

Return 'Em Right: An Integrated Learning Platform to Sustain Gulf of Mexico Reef Fisheries.

Return 'Em Right: Una plataforma de aprendizaje integrado para fortalecer la pesquería de aguas profundas en el Golfo de México.

Return 'Em Right: Une plate-forme d'apprentissage intégrée pour soutenir la pêche dans les récifs du golfe du Mexique.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the Southeast United States, federally managed reef fish are highly targeted and regulated leading to a high magnitude of both harvest and releases. Reef fish, such as snapper and grouper, are commonly caught in deeper water (>10 meters) where they experience barotrauma, often leading to reduced survival post-release. Barotrauma refers to injuries fish experience from the change in pressure while being reeled up from depth. Impacts from barotrauma and release may lead to a significant portion of quotas being consumed by dead discards, reducing anglers fishing and harvest opportunities.

Discard mortality has been at the forefront of reef fishery issues resulting in contention among stakeholders, fisheries scientists, and resource managers. Reducing dead discards and improving survival of released reef fish continues to be a high priority for fisheries managers. Anglers can improve survival of released reef fish suffering from barotrauma through venting or descending techniques. Although awareness of these practices varies geographically, anglers are generally more familiar with venting techniques in the Gulf of Mexico. Venting techniques improve survival when done properly, however, anglers can do more harm than good if they are not knowledgeable and experienced at venting. The use of descending devices has been proven to be an effective, and sometimes safer, way for recreational anglers to reduce discard mortality.

To improve the health of Gulf of Mexico (GOM) reef fish fisheries, the NOAA Restoration Center is collaborating with Florida Sea Grant and the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission on a program to enhance reef fishery resources through education and promotion of sustainable angling and barotrauma mitigation techniques. In addition to promoting education and knowledge of best release practices, the program distributes free release gear to anglers who fish in the Gulf of Mexico and complete the education requirement. Objectives of the program are to reduce mortality in reef fish resulting from barotrauma and release, improve angler's experiences with release gear, and improve the overall health of the GOM reef fish fishery.

In an effort to build trust with the angling community, the program was established under an independent brand, Return 'Em Right, that resonates with anglers. Return 'Em Right is an angler-driven program that is guided by anglers and grounded in science. A new logo, slogan, website, and social media accounts were created under the Return 'Em Right brand to deliver the education on barotrauma and best release practices to the angling community. An invitation to bid process was used through the University of Florida to procure fish descending devices to distribute to anglers. Contracts were awarded to three descending device manufacturers.

An education module that teaches anglers about barotrauma and best release practices serves as the foundation of the program. The module was developed using an interactive online learning platform, Articulate Rise, coupled with the distribution of free fish descending gear, as a central element, to motivate sustainable angling knowledge and best practices among recreational reef fish anglers. The educational platform leads participants through a series of interactive learning modules that combine short, illustrated demonstrations and complementary videos showing the use of sustainable angling gear and fish descending devices. The educational material has been developed through the participation of angling community influencers with input from charter captains. An essential focus of educational efforts was for the training tool to be clear, concise, and short to maintain anglers' interest and attention while still providing all the necessary information to recognize barotrauma and take action to improve survival upon release.

Promotion of the Return 'Em Right program occurred through a wide variety of modern marketing, advertising, and outreach efforts. These efforts included in-person presentations to stakeholders, editorials and advertisements in major fishing magazines, radio and podcast interviews, videos with YouTube influencers to promote best release practices on

social media, attending and presenting at industry led outreach events, fishing tournaments, and more. State and federal natural resource agencies supported participation in the program. Gulf of Mexico Sea Grant Programs (Florida, Mississippi-Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas) further supported region-wide outreach to angling communities.

Return ‘Em Right launched its program publicly to the Gulf of Mexico angling community on May 3, 2022. Since the programs launch, over 27,000 anglers that fish for reef fish in the Gulf of Mexico have completed the online training module and received free release gear. Program participants are primarily private recreational anglers, however, over 800 charter captains have participated and received free release gear. Response from the fishing community has been overwhelmingly positive with the educate module scoring an average rating of 4.94/5 from over 14,000 survey responses. Follow-up survey responses from anglers who have received and use the gear indicate high satisfaction with the package of release and an initial transition in preference away from venting tool use towards descending device use. Return ‘Em Right has amassed over 97,000 website users and reached more than 750,000 unique individuals on social media.

Developing a brand that resonates with anglers and “speaks their language” is key to building trust in the community and participation in educational programs to support the fishery. Investing in traditional business-like marketing and social media efforts has helped the program develop into a community brand instead of a one-time use program. This community approach to the brand fosters sharing of information between anglers and the program management team to continue to improve educational programming and provide further education to support sustainable fishing practices, beyond barotrauma mitigation techniques. The integration of new technologies and processes for learning, monitoring, and program evaluation defines *Return ‘Em Right* as a model for inspiring stakeholders to take an active role in ocean resource conservation.

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KEYWORDS: Barotrauma, Descending Device, Reef Fish, Education, Release Tools