



FORAGE FISH: ATLANTIC HERRING

BACKGROUND

Atlantic herring (*Clupea harengus*) is a major forage species off the northeast coast of North America, feeding valuable groundfish such as cod, hake, haddock, flounder, monkfish, and dogfish; pelagic fish species such as bluefin tuna, swordfish, and bluefish, as well as striped bass, black sea bass, Atlantic salmon, sharks and skates, and even squid. Many species of seabirds and marine mammals also rely heavily on herring as a major food source. The recovery of overfished groundfish and pelagic fish species may depend on the abundance and availability of herring as a food source.

ATLANTIC HERRING FISHERY

Record-setting catches by the so-called “distant water” factory trawlers of Spain, the former Soviet Union and other foreign countries during 1960s and 1970s led to the collapse of the New England herring stock. The Gulf of Maine-Georges Bank herring stock complex began to recover during the late 1980s with limited fishing. Since the mid-1990s, the New England herring trawl fishery has once again expanded and is now the largest fishery in the region, supplying markets for canned, frozen and salted products as well bait for commercial lobster, crab and tuna fisheries in New England.

ATLANTIC HERRING MANAGEMENT

Although the stock is not considered overfished at present and estimated fishing mortality has been relatively low compared to the peak years of the fishery in the 1960s, there is growing concern about the rapid expansion of the nearshore fishery in the Gulf of Maine and the impacts on foraging whales as well as high bycatch of overfished cod, haddock and other fish. In addition, the herring management plan does not explicitly consider the needs of predators when setting the annual quota.

CURRENT ATLANTIC HERRING POLICY ISSUES

After being pressured by a coalition of environmentalists and fishermen, the New England Fishery Management Council decided to further study the herring catch in federal waters off the New England coast to determine whether or not herring regulations should be tightened for large trawlers. According to the Herring Alliance, in 2008 fishery managers need to address the three following critical issues:

1. Better accounting for what the industrial mid-water herring trawl fleet catches and what it catches, but throws away.
2. Creation of buffer zones to protect inshore coastal waters from the herring trawl fleet.
3. Addressing the needs of predator species when setting annual catch levels for herring.

Councils: New England Fishery Management Council and Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

Links to Resources: <http://www.herringalliance.org>; <http://www.foragefish.org/herring.html> for fishery management area map and historical catch data.

###

The Marine Fish Conservation Network is the largest national coalition solely dedicated to promoting sustainable management of marine fish and wildlife, and our oceans. The Network, made up of almost 200 environmental groups, commercial and recreational fishing associations, aquariums, and marine science organizations, uses its distinct voice and the best available science to educate policymakers, the fishing industry, and the public about the need for sound marine conservation and best marine management practices.