



## FORAGE FISH: MENHADEN

### BACKGROUND

Menhaden has been called the most important fish in North America because they were:

- historically superabundant in coastal waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico;
- important food for many species of marine fish, birds and mammals;
- plankton feeders vacuuming up vast quantities of algae and filtering coastal waters; and
- one of the largest industrial fisheries in North America through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Menhaden are from the herring family, *Clupeidae*, and include the Atlantic menhaden and the Gulf of Mexico menhaden. Menhaden are often called by other names including alewife, bunker, poggy, bugmouth and fat-back. Menhaden is considered unfit for human consumption due to its small size and high oil content.

Atlantic menhaden are found in estuarine and coastal waters from northern Florida to Nova Scotia and were the dominant prey species in places such as Chesapeake Bay and North Carolina. The Gulf menhaden are found in estuarine and coastal waters from the Yucatan Peninsula to Tampa Bay, Florida. Industrial commercial fishing greatly reduced the Atlantic menhaden and the even larger Gulf menhaden population faces an uncertain future. Historically, menhaden were the dominant prey species in places such as Chesapeake Bay and North Carolina.

### MENHADEN FISHERIES

- Today the combined Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean menhaden reduction fishery (one that grinds up menhaden for other uses, usually not for human consumption) remains the second largest fishery by weight in the United States. Currently about 50 percent of menhaden is used in fishmeal production for aquaculture feed.
- The modern purse seine reduction fishery is the largest fishery on the East Coast and grinds up more than a billion pounds of menhaden a year into fish meal and oil for use as an ingredient in food for farmed fish, livestock, and pets, fertilizer, and a variety of other products.
- A much smaller fishery supplies commercial fishermen with bait for blue crab, lobster, crayfish, and eel fisheries. Menhaden are used by recreational fishermen as chum and as cut or live bait for sport fish such as striped bass, bluefish, king mackerel, sharks, and tunas.

The 2004 Atlantic Menhaden Workshop Report and Proceedings of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) underscored the ecological importance of menhaden in U.S. coastal waters of the eastern seaboard. However, as the numbers of menhaden are reduced, so is their ecological role.

### ATLANTIC MENHADEN MANAGEMENT

The Atlantic menhaden fishery is managed by an interstate agreement through ASMFC. According to the most recent stock assessments, the menhaden stock is not considered overfished on a coastwide basis. However, the reduction fishery has reduced the menhaden's natural range into core areas, which is troubling. In 2006,

fishery managers agreed to cap the level of catch in the Chesapeake Bay as a precautionary way of reducing the likelihood of depleting the localized population.

#### GULF OF MEXICO MENHADEN MANAGEMENT

The Gulf of Mexico menhaden fishery is managed by an interstate agreement through the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC). Like the Atlantic menhaden, the most recent stock status evaluation does show overfishing on a coastwide basis, but the stock has also diminished the range of the species and most fish (92 percent) caught come from the Louisiana region. The loss of stock around the entire coastal region could make the Louisiana stock vulnerable to overfishing or even extermination.

#### CURRENT MENHADEN POLICY ISSUES

Representative Wayne Gilchrest (R-MD) introduced a bill (H.R. 3841) in Congress this fall that would prohibit commercial harvesting of Atlantic menhaden for reduction purposes in the coastal waters and the U.S. exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The bill would essentially shut down the largest reduction fishery company, Omega Protein. Mr. Gilchrest has introduced the bill to ensure the Atlantic menhaden population is stable for commercial and recreational fishermen on the eastern coast and the Chesapeake Bay.

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) is currently developing proposed regulations and guidelines for National Standard One, the rule controlling overfishing in U.S. waters. When writing these regulations, the Network is advocating for changes to federal regulations in how catch limits are set for forage fish are set that take into account the needs of the entire ecosystem.

Councils: Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (Atlantic Herring) and Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (Gulf of Mexico Herring)

Links to Resources: [http://foragefish.org/atlantic\\_menhaden.html](http://foragefish.org/atlantic_menhaden.html) for fishery area management map and historical catch data.

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*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.*