

Cooperative Science Services, LLC Dolphinfish Research Program

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July 2009



2009 Tag Recoveries. WOW!

Tag recovery reports have poured in during the first half of 2009. A total of 41 tags have been reported recovered so far this year compared to 27 reported for all of 2008. Only during 2007, when 73 tags were reported for the full year, were more tag recoveries reported in the first half of the year.

Tag recoveries are largely a direct function of the number of fish tagged. The record-setting year of 2007 saw 73 tags reported when more than 2,400 fish were marked and released. In 2008, with almost 1,400 dolphinfish tagged, 27 tags were reported. The first half of 2009 has had 900 fish reported tagged and an amazing 41 tags reported recovered.

The 2009 recovery rate (4.6 percent) is almost double the normal rate of 2.5 percent. Such a large increase in the rate at which the tags are being recovered is most likely to the result of education of anglers as opposed to an increase in the portion of the stock being harvested. Over the seven and one-half years the study has been operating, the saltwater sports fishing magazines and many of the major coastal newspapers have done an outstanding job in reporting the progress and findings of the Dolphinfish Tagging Study. These articles have served to educate offshore anglers to the importance of reporting tagged dolphinfish that are recovered. The downside of the increase in reporting rate is the implication that many tags recovered in previous years went unreported.

The crews of six boats have already had multiple recoveries of the fish they tagged this year. Leading the list once again is the crew of the *Killin Time*, owned by Don Gates, which fishes out of Marathon, Florida, with

16 of their marked fish being reported. Dave Wilson, fishing aboard his boat *Knot Yet* out of Andros Island, Bahamas, has had five of his fish recovered so far. The Miami, Florida, charter boat *Bouncer's Dusky*, owned by Bouncer Smith, has produced four tag recaptures so far in 2009. Rob Harris's Key West, Florida, charter boat *Gotta Go* has had three of its tagged dolphinfish reported. The crews of the *Reel Gator*, owned by Tony Zara of Orlando, Florida, and *Rosa Maria*, owned by Carl Haas of Jupiter, Florida, have each had two of their fish reported recovered. While "luck" does play in the recovery process, it is the care and attention to handling the fish gently and returning it to the water quickly that result in a quality (healthy) tagged fish more likely to be recaptured.

Starting Points

Dolphinfish recovered in 2009 have originated from just four areas. Surprisingly, fish from the Bahamas have accounted for almost one quarter of the returns. As usual, it is the fish marked off the Florida Keys that have produced 56 percent of the recaptures. Dolphinfish marked off south Florida have resulted in six recaptures. And finally, waters of the Central Western North Atlantic off Puerto Rico produced a single but very important, recovery.

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Bahamas' Recoveries

A lot of information has been gathered this year about dolphin found in the Bahamas. First, it seem that school dolphin found in the Tongue of the Ocean adopt the leisurely life style famous in these tropical islands. Five recaptures of fish tagged in this deepwater sound in 2009 remained there for as long as 37 days. Three of the 2009 Tongue recoveries were at liberty for 23 to 37 days. This is the only area that tag recoveries suggest that dolphin will linger for extended periods.

This year saw the first long-distance movement by a fish tagged in Exuma Sound off Eleuthera Island. This fish traveled as much as 620 miles, following the eastern side of the Bahamas Bank to a point off Ft. Pierce, Florida, where it was recovered. The other recovery was a fish released off Great Guana Cay off the Abacos that was recaptured off Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, a distance of 570 miles. These recaptures help reinforce the theory of Bahamian dolphin moving to the U.S. East Coast and also indicate a new southern limit to where these fish enter the U.S. fisheries.

Central Western North Atlantic Recoveries

The January 2009 recovery off the Dominican Republic of a fish tagged in 2008 off San Juan, Puerto Rico, is the first recovery for the study of a fish tagged off a Caribbean Island. This recovery suggests that fish found off San Juan in October move westward from Puerto Rico traveling along the deep trench between the northern Caribbean Islands and the Bahamas Bank. This route would ultimately lead them into the Florida Straits and the baited hooks of Keys' fishermen.

Florida Keys Recoveries

Fish tagged off the Florida Keys have accounted for the lion's share of the recaptures, 23 fish, but only one made it out of Florida. Half of the recoveries were made before the fish reached Key Largo, Florida. These fish had traveled an average of 42 miles during a liberty averaging 2.8 days. The other half of the recaptures were



Care in handling fish when tagging and minimizing the time the fish is out of the water will maximize the potential for recapture.

