




Fix Our Fisheries



It is insanity that the vast majority of a single year's fish production dies before having a chance to reproduce. It's time for a different approach. It's time to Let 'Em Spawn!

No one doubts that marine fisheries reform is difficult.

No one questions that North Carolina is faced with plummeting stocks of some of the Tar Heel State's most beloved saltwater fish—flounder and bluefish, croaker, weakfish and even the once plentiful spot.

And no one who cares about coastal resources is blind to the fact that the policies and the strategies put into place over the last decade have had limited success—if any success at all.

But no one in their right mind could possibly support an approach to fisheries management that has brought North Carolina to a position in which hundreds of millions of juvenile fish are netted and killed before they are old enough and large enough and mature enough to spawn a single time. And that's where we are: a huge percentage of the juvenile fishes that hatch in our world-class estuaries—2 million acres of nursery grounds that could produce astonishing numbers of fish—die before they have a chance to spawn and add to their own populations. The greatest portion of these fish are caught in shrimp trawls and then shoveled overboard dead after being culled from the shrimp harvest. Spot, croaker, kingfishes, weakfish, southern and summer flounder—hundreds of millions of fish utterly wasted.

And one more thing that can't be argued when it comes to North Carolina's saltwater fisheries: Progress—even incremental progress—is at a stalemate. Decades of studies have been heaped upon decades of studies. Proposals have progressed and withered. Regulations and reforms have come and gone.

It is now time for a call for conservation that is not only elegantly simple, but also scientifically sound and economically forward-thinking.

Let 'Em Spawn.

It's that simple. Fostering reproduction is the most basic tenet of population biology, so let these critical, beloved, beleaguered fish spawn at least once in their lifetimes. Could that possibly be too much to ask? Is there any reasonable perspective that supports a system in which we are wiping out hundreds of millions of fish without them ever having a single chance to replace themselves or, even better, add to their own population?

Let them spawn. Set size limits for all species of commercially and recreationally utilized fish to protect juveniles until they reach a size at which 75 percent of the stock has reached sexual maturity and have the opportunity to spawn at least once.

Just once.

Could the solution to the current paralysis over North Carolina fisheries be this straightforward? A baseline to start from, without complicated rules and complex gear regulations? Simply put: Yes

It's a common-sense starting point for a management policy. Let most of our fish spawn just once and this will significantly—and quickly—add to the populations of declining and collapsing fish stocks. Build a fisheries program around this bedrock and a healthy spawning class of adult fishes will increase yield to the fishery and create resiliency when environmental conditions are unfavorable.

It just makes sense.

This can't be too much to ask.

NOW



Think about a few figures. It is simply astonishing to consider how many fish are killed before they are large enough to reproduce a single time.

In 1997, at the time of the passage of the Fisheries Reform Act, commercial fishermen landed nearly 11 million pounds of Atlantic croaker, more than 2.6 million pounds of spot, and 3.5 million pounds of weakfish. The impacts of overfishing on juvenile fish and the extraordinary bycatch in the estuarine shrimp trawl fishery that has taken place on these species nursery grounds have produced devastating results.

What are the results? In two decades, Atlantic croaker landings have fallen 90 percent. Spot landings fell by four-fifths. Weakfish tumbled from 3.5 million pounds to a paltry 85,000 pounds. The list goes on.

Why would we kill so many fish before they can reproduce?

The Fisheries Reform Act of 1997 was passed to rebuild already declining fish stocks. In the two decades since, the vast majority of species have not recovered and most have declined precipitously. Hundreds of millions of juveniles of these species have been taken and discarded in the shrimp trawl fishery and harvested by commercial and recreational fishermen, leading to the near or total collapse of these important fisheries in North Carolina. They catch these mostly juvenile fishes because that is all that is left!

This is what happens when you don't *Let 'Em Spawn*.

Why would we kill so many fish

Our Line in the Sand

Commencing this spring, the North Carolina Wildlife Federation is launching *Let 'Em Spawn – Before They're Gone* as a campaign for action. It's more than a catchy slogan. This could be—and should be—a movement through which this state finally breaks the logjam of in-fighting and inaction that has devastated our fisheries. It cuts through the confusing and often at-odds statistics that proponents or opponents of specific regulations use to bolster their arguments. Simply put, a policy based on the *Let 'Em Spawn* approach would ensure that the number and age classes of fishes remaining after harvest is high enough to replace the number of fish harvested. Astonishingly, this most basic approach is not in evidence in North Carolina's fisheries management.

Instead of being in favor of one type of fishing gear restriction or in opposition to a particular size of catch limit restriction, *Let 'Em Spawn* seeks to set a baseline from which to analyze and enact fishing regulations. If an action doesn't allow young fish to grow large enough to reproduce, it's probably not a viable part of a fisheries plan that looks to the future. There is no realistic argument in opposition.

