfishing 47.-(1) The owner or operator of a vessel shall not permit the vessel to be engaged in sportfishing unless the owner or operator of the vessel -

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Table 3. Summary of annual sportfishing tournaments scheduled to be held in the Bahamas during 1987.

Name of Tournament	Location
1. Bonefish Bash Tournament	Exuma
2. Billfish Benefit Billfish Tournament	Bimini
3. Bacardi Billfish Tournament	Bimini
4. Hemingway Billfish Tournament*	Bimini
5. Bertram/Hatteras Shootout	Abaco
6. Walker's Cay Billfish Tournament*	Abaco
7. International Women's Fishing Association Bonefish Tournament	Exuma
8. His & Hers Tournament	Berry Islands
9. The Championship Tournament*	Bimini
10. Members Tournament	Berry Islands
11. Abaco Anglers Tournament	Abaco
12. Cat Cay Billfish Tournament*	Cat Cay
13. Superboat Billfish Tournament	?
14. Chub Cay Blue Martin Tournament	Berry Islands
15. Treasure Cay Billfish Tournament	Abaco
16. Bimini Blue Water Tuna Tournament	Bimini
17. Green Turtle Cay Club Fishing Tournament (All fish)	Abaco
18. Treasure Cay Billfish Tournament*	Abaco
19. The Blue Martin Tournament (All billfish)	Bimini
20. Chub Cay Bahamas Championship*	Berry Islands
21. Jimmy Albury Memorial Blue Martin Tournament	Bimini
22. Native Tournament (All fish)	Bimini
23. The Big Game Rodeo (All fish)	Bimini
24. B.O.A.T. (Small Boat Open Angling Tournament	Bimini
25. Andros Bonefish Championship	Andros
26. Bonefish Bonanza I	Exuma
27. Bonefish Bonanza II	Exuma
28. Bonefish Bonanza III	Exuma
29. Adam Clayton Powell Memorial Wahoo Tournament	Bimini

*Bahamas Billfish Championship Tournament (6)

Third
Schedule

(a) holds a permit granted by the Minister under this Regulation authorizing the vessel to be so engaged; and

(b) pays for the permit the fee prescribed in the Third Schedule.

(2) Paragraph (1) shall not apply to Bahamian owned and licensed charter vessels or a boat which is normally towed by or carried on a vessel to which that paragraph applies.

- (3) An application for a permit under paragraph (1) shall be made to the Minister in Form 7 in the First Schedule and be submitted -
- (a) in the case of a vessel entering the Bahamas for the purpose of sportfishing, to the customs officer at the Port of Entry at which the vessel first called;
 - (b) in any other case to the office of the Director of Fisheries.

Form 8. First Schedule. (4) The permit granted under paragraph (3) shall be in Form 8 in the First Schedule.

- Sportfishing rules 48.-(1) In sportfishing the following rules apply -
- (a) a person shall fish by the traditional method of angling with a hook or lure attached to a line held in the hand or attached to a pole, rod or reel;
 - (b) a person unless otherwise authorized by the respective permit shall not use a spear, a fish trap, or a net other than a landing net;
 - (c) each vessel shall use not more than 6 rods or reels unless the operator is in possession of a permit authorizing the use of more rods or reels;
 - (d) any migratory fishery resource that is caught shall not in total consist of more than six Kingfish, Dolphin or Wahoo per person and any resource not intended to be used shall not be injured unnecessarily but be returned to the sea alive;
 - (e) no vessel shall have on board any turtle or more than 20 pounds of other demersal fishery resources per person at anytime and excluding not more than ten conchs or six crawfish per person.
- (2) The limitation specified in (1) (d) and (e) shall also apply to a Bahamian vessel engaged in fishing for purposes other than commercial by persons who are not Bahamians.

Section 70 of the Fisheries Resources (Jurisdiction and Conservation) Regulations 1986 also relates to Sportfishing and is reprinted below:

- General prohibition of exportation. 70.-(1) Without prejudice to the foregoing regulations, no person shall for commercial purposes, export any fishery resource, sea shell or coral unless --
- (a) he holds a licence from the Minister on behalf of the product or resource he wishes to export;

Table 4. Summary of data collected on 14 major fishing tournaments held in the Bahamas during March—July, 1984. A total of 552 boats entered these tournaments. Summarized from data received from the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Species	Blue Marlin	White Marlin	Sailfish
# Landed	475	126	64
# Weighed	200	72	28
Weight (lb)	36,563	4,787	1,111.5
Avg. Weight	182.8	106.5	39.7

