Stocking

Do an internet search with the keywords “red drum stocking” and the majority of the results will undoubtedly highlight the efforts of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

The state resource agency has always been a leader in the production of fish, starting in 1961, with the first documented production of striped bass in the country at a hatchery in Moncks Corner. In 1983, with the construction of the Waddell Mariculture Center in Blufton, SC, the Marine Resources Division of SCDNR gained national and international recognition with the development of techniques to produce hatchery-reared marine fish for use as a management tool. Since this time, the Division has successfully reared red drum, flounder, black sea bass, cobia, and spotted seatrout.

The successful stocking of marine species in the coastal waters of South Carolina has been beneficial to both recreational anglers and biologists. Most anglers view stocking as a way to increase the population of a particular species, thus providing more fish to catch, but what stocking has actually achieved is much more than that.

All good things come to an end, and in the same sense, great fishing never seems to last. Fluctuations in species abundance in any given area, as experienced by anglers over a period of time can be like a roller coaster ride. The “hills” are the good seasons, and the “troughs” are the bad. Consider red drum fishing over the last twenty-five years. Is it better now than it was back then? SCDNR’s Marine Division began stocking red drum in 1988 at a time when the fishery was considered overfished. That same year, for the first time ever, a bag limit of 20 fish per person was implemented in addition to the 14-inch minimum size limit that was put in place the year before. The intent of stocking red drum was not to increase the size of the population. After all, the Division’s marine stocking program was still in its infancy and was not developed to be a production level operation. Instead, stocking was used as a tool to enhance the understanding of the wild population and answer specific scientific questions allowing better management of our wild fisheries.

Advances in scientific technology, specifically the ability to identify hatchery raised fish through genetic testing, make stocking more than a simple tool to increase red drum populations. It allows scientists to track a fish from birth to adulthood, as well as identify habitat usage and quantify recruitment dynamics. This information can then be applied to wild populations.

The stocking of red drum and subsequent monitoring of the population allowed DNR to refine early regulatory measures and effectively manage the fishery. During the past twenty-five years, from the perspective of many red drum anglers, there were still good and bad seasons, but overall the fishing has improved.

A combination of factors has contributed to the rebounding of South Carolina’s red drum fishery, and stocking has certainly had a positive impact on the overall coastal population. How much of an impact is a question that scientists are currently attempting to answer through research which focuses on the adult population. As a result, the future of red drum will be something anglers can look forward to.