

Managing Maryland's Recreational Bluefin Tuna Fishery

By Jim Casey and Harley Speir

The Atlantic bluefin tuna, *Thunnus thynnus*, is one of the most valuable animals in the world. Their commercial value in the Asian sushi and sashimi markets can be as high as \$60,000 each for the giant tuna. Recreational fishermen on the Atlantic coast pay top dollar for offshore charter boats seeking the bluefins. In North Carolina, a 1997 economic study of the winter offshore recreational tuna fishery found that the total economic output associated with this fishery at the state level was in excess of \$5 million dollars.

Frequenting the offshore sand ridges and canyons of the continental shelf and slope, these fish are often found wherever there is mixing of cold and warm currents. Off Maryland's coast, this can be 30 or 40 miles offshore.

This tuna has a worldwide distribution, being found in the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as the Mediterranean, North Baltic and Black Seas and the Persian Gulf. In the Atlantic, it is found from Newfoundland to the Gulf of Mexico. Based on this, management activities are carried out by a world-wide group representing the tuna fishing nations - the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, or ICCAT. ICCAT reviews scientific information and sets fishing quotas for each participating nation. Currently, the United States has requested ICCAT to examine the mixing issues of eastern and western Atlantic stocks and to help determine if there is a central Atlantic spawning area.

Though harvested commercially since the early 1900's, recreational tuna fishing did not begin in Maryland until the mid - 1930's. Coastwide, these recreational catches remained small until 1950 when a record was set with a 977 pound bluefin landed in Nova Scotia. With the advent of larger vessels, improved electronic navigation and fish-finding equipment, catches increased and in the 1970s, this record was broken five times! Soon though, the world-wide high levels of commercial and recreational harvest caused a decline in the stocks. To correct this in U.S. waters, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) enacted certain measures to sustain and rebuild the population, one of which required permits for the different categories of commercial and recreational tuna fishing. Quotas were applied to each category along with seasonal restrictions, bans of certain gear types, minimum sizes and catch limits. These were designed to contain harvest quotas, reduce catches of non-tuna species and restrict those caught to certain sizes and ages. Beginning in 1995, to obtain information on successful recreational tuna fishing trips, anglers were required to report their daily catch to NMFS through a toll-free telephone number.

However, concerns were soon being voiced that anglers were not taking the time to report and inaccurate landing records were being produced. NMFS asked the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) to design a landing census similar to one being used by the state of North Carolina to estimate their tuna landings. Anglers must first get a bluefin tuna permit from NMFS. Permitted anglers landing bluefin tuna in Maryland's only ocean port of Ocean City, must check in each fish landed at one of several selected marinas in the Ocean City area and fill out a catch card. Each card contains spaces for the angler's name, permit number, marina, and length of each tuna, with one card for each fish. In exchange for the completed card, the angler receives a numbered landing tag to be placed on each tuna before it can be removed from the boat.

MDNR began using this card-and-tag system during the 1999 tuna season in Ocean City. In the first year of the survey, 1,254 bluefins were landed and in the year 2000, 1,247 were landed. When coastal recreational harvests were recalculated using this and the North Carolina data, the increased accuracy indicated a lower harvest than previously calculated. For 2001 and 2002, creel limits were increased. As a result of the landing limit changes, Maryland landings for 2001 jumped to 4,240 bluefins. For 2002, landings are again up but weather and water temperature conditions may have conspired against anglers for as of August 25th, 2,282 bluefins had been landed compared with the 3,673 for the same period in 2001. As temperatures begin to drop, tuna to the north will pass close to Maryland on their southerly migration route and perhaps give anglers

another chance at them.

The mean size of tuna landed has also increased. In 1999, the average fork length size was 40.5 inches but with the 2001 season, average size had increased to 50 inches.

The card-and-tag system will likely be continued in the future to obtain improved accuracy on these landings that will benefit the bluefin tuna resource and Maryland's recreational tuna fishery. Anglers bringing in bluefin tuna to Ocean City can obtain cards and tags at the following marinas:

1. Ake Marine, Ocean City, MD
2. Bahia Marina, Ocean City, MD
3. Fisherman's Marina, Ocean City, MD
4. Ocean Pines Marina, Berlin, MD
5. Captain Mac's South at O.C.Fishing Center, Ocean City, MD
6. Talbot Street Pier & Marina, Ocean City, MD
7. White Marlin Marina, Ocean City, MD
8. Sunset Marina, Ocean City, MD