- Second
Schedule
- (b) the product or resource is presented to a fisheries inspector at the time of exportation; and
 - (c) the export duty on such product or resource as may be specified in the Second Schedule is paid.
- (2) Subject to paragraph (1) no person shall take out of the Bahamas migratory fishery resource which consist in total of more than six Kingfish, Dolphin and Wahoo or ten pounds of conch or crawfish or more than twenty pounds of other demersal fishery resource.
- The fees for a permit are as follows:
- (i) for Vessels entering The Bahamas -
 - on which will be used not more than six reels - \$10.00 per trip or \$50.00 annually;
 - on which will be used more than six reels - \$7,000.00 per annum
 - (ii) Other vessels — .10¢ per ft per annum.

Since the publication of these regulations, the Ministry of Tourism and The Department of Fisheries have had numerous communications from sportfishing interests. Most of these have supported the idea of regulating the industry but some have expressed concern primarily about two aspects of the regulations:

1. The annual fee of \$7,000 for larger charterboats. Charterboat operators have expressed a concern that this fee is too high and have suggested a per person per trip permit fee.
2. Persons wishing to fish for 7 to 10 days have indicated that the maximum exportable poundage for them should be increased.

These aspects of the regulations are presently under review by the Ministry of Tourism, the Department of Fisheries and the recently formed Sportfishing Committee which is comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Tourism, Department of Fisheries, and the major fishing resorts.

DISCUSSION

The Bahamas has long enjoyed its reputation as one of the big game fishing capitals of the world. This reputation is justified as more world record marine gamefish have been caught in the Bahamas than in any other country except the United States. IGFA (1986) lists a total of 36 world record fish caught in the Bahamas. Two records are listed under the freshwater and saltwater all-tackle category, four are listed under the saltwater fly rod category, and thirty are listed under the salt water line class category.

The Ministry of Tourism activities survey report for the fourth quarter of 1980 showed that 6.2% of visitors to New Providence were engaged in fishing at sometime during their stay. This compares to 5.3% for Grand Bahama and 20% for the Family Islands.

The Bahamas possesses a number of advantages for sport fishermen that are not available to the same extent in most other tourist destinations:

1. Close proximity to the southeastern United States.
2. Well equipped marinas, resorts, and other facilities for sport fishermen.
3. Easy access to these facilities in dozens of Islands and Cays.
4. Numerous charter boats available at many facilities.
5. A reputation as one of the big game fishing capitals of the world with numerous game fish records.

6. Clear, colourful, calm waters that make the fishing experience more enjoyable.

7. A wide variety of game fish in abundant supply.

The Ministry of Tourism promotes the sportfishing industry through its large, well organized promotional system. A total of nineteen Bahamas Tourist offices are established in six countries as follows: United States (12), Canada (3), and one each in England, France, Japan, and West Germany.

During the immediate future, the Ministry of Tourism will be directing special marketing attention towards the enthusiasts for whom fishing is the main purpose of the trip. On-Island promotion will be given special attention and will be geared towards encouraging the greater use of charter/marina facilities.

Hotels will be encouraged to highlight the availability of fishing charterboats to their guests. They will be encouraged to match interested guests who wish to share the cost for a boat through their visitor's desk or social hostesses. Fishing will continue to be mentioned in the general literature and promotions as a definite attribute to the Bahamas.

The Ministry of Tourism plans to encourage fishing writers and editors of specialty fishing magazines to visit and write about fishing in the Bahamas. Stories and releases will be developed for outdoors and fishing columns of newspapers and specialty magazines. Opportunities for guest appearances on outdoor radio and television shows for fishing spoke-persons for the Bahamas will be sought.

The Ministry will continue to sponsor and cover local fishing tournaments and consideration is being given to arranging a tournament for travel and fishing writers. Special attention will be given to the Bahamas Billfish Championship and the tournaments in the Abacos and the Exumas. The Ministry will develop fishing seminars to better educate the fishing writers and publishers as to what the Bahamas has to offer the sport fisherman. This will be tied to the proposed writer's fishing tournament which will rotate each year among local resorts and which will cover bonefishing and billfishing.

Efforts will also be made to ensure that official weight scales are available and operating properly at all appropriate facilities. Information on fishing and marina facilities will be updated and a research program will be conducted by the Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Fisheries to determine the impact of sportfishing on the economy of the Bahamas.

Finally, the Ministry of Tourism will continue to assist, where necessary, and encourage the development of good fishing facilities within the Bahamas.

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