

The Marine Recreational Information Program: USE AND ABUSE

by CHARLES WITEK



If fisheries managers want to have any hope of properly regulating recreational landings, they have to know just how many fish anglers actually kill. That’s a hard thing to do.

Estimating commercial landings is relatively easy. The universe of commercial fishermen is fairly small, they are generally required to have licenses and, in most fisheries, have to fill out vessel trip reports, often before their boat returns to shore. Shoreside fish buyers and packing houses generally have to fill out and file their own reports of the fish that pass through their hands, and who they purchase them from, which provides a sort of ground-truthing for the commercial fishermen’s filings.

Yes, some fish fall through the cracks. There are illegal landings, and a few fish sold directly from the boat to end users, which don’t make it into the reported landings, but those instances probably make up a very small proportion of the commercial landings. Sometimes fishermen and fish dock conspire to hide or misreport landings, as was the case with Carlos Rafael in New Bedford, and with some folks right here on Long Island, who were engaged in the summer flounder fishery. Those instances can substantially distort the commercial landings picture, but they don’t occur often.

Generally, the commercial landings estimates are pretty good.



Getting accurate recreational fishing data is a lot harder

There are far more anglers than there are commercial fishermen. They fish from for-hire boats, and from private boats that might be docked at one of the many marinas scattered all along the coast, or tied up in an obscure creek or canal that abuts someone’s back yard. They fish from boats that might be cartopped or trailered, and not kept in the water at all. They fish from rental boats, kayaks and paddleboards, and from every bit of accessible land that touches saltwater. And with very few exceptions, they’re not required to report what they catch; they can just take it home, with no one the wiser.

For many years, the National Marine Fisheries Service has tried to figure out the best way to estimate recreational landings. The earliest surveys, conducted prior to 1981, were slapdash and very badly constructed affairs, which didn’t produce meaningful data.

In 1981, NMFS rolled out the Marine Recreational Fishery Statistics Survey, which was light years ahead of what existed before, but was still badly flawed. A National Academy of Sciences report, *Review of Recreational Fisheries Survey Methods*, released in 2006, found many problems with that MRFSS program, and said, in part, that

“The MRFSS (as well as many of its component or companion surveys conducted either indirectly or

independently) should be completely redesigned to improve its effectiveness and appropriateness of sampling and estimation procedures, its applicability to various kinds of management decisions, and its usefulness for social and economic analyses. After the revision is complete, provision should be made for ongoing technical evaluation and modification, as needed, to meet emerging management needs...”

In response to that advice, NMFS has replaced MRFSS with the **Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP)**, which was intended to address and avoid all of the problems inherent in MRFSS.

On the whole, the new MRIP represented a marked improvement over the old program. In early 2017, the National Academy of Sciences released its Review of the Marine Recreational Information Program. That report didn’t say that MRIP was perfect—there is always room for improvement—but it did say that

“Work to redesign the National Marine Fisheries Service’s recreational fishery survey program (now referred to as the Marine Recreational Information Program) has yielded impressive progress over the past decade in providing more reliable data to fisheries managers. Major improvements to the statistical soundness to the survey designs were achieved by reducing sources of bias and increasing

sampling efficiency as well as through increased coordination with partners and engagement of expert consultants.”

Overall, it was a solid endorsement.

Yet, despite the National Academy of Sciences’ general improvement of the MRIP survey, it is still often disdained by anglers and the angling industry, which often addresses it in a very negative and dismissive manner.

For example, the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council’s Summer Flounder, Scup, and Black Sea Bass Fishery Performance Report, from the August 2019 Advisors’ meeting, notes that, “Multiple advisors said they had no faith in the data from the Marine Recreational Information Program (MRIP), which they see as inaccurate and fundamentally flawed,” and lists a number of complaints that the advisors had about the program.

While some of those complaints undoubtedly arose out of an MRIP survey that returns data, and leads to management measures, that some advisors just plain don’t like, regardless of the data’s validity, and some other of the complaints seem to have arisen out of some advisors’ misunderstanding of how the MRIP program operates, there is no question that MRIP-based management measures often fail to constrain recreational landings to prescribed levels, and thus are deserving of criticism. **(to page 36)**