SAFMC Citizen Science Program Evaluation – Interview Question Summary Findings
April 28, 2022
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Key/summary findings from interviews with 18 members of the South Atlantic fishing community to establish baseline levels of knowledge about, confidence in, and trust in the citizen science process of collecting data to inform fisheries resource management. Interviewed were six fisheries scientists, six fisheries resource managers, and six commercial/recreational fishermen.

A draft report will be available by May 6, 2022

Please tell me how you fit into the fisheries community. What role or roles do you play, and how long have you been involved?

Most of this information turned out to be available online, even for the fishermen. Thus I knew a lot about the interviewees before talking with them. All of them had been involved with fisheries for many years, often decades, and most got started when young.

What involvement have you had in fisheries management, including with the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council (SAFMC)?

Most of them had interacted with the council significantly, serving on the council or on one of its committees or working groups.

Are you familiar with the stock assessment process (e.g., SEDAR) used to assess the health of the fish populations managed by the SAFMC?

All of them were familiar, in most cases extremely familiar.

Are you familiar with the process the SAFMC uses to recommend management decisions?

All of them were familiar, in most cases extremely familiar.

How do you feel about the current health of fisheries in the South Atlantic?

This was a difficult question to answer, in part because there is so much variability among species and locations. Some generalizations and patterns emerged, however.

Scientists tended to feel that a few species were doing well but that most are doing very poorly. Managers were much more optimistic, sometimes stating that many species were doing well, especially species that are most actively managed. Fishermen tended to be very pessimistic, often stating that there aren't many fish anymore and that it's almost not worth fishing.

Do you think that the data currently available are sufficient to support fisheries management decisions?

Here again there was a lot of variability. Four of the scientists felt that sufficient data are available; another said that more data would be helpful, but that a lack of data was not the biggest issue with fisheries management. Managers felt the opposite: all six felt that more data are needed, in most cases, much more data. Fishermen were mixed: four felt emphatically that there aren't enough data, one said that there are, and one wasn't sure.

Have you ever engaged with citizen science?

All respondents were familiar with citizen science, and some had engaged with it in some way. Considering scientists, one scientist had worked with REEF data and another had worked with fishermen to monitor red tide, while the other four had not engaged with citizen science projects or their data. Managers were more involved; two had participated in tagging programs, one was involved with FISHstory, and one said they were involved in an unspecified way. The fishermen were suprisingingly uninvolved; only two of them had directly participated.

Are you familiar with the SAFMC Citizen Science Program?

All respondents knew that the program exists, but most did not know much about it. Three scientists were pretty familiar with it; two of them had advised on projects. Only one manager professed to have much knowledge about it. In contrast, four of the fishermen knew quite a lot about it, with three having participated in some way either as a tester or advisor.

Are you familiar with the list of research priorities that SAFMC believe could be addressed by citizen science data?

None of the participants seemed to be aware of the list.

Do you think that fishermen will be able to collect data of sufficient quantity and quality to address these priorities?

All six of the scientists were generally supportive of citizen science, some very much so. Four of them discussed the critical nature of sound project design to ensure its utility. One of them felt that managers would need to have realistic expectations for the data. Only one worried about data misreprentation. Managers felt about the same way as scientists, with all six being generally supportive as long as expectations were realistic and projects are well designed. Fishermen were perhaps surprisingly less optimistic than either scientists or managers. Two seemed to say that data could not be trusted, one felt that it's too hard to collect data while fishing, and one wasn't sure that the data would be used.