Dolphin Tagging Progress by Zones, July 1, 2009.

Zone	Area	Southern Limit	Northern Limit	Number Tagged
1	Bahamas	22N	28N	224
2	FL Straits	23N	25N	393
3	South Florida	25N	27N	190
4	Central Florida	27N	30N	9
5	North FL & GA	30N	32N	11
6	Southern SC	32N	33N	41
7	N. SC - S. NC	33N	35N	12
8	Northern NC	35N	36.5N	0
9	Virginia	36.5N	38N	0
10	N. Mid-Atlantic	38N		0
11	Gulf of Mexico			0
12	W Central Atlantic			15
13	Caribbean Sea			5
	Total			900

made from Key Largo northward to Ft. Pierce. These fish had an average liberty of 5.4 days. The lone escapee was the fish tagged in 2008 that went to Cuba in April 2009 and was reported in this newsletter in April.

Thanks to the intense tagging effort off Marathon by the crew of the *Killin Time* where they tagged numerous members of the schools they encountered, three schools of fish were able to be tracked northward along the Florida coast. In a dolphin school encountered June 1, ten fish were tagged and three have been recovered. Four fish were tagged in a school June 4th resulting in two recoveries. On June 10, the crew tagged 23 fish in a school that has yielded three recaptures. In all cases the first fish to be recovered was off Islamorada after one or two days. Two of the schools had their second fish recovered off Miami in two and three days respectively. The June 1 school had its second fish recovered off Key Largo after four days, with a third member recaptured off Port everglades after five days of liberty.

These schools displayed a clear movement northward along the Florida coastline. However, they did show that schools will travel at varying speeds. The June 1 school averaged moving at a rate of 24 miles per day, while the other two schools of dolphin averaged more than 50 miles per day.

South Florida Recoveries

Six tags deployed on dolphin off south Florida have been reported so far this year. Two offer little information, since one was picked up after it washed ashore on Dania Beach, while the second tag was recovered in a Maryland commercial seafood processing plant from a batch of dolphin purchased from a Florida commercial vessel.

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One recovery hints that dolphin may linger in the south Florida area during winter or at least frequently revisit the south Florida area. Tagged off Miami in January, the fish was recovered 72 days later off Ft. Pierce, just 119 miles north of its release point. In this same vein, another fish was tagged and recaptured off Miami during a span of 12 days.

The fastest traveling fish moved at the rate of 65 miles per day. Released off Key Largo, it traveled to Ft. Pierce in only two days, a distance of 130 miles.

The most significant recovery of a south Florida dolphin so far this year involves a fish tagged by Capt. Bouncer Smith on May 19 while fishing off Miami. The fish was recovered just eight days later, 427 miles north of its release site. It was recovered by Capt. Billy McIntyre while fishing aboard his commercial fishing vessel *Shady Lady* 80 miles southeast of Charleston, South Carolina. This recapture provides support to the theory that dolphin from south Florida and the Keys travel along the east side of the Gulf Stream as they pass Georgia and South Carolina.

For more information visit www.dolphintagging.com and go to the page on "Map of Tags & Recaptures."

Do Not Use Yellow Tags on Dolphin

Yellow tags distributed during the first four years of the study belonging to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources should no longer be used on dolphinfish. The public tagging program operated by the state can no longer keep up with processing the tagging and recovery information. This makes it extremely difficult to recover records on dolphin tagged or recaptured using DNR tags.

Please contact the Dolphin Tagging Study should you need tags to replace the yellow tags.

Where do Our April-May Dolphin Go?

A recent conversation with commercial fisherman Vaughn Nickerson of Nova Scotia, Canada, who recovered a tagged dolphin last year in international waters of the North Atlantic, may shed some light on dolphin movements. According to Mr. Nickerson, in mid-June of this year longliners out of Nova Scotia, made larger hauls of dolphinfish than at any previous time. Many boats returned with more than 10,000 pounds of dolphin in a single trip. In previous years, mahi were a rare catch for these Canadian vessels.

There is a high probability that the fish encountered in the Gulf Stream at 40° N latitude, 64° W longitude are the same fish that passed through the South Atlantic Bight in April and May.

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For More Information, Contact

Don Hammond

Cooperative Science Services, LLC

961 Anchor Rd., Charleston, SC 29412-4902

Telephone – FAX (843) 795-7524

Email CSSLLC@bellsouth.net

Web site www.dolphintagging.com

