

COBIA MANAGEMENT DILEMMA

By David Harter for “Coastal Angler” magazine. May issue.

Port Royal Sound and the Broad River are arguably the largest and southernmost spawning grounds for cobia on the Atlantic Coast. While the cobia are inshore, on what could be compared to a salmon run during May and June, hundreds of fishermen are targeting them for 10 miles from the Broad River Bridge to the mouth of the Sound. While many will go fishless trying to outsmart this strange and nosy predator, some boats will catch their limit of 2 per person per boat per day which counting the captain and mate might be 12 fish. If the captain decides to “double dip” with another charter that day, he might remove 20-24 cobias that day. This is illegal as well as his selling more than his possession limit, which is two, but every year the stories run rampant about the increasing slaughter and both charter captains and recreational fishermen ask “why doesn’t the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources do more to protect this economically significant species?” I assure you that this is one of their great concerns but there are several obstacles:

- Cobia are managed by the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council and done so on a regional basis. Because the cobias were thought to be consistently migratory they were treated as one stock. DNA and conventional and satellite tagging study results are casting doubts on that theory and suggest that once our cobias reach maturity they are an indigenous stock and have little in common with either Florida or North Carolina stocks.
- If SCDNR is successful in convincing the SAFMC to give up some jurisdiction then someone would have to sponsor a bill in our state legislature to set any limits. SCDNR does not have authority in our state to make regulations.
- Both SCDNR and SAFMC will require more scientific data to back up any changes. As 85 % of the cobias caught in South Carolina are from Beaufort County waters, it’s difficult to get help from the rest of the state to fund the necessary research.

That’s not to say that little is being done. In fact, over the last ten years we have probably accumulated more significant data on cobia than any other state and have had some of the most sophisticated research projects carried out by SCDNR and the Hilton Head Reef Foundation. The funding for this research has been cobbled together with grants from Sea Grant and NOAA and has been bolstered by the internationally significant cobia farming techniques developed at the Waddell Mariculture Center in Bluffton. The most intense focus will now be on DNA sampling and its newest field of “telomere” measurement. A telomere grows on the end of a chromosome each time it divides. By measuring its length the scientists can tell the age of a tissue. The significance of that is now we will be able to get information about the age, sex, approximate size, family, and migrations of a fish without killing it. We will be able to tell if a fish is naturally spawned or hatched at the Waddell Center. We will now be able to add a huge amount of information about undersized and released fish just by taking a tiny fin clipping.

Look for more publicity on this effort by SCDNR which not only allows all fishermen to participate in the DNA collection but will provide the data necessary to develop protection strategies and convince the SAFMC that we should be in charge of our Beaufort County cobia fishery.