

Return 'Em Right Monitoring and Evaluation Program

Programa de monitoreo y evaluación del proyecto de liberación de peces capturados en aguas profundas.

Programme de suivi et d'évaluation du projet de remise à l'eau des poissons pêchés en eaux profondes.

NANCY MONTES DE SOTO^{1*}, CHARLES SIDMAN¹, NICK HADDAD^{1,2}, and JAMES REINHARDT³

¹Florida Sea Grant, ²Return 'Em Right Program, ³NOAA Restoration Center

[*nancymontes@ufl.edu](mailto:nancymontes@ufl.edu)

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Evaluation of efforts to promote fisheries management and ocean resource health are usually undertaken near the end of programs or the conclusion of activities, which can limit overall effectiveness and opportunities for integrating critical feedback as the program progresses. Using the Return 'Em Right program as an example, we shared the model developed to execute communications, educational, and marketing through the central functions of monitoring and evaluation.

The Return 'Em Right program is a 7-year program that seeks to reduce mortality of reef fish due to barotrauma upon release. Barotrauma is a pressure related injury in which fish become bloated and is not able to return to depth on its own (Figure 1), but there are some tools and devices that anglers can use to help these fishes survive. Therefore, the program is providing training and materials describing best release practices, in combination with the distribution of release devices to anglers in the Gulf of Mexico.

We use several marketing and communication strategies for the promotion of the Return 'Em Right website in which anglers can access a 15-minute online training that identifies symptoms of barotrauma in fish and describes best release practices. After the training, participants are asked to provide their feedback, and this is used to improve the training --- which is now on its 2nd version thanks to the feedback of over 10,000 participants. Participants and training data is recorded and used to provide data analytics. At least six months after participants take the training and received their free fish release devices, we solicited feedback about their level of satisfaction with the information and devices we provided as well as details about their experiences with barotrauma in reef fish. All of this information is used to create and maintain an interactive dashboard that is updated weekly (Figure 2).

The interactive dashboard is a tool that allows the program management team to quickly visualize strategic information. It was created using ESRI products such as ArcGIS Pro, dashboard, and hub. It is comprised of several sections such as indicators with number of training completions and number of devices distributed, as well as monitoring in the process of device procurement and shipping. An interactive web map illustrates device distribution by zip code, county, and state. More detailed information includes the number of training completions in relation to estimates of our target populations (e.g., private recreational anglers or for hire anglers), which allows the team to better characterize our angler participants. Follow-up surveys are accessible on the dashboard as full reports. But the dashboard also contains graphs highlighting main results --- comparison of participants knowledge of barotrauma and use of descending devices before and after six-month follow-up surveys.

The interactivity function of the dashboard allows the program management team to identify the impact of specific marketing and communication campaigns. For instance, if we look at the entire dataset, a good portion of our participants are learning about the Return 'Em Right program from other anglers --- so anglers are recommending our training to others. But when we selected the latest entries (Sep-Oct 2023), we noticed that some new participants are coming from program YouTube media campaigns. We published several videos during this timeframe, so right away, we can see and document the impact of this campaign in boosting our training completion numbers.

Thanks to this approach we can update and improve the training, materials, and resources throughout the life of the program, and we can detect and correct any issues, promptly. This ensures that program team decisions are truly data driven. Even though the program is at its mid-point, we already have information to evaluate the program because the data collected shows that participants are more knowledgeable about barotrauma and that they are using the best release practices we are promoting. Monitoring and evaluation is a dynamic and integrated process with the interactive dashboard improved constantly to fit the evolving information needs of the team.

Integrated monitoring and evaluation is providing a deeper and richer understanding of the effectiveness of Return 'Em Right in promoting knowledge, positive attitudes, and behaviors among GOM reef fish anglers.



