



Introduction

On the middle and outer continental shelf of the southeastern United States, areas of moderate- to high-relief live bottom (sponge-coral) reefs and rocky outcrops in depths from 120-200 ft provide habitat for schools of vermilion snapper (“beeliners”) that support important commercial and recreational fisheries. Small juveniles can be found on inner-shelf live bottom (60-100 ft), but most fishing takes place on middle-shelf “snapper banks” (120 ft) and shelf-edge “rocky reefs” (180 ft). Managed by federal fishery management agencies as part of the “Snapper-Grouper Complex”, vermilion snapper are subject to heavy fishing pressure and considered to be experiencing overfishing.

Commercial Fishery Harvest

Vermilion snapper support a regional offshore fishery with landings recorded in South Carolina since the late 1970s (Figure 1). These landings in South Carolina have been cyclical, with periods of high and low catches; the highest landings to date were reported in 2001. Prices have been good, with fishermen being paid about \$2.50 per pound in the two most recent years. Landings in South Carolina in 2004 and 2006 showed a reverse of the decline (2002-2003) since the peak in 2001, and landings in South Carolina were about twice the 43-year average.

Recreational Fishery Harvest

Vermilion snapper are a favorite target of head boats (party boats that charge by the head for a full or half day fishing) and other recreational fishing boats on natural reefs, particularly shelf-edge rocky reefs. Although recreational catches of vermilion snapper had a general downward trend since 1982, catches have increased slightly since the most recent period of low catches in 2002 (Figure 2). Recreational catches landed in South Carolina in 2006 were slightly less than the 14-year average.

Fishery Independent Sampling

In spite of recent catches being above average, the number of vermilion snapper in MARMAP (Marine Resources Monitoring, Assessment and Prediction) fish trap catches have shown a decreasing trend, and have been below the 17-year average since 1997 (Figure 3). Catches in 2007 and other recent years were well below the maximum reported in 1988.

Overall Condition of the Stock and Status of Management

Vermilion snapper is classified by federal fishery managers as not overfished, but undergoing overfishing. This means that the amount of fishing occurring is too high (undergoing overfishing), but that the biomass of the stock is not too low (not overfished). If overfishing is allowed to continue, the

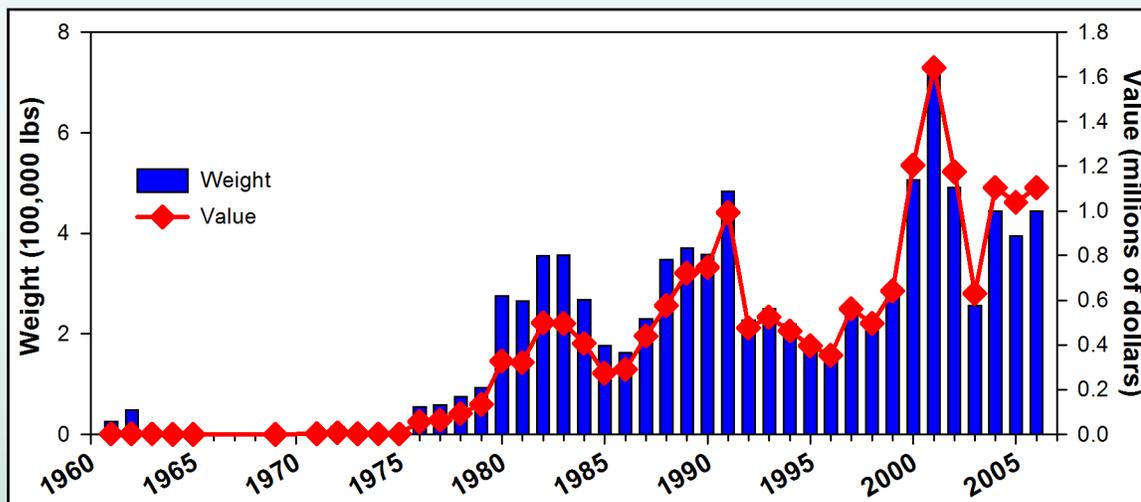


Figure 1. South Carolina commercial vermilion snapper landings in pounds and dollars.

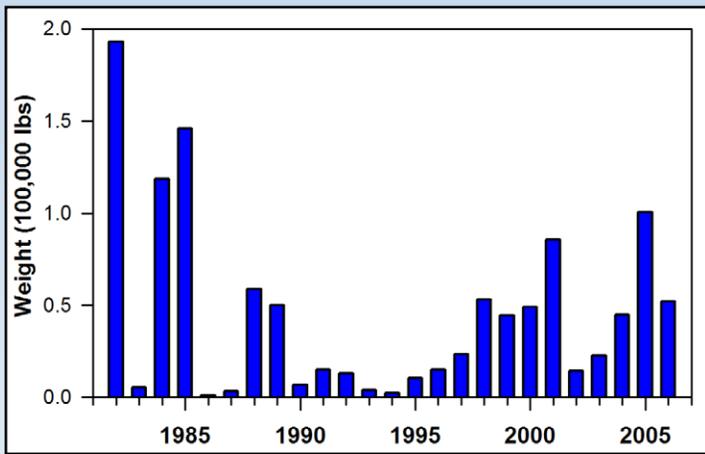


Figure 2. South Carolina recreational vermillion snapper landings in pounds.

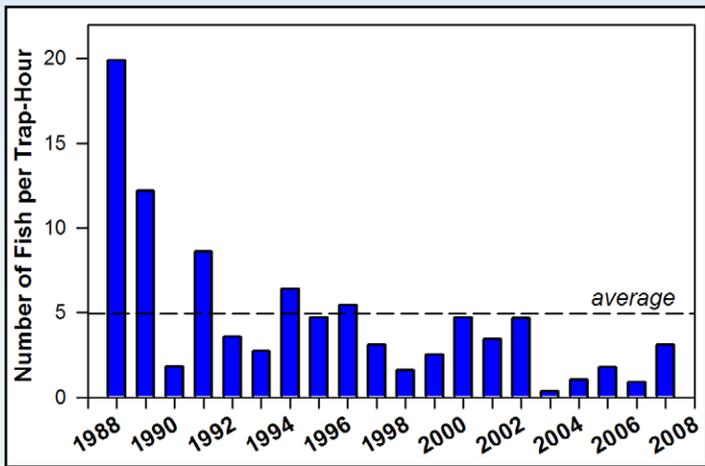
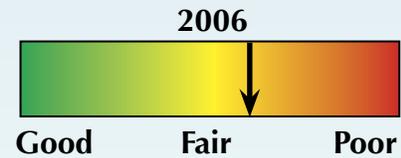


Figure 3. Number of vermillion snapper caught per trap per hour in MARMAP fish trap surveys.

stock will become overfished. Therefore, additional regulations on the fishery have been proposed.

To end overfishing, the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC) set the current commercial vermillion snapper quota at 1,100,000 lbs gutted weight (1,221,000 lbs whole weight) and increased the minimum size in the recreational fishery from 11 to 12 inches. However, in response to the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Reauthorization Act, the SAFMC is considering several management measures for vermillion snapper including seasonal closures, two commercial quotas occurring at two different times of the year, and adjustments to the size and bag limits with an allowable biological catch of 566,179 lbs for 2008 (385,003 commercial and 181,177 recreational). After the commercial quota is met, all purchase and sale will be prohibited for the rest of the year, and harvest and/or possession would be limited to the recreational bag limit.



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Contributing authors:
Dr. Pat Harris
harris@dnr.sc.gov