

Blue Water Fishermen's Association – a quarter century of integrating conservation and pelagic longlining

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“Working with the leadership of the organization, I have seen first-hand how the Blue Water Fishermen's Association has played a key role over the past two decades in ensuring sustainable fishing practices and a level playing field for U.S. fishermen. BWFA leadership endorsed, along with several environmental NGOs, a USG proposal to reduce Atlantic quotas across the board in order to rebuild the swordfish stock. With work behind the scenes to communicate directly with their counterparts in other countries, the first-ever successful international rebuilding program was implemented.” (Rebecca Lent, formerly with NOAA Fisheries)

I had the pleasure, both personal and professional, of attending the annual membership meeting of the Blue Water Fishermen's Association (BWFA) in Atlantic City in April. It was pleasurable in large part because I got to catch up with old friends who I haven't seen nearly as much as I would like to in recent years, and that was the personal part. The professional part, however, was my being able to once again experience at firsthand how a fishermen's association that is truly committed to conservation operates internally (this isn't to imply that there aren't a whole slew of fishermen's organizations whose members aren't similarly committed. In 2014 this is the rule, not the exception).

First off, for those readers who aren't familiar with BWFA, next year will be its 25th year of representing members of the pelagic longline fishery on the East and Gulf coasts.

One of the speakers at the meeting was Dr. Mariluz Parga, a veterinarian with Submon (<http://www.submon.org/en/who-are-we-in-submon/>) in Barcelona, Spain. Submon is an organization which *“provides environmental services related to the conservation, study and awareness of the marine environment”* and Dr. Parga is a sea turtle specialist who was at the meeting as a contractor to the NOAA/NMFS Bycatch Reduction and Engineering Program.

Her presentation immediately followed an update on the sea turtle program by Charles Bergmann from the Harvesting Systems and Engineering Branch at the NMFS Pascagoula, Mississippi lab. In total BWFA dedicated at least twenty percent of their one day annual meeting to sea turtle conservation involving interactions with pelagic longline gear and how they can be mitigated.

Considering that this is probably the only opportunity that many BWFA members have every year to get together minus the constraints of everyday business pressures, as well as the fact that they are facing the same problems that every other US commercial fisherman and those in US fishing-dependent businesses this might be considered excessive. However, and this is something that will probably be understood by anyone in the commercial fisheries, it's a testament to how critical conservation has become to the pelagic longline fishermen in particular and to our domestic seafood harvesters in general. It's safe to say that US fishermen are among the mostly highly regulated in the world, and accordingly they are interested in and to a very large extent focused on the creation, implementation and effectiveness of the regulations that are so important to their businesses.

Dr. Parga discussed her work on sea turtle/fishhook interactions in various several countries. From the start it was obvious that she was as interested in hearing what the fishermen had to say as she was in them hearing her presentation. After many instances of listening to protected resources researchers and bureaucrats talking at, and too often talking down at, fishermen this was like the proverbial breath of springtime. It was obvious that she felt that the only way to be effective in reducing unwelcome interactions is by working with the fishermen. This is something that most of the ENGO “crusaders” who are so busy protecting this, that or the other thing from the depredations of commercial fishermen have yet to learn – or perhaps are disinclined to learn because of all the bucks and publicity that flow from MMPA/ESA lawsuits.

It was obvious that Dr. Parga (and Mr. Bergmann as well, though to anyone who knows Charlie, that goes without saying) was interested in all sides of the sea turtle/fishermen interactions equation and the BWFA members responded to her and her presentation accordingly.

I was impressed. But on looking back at my almost twenty-five years of association with BWFA since it began, and of a number of its founders/members before that, it certainly wasn't the first time that I had been impressed by the strides they had made in the conservation of both swordfish/tuna conservation and in the incidental catch of other species as well.

Going back to a Subcommittee on Fisheries Management of the House Committee On Merchant Marine and Fisheries on the Atlantic Tunas Conservation Act reauthorization on October 23, 1993, Nelson Beideman, a founder of BWFA and its long-time Executive Director until his death in 2006, testified *“regulating only the U.S. commercial and recreational fishermen will not conserve these fish which are found in virtually all areas of the Atlantic. How successful can conservation negotiations be if other countries across the table know (before we even sit down to negotiate) that the U.S. will take all necessary steps unilaterally? What incentive do they have to agree to management and conservation measures?”* This testimony set the tone for BWFA's management and research activities early on, a tone which is still influencing the organization, its members and its activities today. Highly Migratory Species management, to be effective, must address every aspect of the various fisheries throughout their range.

In fact, in 2007 Nelson was given a posthumous tribute at NOAA's Sustainable Fisheries Leadership Awards ceremony. From the NOAA/NMFS web page memorializing the ceremony, he *“helped initiate some of the most effective collaborative research projects between commercial fishermen, NOAA scientists and conservation organizations. He was an active fisheries management partner who was instrumental in efforts to reduce domestic and international bycatch of sea turtles, and develop domestic and international management programs that led to the rebuilding of north Atlantic swordfish”* (<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/awards/2007.htm>). For a more extensive review of this work see

Having a guest speaker at the BWFA annual meeting who is a turtle conservation specialist from Spain is a recognition of how truly international HMS management must be to be effective, and of the fact that BWFA's members and staff have recognized that, and have been working towards that end for more than two decades.

