

We Need Catch and Release of Inshore Cobia

Up until 2001, when South Carolina Department of Natural Resources marine biologist Don Hammond issued the first South Carolina cobia technical report, not much attention had been paid to Beaufort County's burgeoning fishery. Except for some work done by the Mote Marine Lab in Florida, little was known nationally to aid the fisheries managers to protect this mysterious fish. Since that time SCDNR has launched an aggressive program of playing catch up, using state of the art genetic testing using DNA samples collected by biologists and fishermen, tagging and carcass collections. They also harvested and spawned cobia brood stock at the Waddell Mariculture Center to better understand our capabilities for rapid stock enhancement in case we needed to support the wild fishery. As a result, our SCDNR marine biologists have become some of the leading experts in the country about the families, travels, habits and the mariculture of this fast growing fish. Periodically they would release some research groups of small cobia into the wild to check their survivability, reproductivity and homing instincts.

After several years of releasing fish and waiting for them to become of legal size, the latest DNA sample results are showing an alarming picture. **Up to 50% and more of the cobia being caught in Port Royal Sound and the Broad River are Waddell raised fish.** Because our overall catch has not increased and as some would say may have decreased, our wild stock has fallen as a percentage of the total population. If we keep along this path of stock enhancement, we will just be creating a giant fish farm with uncharted genetic diversity problems and the crowding out of wild fish. Stock enhancement should be a tool not a policy.

Our marine biologists have suggested that what we need is a pause in the taking of all inshore cobia for a couple years to see what the trend is and is it reversible. This would not affect the artificial reef cobia as they are mostly of a different family and contains fewer fish with Waddell DNA.

Even though this would be a voluntary pause there are some who will say that it is their right as a license holder to take any fish that is legal. What they don't know is that this cobia research and stocking program was paid for with outside grants and a lot of volunteer time, not license fees. This program was a gift from SCDNR to the Beaufort County fishing community.

Because the cobia fishery is federally regulated, SCDNR's hands are tied to force any catch limits or closures. There is a clear likelihood that the inshore cobia fishery will show more signs of decline as we have more Waddell fish come of legal size and reproduce. For right now we are on our own to preserve or break this cobia fishery.

David Harter, Pres.
Hilton Head Island Sportfishing Club
PO Box 5542
HHI SC 29938
843 785-4106