

SAFMC Citizen Science Program



2025 Annual Report

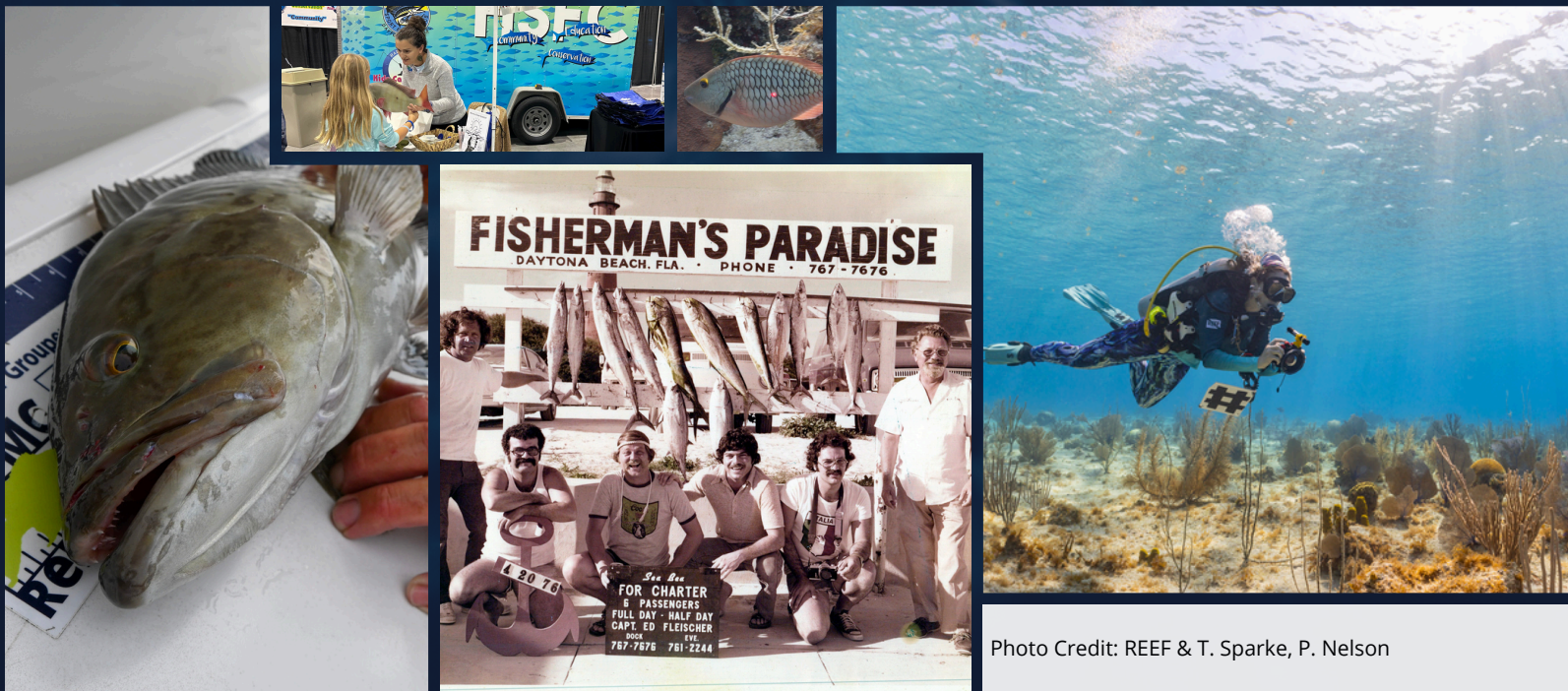


Photo Credit: REEF & T. Sparke, P. Nelson

A Successful Year

The South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (Council) Citizen Science Program has had a busy year, with 2025 featuring exciting progress and data milestones. Our 2025 Annual Report details key activities and achievements from the year, none of which would be possible without the support of our partners, collaborators, and volunteers. We look forward to seeing what we can accomplish together in 2026!

Tracking Progress: Citizen Science Program Indicators

In 2025, the Citizen Science Program developed indicators aligned with its four goals to track progress, identify opportunities for improvement, and measure impact. Developed with input from the Citizen Science Advisory Panels and Council members, these indicators will be monitored annually to guide ongoing evaluation and growth.

Indicators track the diversity of perspectives advising the Program, the scope and funding of projects, the extent to which data inform research and management, and the breadth of collaboration and outreach. Together, these indicators help provide a picture of the Program's growth, relevance, and impact across science, management, and community engagement.



By the Numbers 2019-2025


33

Partners

Have collaborated with the Program representing state, regional, and federal agencies, industry, academics, NGOs, and more.

83 **Community Members**

Have advised the Program serving on work groups and Advisory Panels representing state and federal agencies, industry, academics, and NGOs.