On the other side of the fence

It was back in August 1997 that Pew Environmental Program Director Joshua Reichert wrote in an op-ed article titled **Swordfish technique depletes the swordfish population** printed in the Philadelphia Inquirer *"the root problem is not only the size of the quota, the length of the season, or the number of vessels involved. It is how the fish are caught. Use of longlines must be barred."*

Five years later members of ENGOs established and or supported by the Pew Charitable Trusts went to great lengths to take credit for the recovery of the North Atlantic swordfish stock via their **Give Swordfish A Break** media campaign, which was begun in 1998 by a Pew created ENGO named SeaWeb. Needless to say, their PR blitz made no mention of the fact that BWFA had been championing swordfish conservation in the entire North Atlantic years prior to the Pew campaign.

How legitimate was Mr. Reichert's and his minions' commitment to saving swordfish and to ending longlining, the principal method developed for their harvest? Obviously that's information that I'm not privy to, but consider that in a 1998 article in the St. Petersburg Times (FL), titled **En Garde for Swordfish** (<http://www.fishtruth.net/PDF/SpruillSwordfish.pdf>), reporter Bill Duryea detailed the SeaWeb strategy behind the Give Swordfish A Break campaign. *"The first thing (SeaWeb Executive Director) Vikki Spruill did when she went looking for a fish to save did not have to do with fish at all,"* Duryea wrote. Having decided that the most effective way to *"engage the public interest" in ocean problems was through the food on their plate, Spruill*" Duryea wrote *"needed a certain kind of fish. A poster fish, if you will. Shrimp and salmon rank at the top of the most popular seafoods, but half of the shrimp and salmon sold in the United States are farm-raised, tempering their status as overfished. Besides, shrimp lack a certain weightiness. 'We wanted something majestic,' said Spruill. Number 3 on the popularity list, according to Spruill, was swordfish, whose firm-fleshed steaks had become a mainstay of fashionable restaurants across the country."*

Josh Reichert's and Pew's actions to destroy a form of fishing that has been accepted and effective for well over a century (tub trawls, also known as bottom longlines, were employed by the dory fishermen on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland who Rudyard Kipling immortalized in his novel **Captains Courageous**) appeared, at least in Vikki Spruill's opinion as related to Bill Duryea, have far less to do with saving swordfish than they did to crassly using the "majestic" image of swordfish and their popularity in white tablecloth restaurants to advance their ocean agenda.

But note that BWFA's efforts to have meaningful international conservation measures for the HMS fisheries adopted in the North Atlantic years started long before any of the people at Pew took any public positions regarding them. The swordfish had gotten their break starting at least in 1993, and that break was because of the efforts of BWFA, not because a handful of chefs who had no idea of what was going on in international swordfish management – the only effective method for managing swordfish or other HMS – were convinced by an expensive foundation supported campaign that the U.S. swordfish fleet should be made accountable and, not coincidentally (if the Pew troops were paying any attention to head man Josh Reichert) driven into economic oblivion. This was one of the first times that domestic commercial fishermen were "collateral damage" in Pew SeaWeb's (and the Pew Trusts') campaign to appear to be the oceans' saviors in the public eye.

But fortunately for the swordfish, for the longliners who catch them, and for seafood consumers who know what a culinary treat ocean fresh swordfish are, the pelagic longliners are still fishing and BWFA is still committed to effective international swordfish conservation.

“Without the research platforms provided by members of the BWFA, it would have been exceedingly difficult to test different hook type and bait combinations in the pelagic longline swordfish fishery in the goal of reducing sea turtle bycatch mortality. The successful results have not only allowed U.S. fisheries to continue to target swordfish and tunas, they have also been spread to fleets around the world through global and regional fishery management organizations.” (R. Lent as above)

But BWFA’s conservation interests go far beyond swordfish conservation.

Anyone with anything beyond a nodding acquaintance with open ocean fisheries has probably come upon anti-longlining rants referring to “walls of death” tens of miles long festooned with thousands of hooks and snagging virtually every innocent sea creature unfortunate enough to be swimming anywhere in the neighborhood.

How close to accurate are these “walls of death” claims? A pelagic longline uses floats to keep the baited hooks suspended in the water column. These floats are 1,000 feet apart and support the horizontal main line. Suspended from the main line are vertical lines from 60 to 100 feet long. Each has a circle hook (more on that later) at its end. There are 4 or 5 baited hooks suspended between each buoy – the hooks are 200 to 250 feet apart and hang anywhere from 50 feet to 300 feet below the surface.

In actuality there is a single 4 inch long hook embedded in a foot long dead squid or mackerel hanging every 200 feet along the longline and anywhere from 50 to 300 feet below the sea surface. If we were talking about a brick wall that wall would be .0001% brick and 99.9999% empty space. Some wall!