Figure 1. Barotrauma in reef fish and its main symptoms

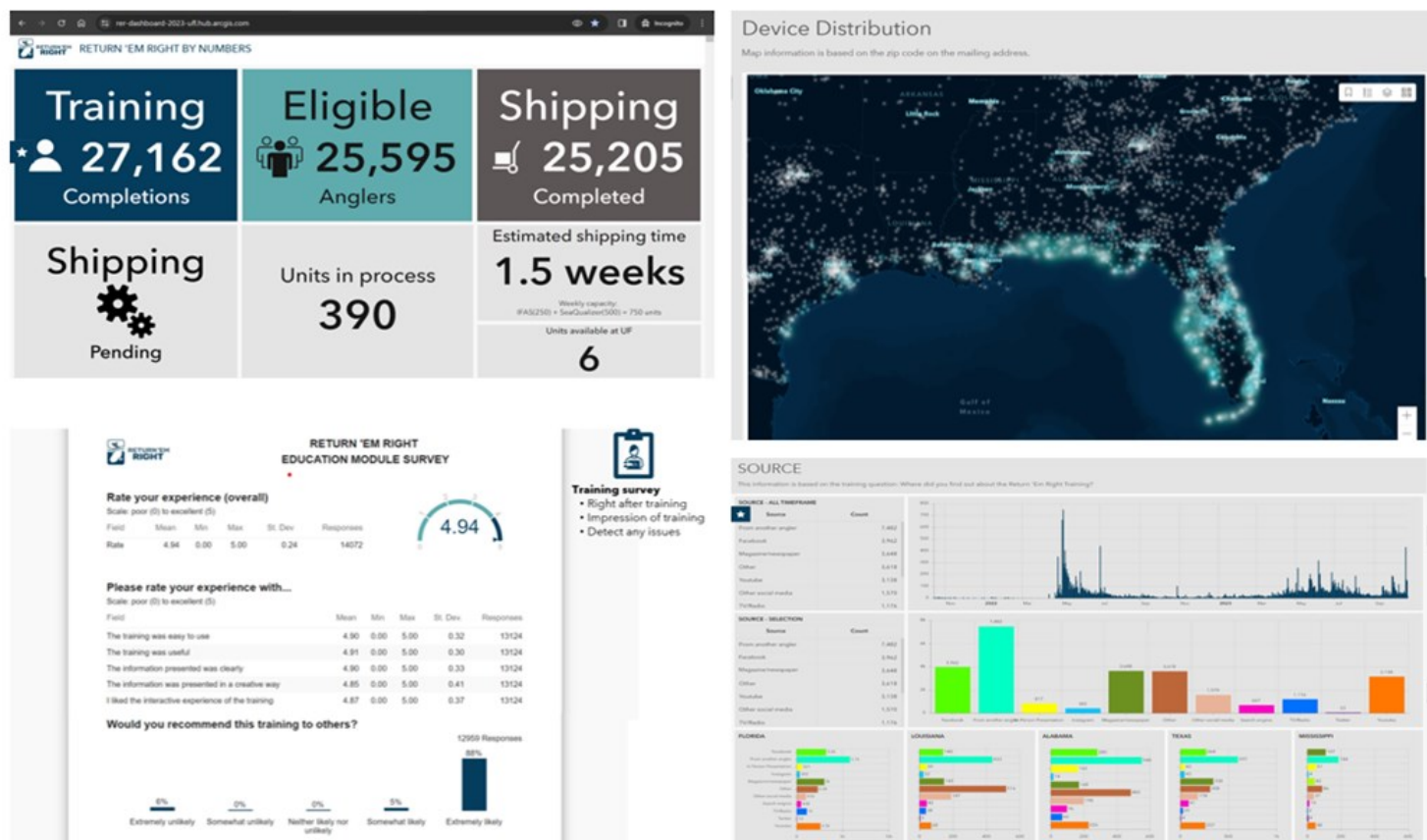


Figure 2. Return 'Em Right Program interactive dashboard

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project is being funded by the Deepwater Horizon Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group as part of the 2019 Open Ocean Restoration Plan.

KEYWORDS: barotrauma, reef fish, monitoring, evaluation