Simply put, this new idea and plan reverses a decades-long pattern of decline in vitality and abundance in our commercially and recreationally important marine fisheries from overfishing, bycatch and regulatory discard mortality. It will fix age-class distributions ever-more skewed toward younger, immature fish. Marine fisheries managers have tip-toed around the issue with a myriad of shadow proposals that recognize the problem to a degree but do not address it head-on with management measures that attack the cause.

Size limits are the most rudimentary tool used by fisheries managers to protect the spawning stock that produces each year's new class of fish, but at present, many finfish species important to the commercial and recreational fisheries remain unprotected in terms of size limits. Unprotected juvenile fish often make up a large percentage of harvest because they are typically the most abundant. The vast majority of the harvest of many species, such as spot, croaker, and kingfish species, is comprised of juvenile fishes that have never spawned. Other species, such as Southern and summer flounder, have size limits that only allow a very small fraction of the female fish the opportunity to spawn at least once. But most of these older fishes no longer occur in our fisheries due to overfishing.

Our Plan

NCWF is not content to put *Let 'Em Spawn* on a bumper sticker and walk away. We have worked hard with legislators to help produce a slate of bills that will move our ideas forward. We are gearing up our lobbying and outreach initiatives to educate all North Carolinians—including those who do not live in coastal counties but hold these coastal resources dear—about this exciting chance to change the conversation and change the future of coastal fishing in North Carolina.

- House Bill 483: Let Them Spawn Before They Are Gone. The essence of the proposal set forth in H483 is to establish a minimum size limit for each historically significant marine fisheries species to ensure that 75 percent of the juvenile fish at that size have reached maturity and have the opportunity to spawn at least once. At press time, House Bill 483 has passed the House Wildlife Committee and has been sent to the House Environment Committee.

before they can reproduce?

○ House Bill 486: Coastal Fishing License Reforms. Concurrently, we are working hard for an approach that seeks to protect active commercial fishermen who depend on commercial fishing. Some 70 percent of commercial fishing license holders in North Carolina either do not fish at all, use commercial gear for pleasure, or use the commercial license to avoid recreational limits. Of 8,909 commercial fishing licenses sold in North Carolina in 2017, only 27 percent reported any landings at all. Less than 1,500 license holders sold more than \$10,000 of commercially viable fish. House Bill 486 will protect the heritage of commercial fishing in North Carolina for fishing families who depend on this beloved resource. This initiative does repeal allowances for recreational use of gear such as gill nets and trawls. But it reserves such gear for licensed commercial fishermen who have a vested interest in the health of our fisheries. This bill will even provide an apprenticeship program to allow new, qualified entrants into the commercial fishing industry, as opposed to simply being able to enter this industry via an online license. At press time, House Bill 486 has passed the House Wildlife Committee and was sent to the House Finance Committee.

And That's the Whole Catch

So that's our position. Simply stated: Hundreds of millions of young fishes too young to spawn or reproduce even a single time are killed by indiscriminate fisheries such as shrimp trawls. These young fish are too small to be of any commercial or food value for current human use. Their primary value is to make more fish. For everyone.

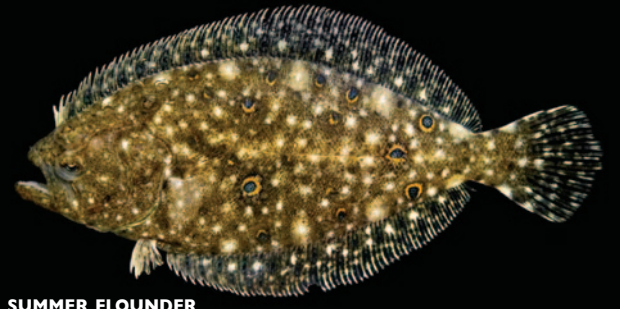
When harvest rates are established based upon the principle of setting the minimum size limit at a length at which 75 percent of the fish of that size are mature and have the opportunity to spawn, an immediate response is predictable. The age class distribution will begin to shift to the older, more prolific fish, which will result in more stability and greater reproductive potential for the fishery. Older fish are bigger fish and more attractive to both recreational and commercial anglers. The fishery will be less threatened by adverse impacts from storms, disease, pollution, and other potentially harmful occurrences. As populations recover, commercial and recreational harvests will be more secure and opportunities for expansion may be possible. An abundant, healthy, stable, self-sustaining fishery will restore and even increase economic benefits locally and statewide directly from the greater harvest of fish for the market and from the activities and expenditure of recreational anglers as they once again travel to our coast. The potential for increasing revenues to local businesses directly associated with recreational fishing such as charter boats, bait and tackle shops, restaurants, motels, guide services, grocery stores, and other related services and products is immense. North Carolina can once again become the destination for fishermen and women desiring a rewarding coastal fishing experience bringing with them all the benefits of tourism.

It can happen. It should happen. The North Carolina Wildlife Federation will work fiercely to make this happen. And the pathway has never been clearer:

Let 'Em Spawn.



SOUTHERN FLOUNDER



SUMMER FLOUNDER



ATLANTIC CROAKER



SPOT



NORTHERN KINGFISH



SOUTHERN KINGFISH

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