And then there’s the type of hooks that are used in the longlines. Essentially there are two types of hooks in use in recreational and commercial bait fisheries. The first of these are commonly called J hooks, which are constructed so that they will look a fish, or any other creatures that ingests it, anywhere in the digestive tract, depending on how the hook is swallowed. If the hook doesn’t lodge in the mouth, other organs are likely to be damaged during hooking or hook removal.

The alternative circle hooks, because of their configuration, tend to lodge in the angle of the jaw, causing minimal damage during hooking and when the hook is removed. Circle hooks are significantly less efficient than J hooks. In fact estimates are that the pelagic longliners can sacrifice up to a third of their targeted catch by switching to circle hooks. But switch they did, in spite of the reduced efficiency, because it cut down significantly on the mortality of fish (and turtles) that they inadvertently caught and subsequently released. BWFA played an essential role in the initial work leading to the adoption of a mandatory circle hook requirement in the domestic pelagic longline fishery and in getting the participants in their fishery to accept the requirement. If the members of BWFA weren’t the earliest adopters of circle hooks they were certainly among the earliest (see the NOAA/NMFS fact sheet for the Northeast Distant Fishery Sea Turtle Bycatch Reduction Project: Project Results: Avoiding Interactions & Reducing Harm at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/mediacenter/turtles/docs/project_results.pdf which took the circle hook research into international waters. BEWFA boats were the cooperating vessels. For a more comprehensive treatment see Do Circle Hooks Reduce The Mortality Of Sea Turtles In Pelagic Longlines? by A.J. Read at http://www.lenfestocean.org/sites/default/files/circle_hook_report.pdf).

The use of circle hooks by the pelagic longline fleet meant a 30% reduction in the swordfish catc.

This commitment to the use of circle hooks and the “ancillary” benefits to sea turtle conservation led naturally into an ongoing training program sponsored by NOAA/NMFS aimed at the captains, owners and crew of domestic pelagic longliners. The program is still in place and BWFA still plays an active role in organizing the training sessions and in insuring that to the greatest possible extent that the sea turtle handling requirements are both effective from the turtles’ perspective and practical for the fishermen. The presentations by Mr. Bergman and Dr. Parga were a part of this process, and the feedback provided by the fishermen has been and will continue to be an integral part of it.

And while on the subject of hooks, BWFA has also been actively engaged in the research leading to the adoption of “weak” hooks in the Gulf of Mexico pelagic longline fishery to reduce the negative impacts of their interactions with bluefin tuna there (see Fish Hooks Designed to Avoid the Wrong Catch in the New York Times at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/08/business/08novel.html?_r=0). Is it any surprise that the Pew Environment Group opposed this conservation measure as well, a measure that the scientific experts, as well as NOAA/NMFS and the fishing industry strongly supported (http://www.pewenvironment.org/uploadedFiles/PEG/Publications/Fact_Sheet/A%20Weak%20Solution.pdf)?

BWFA is one of two fishing industry members in the Consortium for Wildlife Bycatch Reduction, a conservation group located at the New England Aquarium, “*a partnership between science and industry to reduce bycatch of threatened marine animals*” (http://www.neaq.org/conservation_and_research/projects/fisheries_bycatch_aquaculture/bycatch/consortium_for_wildlife_bycatch_reduction/index.php).

Then there’s Atlantic bluefin tuna

No discussion of the domestic pelagic longline fishery would be complete without including the latest on bluefin tuna management, which is part of the not yet approved Amendment 7 to the 2006 Consolidated Atlantic Highly Migratory Fishery Management Plan. This amendment introduces the Individual Bluefin Quota program for the PLL fleet. Its main provisions are to issue separate bluefin tuna quotas to each boat in the fleet based upon that vessel’s fishing history, making that quota transferable between vessels, and closing down the PLL fishery when(if) the quota is reached.

The stated objectives of the amendment are to:

- Limit bluefin landings and dead discards with a hard cap
- Provide strong incentives to avoid bluefin tuna interactions
- Provide flexibility to enable pelagic longline vessels to lease bluefin quota from other vessels.
- Balance the objectives of IBQ program with other Amendment 7 objectives, (e.g., optimize Fishing opportunities, maintain profitability, minimize impacts on the directed permit categories, and consider the broader objectives of the FMP).

(http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/advisory_panels/hms_ap/meetings/sept_2013/documents/a7_individual_bluefin_quotas_sept2013_ap.pdf)

The impetus for this program is the fact that the management program now in place requires that after the PLL fleet catches and keeps a specified number of bluefin tuna all of them that are subsequently caught

must be “released” regardless of the condition they are in. This leads to the dead discarding of the fish, which is against the intent of national standard 9 of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. This program will shift the responsibility for bluefin tuna bycatch away from the fleet to the individual boats/fishermen, will stop the waste of several tons of high quality fish every year and will cap the bycatch of bluefin tuna by the PLL fleet.

The design of this innovative program was a joint effort of BWFA and NOAA/NMFS, and is yet another example of BWFA’s commitment to utilizing and advancing conservation goals both for the species its members target and for those that they unavoidably interact with.

Discriminating seafood consumers and real ocean conservationists should be supporting Blue Water Fishermen’s Association and the domestic pelagic longline fleet for at least another quarter of a century.