4922 **Volunteers**

Have contributed to projects in multiple ways including project development, data collection, data classification, and data validation.


6 **Projects**

Have been done with the Program addressing 3 different research priorities and filling data gaps across 3 fishery management plans. 3 projects have been complete, 3 are on-going.


11 **External Grants**

Have been received to help support Program and project activities.


155 **Outreach Activities**

Have been conducted by the Program and collaborators including workshops, seminars, tabling events, scientific conferences, and more.

Program Reaches Key Milestone in 2025



We're thrilled to share that length data from the SAFMC Release and FISHstory projects were recommended for use in the SEDAR 90 (South Atlantic Red Snapper) stock assessment during the Data Workshop. As part of the assessment process, data sources are discussed during the Data Workshop, and recommendations made about which data to use in the analysis phase of the project. You can check out the working papers presented at the Data Workshop for SAFMC Release and FISHstory by visiting the following links: [SEDAR 90 SAFMC Release working paper](#) and [SEDAR 90 FISHstory working paper](#).

Additionally, Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF) staff presented SMILE length data during the SEDAR 94 (Florida Hogfish) assessment. As SMILE was still in its pilot phase, available data were limited; however, the workshop report included a research recommendation to continue SMILE length-frequency data for future stock assessments.

Our FISHstory and SAFMC Release projects work to help fill data gaps for numerous species, including Red Snapper. Photo credit: P. Nelson (top), N. Bowers (bottom).

Both the SEDAR 90 and SEDAR 94 assessments are still underway, so adjustments may be made along the way regarding how and if the data are used. Nevertheless, this is a HUGE milestone for the Citizen Science Program, and we have all our volunteers, partners, and collaborators to thank for it.



Engaging With Our Communities

Citizen Science staff engaged with members of the fishing community through diverse outreach in 2025. Staff provided information about the Citizen Science Program and projects at the Council's Best Fishing Practices Master Volunteer Program workshops as well as Lines of Communication: Conversations with the Council meetings. Staff also shared project information at industry events such as ICAST, the Florida Saltwater Fishing Expo, and Haddrell's Point Fishing Expo as well as through tackle shop outreach, seminars held in collaboration with fishing clubs and tackle shops, and social media.



Program staff connected with members of the fishing community through diverse outreach in 2025.

Setting the Course: 2025-2027 Citizen Science Research Priorities

The [Citizen Science Research Priorities](#) shape the projects our Citizen Science Program supports and develops. They help narrow the focus from the South Atlantic's wide range of data needs into tangible ideas that are important to our fishermen, scientists, and managers.

These priorities are updated every two years through a collaborative process incorporating input from Advisory Panels, Council members, and other members of the fisheries community who can share project ideas through the [Citizen Science Project Idea Portal](#). In developing the priorities, the Program identifies the overarching topic, the data needed, and the anticipated outcome.

The table summarizes the 2025-2027 Citizen Science Research Priorities, adopted by the Council at its December 2025 meeting. Additional details are available on the [Program webpage](#).

| SAFMC Citizen Science Research Priorities: 2025-2027 | |
|--|--|
| Topic | Data Needed |
| Age Sampling | Otolith & fin clip (future) collection |
| Discard Information | Species, length, depth, quantity, discard reason, devices used, terminal gear, disposition, observation of depredation |
| Genetic Sampling | Fin clips |
| Historical Fishing Photos | Digitized images |
| Fishery Oral Histories & Historic Logbooks | Fishermen interviews, digitized logbooks |
| Oceanographic & Environmental Conditions | Various environmental data including bottom temperature and weather |
| Shifting, Rare or Data Limited Species Observations | Point observations of data limited or rarely encountered species, length info for data limited species |
| Observations in Managed Areas | Species, length, depth, videos, photos, effort, edge effects |
| Movement & Migration | Species, location, length, tag details, supporting existing tagging programs |
| Shark & Mammal Depredation | Observations of depredation, location, species, photo, DNA swab |
| Habitat Characterization | Photos, videos - focus on essential fish habitat live bottom |
| Spiny Lobster Data | Catch, effort, length, sex, presence of eggs, presence/absence, movement |

The Program's updated research priorities for 2025-2027.

A Strong Year for SAFMC Release: Learning from On-the-Water Knowledge



Releasing a project species.

SAFMC Release collaborates with fishermen from all sectors who share information about their released [shallow water grouper](#) and [Red Snapper](#) through the free mobile app SciFish to help fill critical data gaps on the size of released fish and their chances of survival. See some of the insights from the data submitted in the project's [2025 Annual Data Summary](#).

