

The groundfish debacle – and business as usual at NOAA/NMFS

FishNet USA – August 6, 2012

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After a decade of cutbacks in commercial and recreational groundfish landings, after a decade of economic chaos of New England recreational and commercial fishing businesses and the people and communities dependent on those businesses, and after years of assurances by the fisheries managers that they were on the right track and that there was light at the end of the tunnel, it was announced yesterday that the most important groundfish stocks weren't anywhere near where they were supposed to be. Naturally, this means that further – and even more drastic - cuts are imminent. And this in spite of the imposition of a catch shares program in the fishery, something that NOAA head Jane Lubchenco still seems convinced is the answer to any problems with our fisheries.

But have no fear. According to NMFS head Samuel Rauch and New England Council Chairman "Rip" Cunningham, *"we are committed to this fishery, to this industry, and to the people in this community; preserving the groundfish industry is of the utmost importance to us and we'll put forward our unwavering support."* What have they and their predecessors at NMFS and the Council been doing up until now, as this latest "crisis" has been developing? Do they want us to believe that now they're finally going to get really serious about groundfish management and the impact it's having and is going to have on most of the commercial fisheries from Cape Hatteras to the Gulf of Maine?

And what of the so-called fish conservationists, members of those foundation-funded supposed do-gooder ENGOs who have used tens of millions of tax free dollars to design a system that, whether purposefully or not, has forced the fishermen and the fishing dependent businesses down a one-way street leading inexorably towards extinction? Pew's latest adverts on NPR talk about helping the fish and helping the fisherman. Some help!

One of the popular definitions of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. If that's the case, what does that say about our fisheries managers - or perhaps more accurately, for the people that our fisheries managers work for? Or what does it say about the people in Congress who make up the fisheries management rules? If there aren't enough fish, cut back on fishing. If there still aren't enough fish, cut back on fishing even more.

But what else going on in the ocean might be impacting groundfish stocks?

One thing might well be the still burgeoning spiny dogfish population, which is estimated to be growing at 3% a year. Among the "preliminary" data made available to the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council¹ for last year's stock status update, the total biomass of spiny dogfish was 557,059 metric tons (1.22 billion pounds - for a sense of scale, if the average weight of New Jersey-ites was 120 pounds, New Jersey's total population would weigh just over a billion pounds).

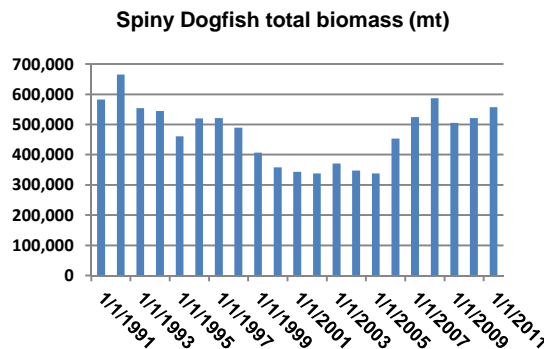
Assuming that dogfish consume six times their body weight each year², the total annual consumption by dogfish off New England and the Mid-Atlantic is 7 billion pounds or so (to the same scale, that would be the combined weight of everyone living in the coastal states from Maryland to Maine). Much of that is composed of groundfish and other valuable commercial and recreational species, or the forage that those species could be, and minus spiny dogfish, would be eating.

In 1992, Steve Murawski, who retired in 2011 as Director of Scientific Programs and Chief Science Advisor at NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service, wrote in **Multi species size composition: A conservative property of exploited fishery systems**³ *"given the current high abundance of skates and dogfish, it may not be possible to increase gadoid (cod and haddock) and flounder abundance without 'extracting' some of the current standing stock."* In 1992 the spiny dogfish biomass was estimated to be 553 thousand metric tons. Among the groundfish stocks that are supposedly in such great trouble – and the harvests of which will be even further reduced – are cod and yellowtail flounder.

The commercial quota for spiny dogfish for this fishing year is only 16,191 metric tons, not even 3% of the total biomass and just a bit under the predicted biomass increase for the year. So why not raise it to a reasonable level? That would certainly help fishermen – and the fishermen it would help wouldn't just be those who would be in the expanded dogfish fishery. It would help those fishermen in every other fishery – both commercial and recreational – that this huge biomass of ravenous sharks is already impacting, and that's most of them.

Is there a downside? Our existing infrastructure would have a hard time processing and handling and our existing markets would have a hard time absorbing a large and abrupt increase in supply, but a government supported development program could surely provide a significant level of support.

How about doing irreparable damage to the spiny dogfish stock? That's something that I'm sure would garner a lot of support in fishing circles, but it isn't likely to happen. As the chart below (from data which was in the background material for the above mentioned Stock Status Update) indicates, the population of spiny dogfish is capable of rebounding from lower population levels in a surprisingly short time, increasing by almost 60% from 2005 to 2008.



In addition, even if, as many in the New England fisheries are saying, the NOAA/NMFS surveys that are the foundation of the groundfish stock assessments are shown to be totally off base, fewer spiny dogfish is going to mean more of the more valuable species.

Isn't this what "ecosystem management" is supposed to be all about? It seems that it's always used as an excuse to reduce fishing, as in "we've got to cut back severely on herring harvesting because it might be having a detrimental effect on the species that eat, among other things, herring," but why shouldn't it also be used as a reason to increase the availability of other species?

This wouldn't be doable under the constraints that the ENGOs have forced into the Magnuson Act that have so effectively tied the hands of the managers, but that could be easily fixed. That's what Congress does, or that's what Congress is supposed to do. And the bottom line could be something that really helps the fish (except for spiny dogfish) and really helps the fishermen.

So now I guess all we have to do is stand back so we don't get crushed by the stampede of Pew people and their minions in their zeal to begin to fix a system that they have so thoroughly messed up and a fishing tradition in New England that is about to be destroyed.

Note: I was involved in organizing a one day workshop on the spiny dogfish situation in Philadelphia in September of 2008. There is a wealth of information on what has turned into a major "scourge of the sea" at the website for that workshop at <http://www.fishnet-usa.com/dogforum1.htm>. Since then their estimated biomass has increased by over 10%. Note also that as the spiny dogfish biomass has been increasing, the biomass of other species, including some groundfish, has been decreasing "inexplicably."

¹ *Update on the Status of Spiny Dogfish in 2011 and Initial Evaluation of Alternative Harvest Strategies*, P. Rago and K. Sosebee, National Marine Fisheries Service, September 2011.

² *Wetherbee and Cortes, 2004, Food consumption and feeding habits, pp. 223-244 in Biology of sharks and their relatives, Mulsick, Carrier and Heithaus, eds.*

³ *With J.S. Idoine in Journal of Northwest Atlantic Fishery Science, Volume 14: 79-85*