New outreach and instructional videos have been developed for the project, including an [entry walkthrough video](#) as well as a [call-to-action video](#) featuring three SAFMC Release participants. The project was also featured in a Sea Grant [best fishing practices video](#) filmed with Z-Man.

Staff continue to connect with project participants through one-on-one communication, monthly newsletters, and the project's Participant

Recognition Program (PRP), which thanks and recognizes participants for their contributions to the project. With support from Sea Grant, recognition opportunities continued to expand in 2025, and exciting changes are coming to the PRP in 2026 thanks to an ACCSP grant.

Staff also partnered with Sea Grant on the inaugural Sea Grant South Atlantic Release rodeo – a new Sea Grant challenge that encouraged SAFMC Release submissions with photos. The challenge was a success and will be held again in 2026.

SAFMC Release had a strong year and we're excited to see how the project grows in 2026.



Entering data in the SciFish app.

FISHstory Keeps Growing: Turning History into Meaningful Data

With support from ACCSP, FISHstory continues to gain momentum and make meaningful progress. We're continuing to collaborate with NC State University, NOAA Fisheries, fishermen, and partner organizations across the region to uncover valuable insights using historic fishing photographs.

In 2025, the photo archive expanded through a scanning event at Down the Hatch restaurant, digitized contributions from the Florida Keys History Center / Monroe County Library, and historic family photo albums shared by Captain Paul Nelson.



The FISHstory archive continued to grow in 2025. Photo credit: J. Forman (left), FL Keys History Center/Monroe County Library (right).

As of May 2025, all analyzable photos currently in the archive (~1,950) have been classified by Zooniverse volunteers. Since the July 2024 relaunch, nearly 2,400 volunteers have contributed more than 75,000 classifications, generating a robust dataset of species identifications and counts.

The FISHstory Validation Team was also reactivated in 2025. Comprised of fishermen, active and retired agency staff, academics, and NGO partners, this team verifies a subset of volunteer classifications, strengthening data quality.

Meanwhile, the NC State University analytical team continued development of models to interpret Zooniverse data and produce indices of species abundance. Validation Team classifications are essential to this effort, helping to calibrate the volunteer-generated data.

Additionally, all King Mackerel and Red Snapper in the current archive have been measured, with length composition estimates now complete.

Want to get involved or stay up to date with the FISHstory project? Visit the [FISHstory webpage](#).



Some of the historic photos providing insights into our fisheries. Photo credit: P. Nelson (top & bottom right), J. Forman (bottom left).

SMILE Completes Successful Pilot & Continues to Grow



SMILE collaborates with recreational divers to collect fish length data. Photo credit: REEF, T. Sparke.

The SMILE (Size Matters: Innovative Length Estimates) project made incredible progress in 2025! Led by the Reef Environmental Education Foundation (REEF), SMILE engages volunteer divers to collect valuable fish length data using low-cost, laser-mounted underwater cameras. These cameras capture images that can be analyzed through an artificial intelligence (AI) supported workflow to extract species identification and length measurements, helping support key research and management needs.

In 2025, the SMILE 3-year pilot project concluded, and an additional year of funding was secured through the Coral Reef Conservation Fund. During the pilot, citizen scientist divers collected tens of thousands of images across hundreds of dives,

and volunteers contributed 100,000+ AI annotations, directly training machine-learning models for image analysis. Length estimates from the SMILE camera were highly comparable to professional stereovideo systems and measurements from roving diver surveys were similar to structured band transects demonstrating consistency across survey designs.

SMILE is truly a collaborative project. The project team includes REEF, the SAFMC's Citizen Science Program, the Southeast Coastal Ocean Observing Regional Association (SECOORA), Axiom Data Science, the Semmens Lab at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego Engineers for Exploration, UCSD Kastner Research Lab, and funding through NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program. Check out the [SMILE webpage](#) to learn more about this project.



The SMILE camera in action, capturing photos for analysis. Photo credit: REEF, T. Sparke.

Advisory Panels Guide and Strengthen the Program



The Citizen Science Program is supported by two dedicated Advisory Panels (APs): the Citizen Science Operations AP and the Citizen Science Projects AP. In December 2025, the Citizen Science Operations AP was excited to welcome a new member to the team, Julie Simpson from the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program.



We are grateful for the ongoing contributions of our Citizen Science Advisory Panels, whose insight and guidance continue to shape and strengthen the Program. Their expertise has been instrumental in building the Program as it exists today, and we look forward to continued collaboration and shared learning in the months and years ahead.

Thank You!

The Citizen Science Program is built on the dedication and support of our partners, volunteers, and collaborators. We're grateful to everyone who has helped shape the Program and its projects, and to those who continue to support its growth and success. Interested in joining a project or learning more about the Citizen Science Program? Staff are always happy to connect and share ways to get involved.

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Citizen Science

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