



**RETURN 'EM
RIGHT**

RETURN 'EM RIGHT

South Atlantic Council Meeting: June 2026
South Atlantic Fishery Management Council

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Outline

- Programmatic overview
- Outreach & education update
- Gear use survey results
- Monitoring & evaluation
- Expansion
- Questions



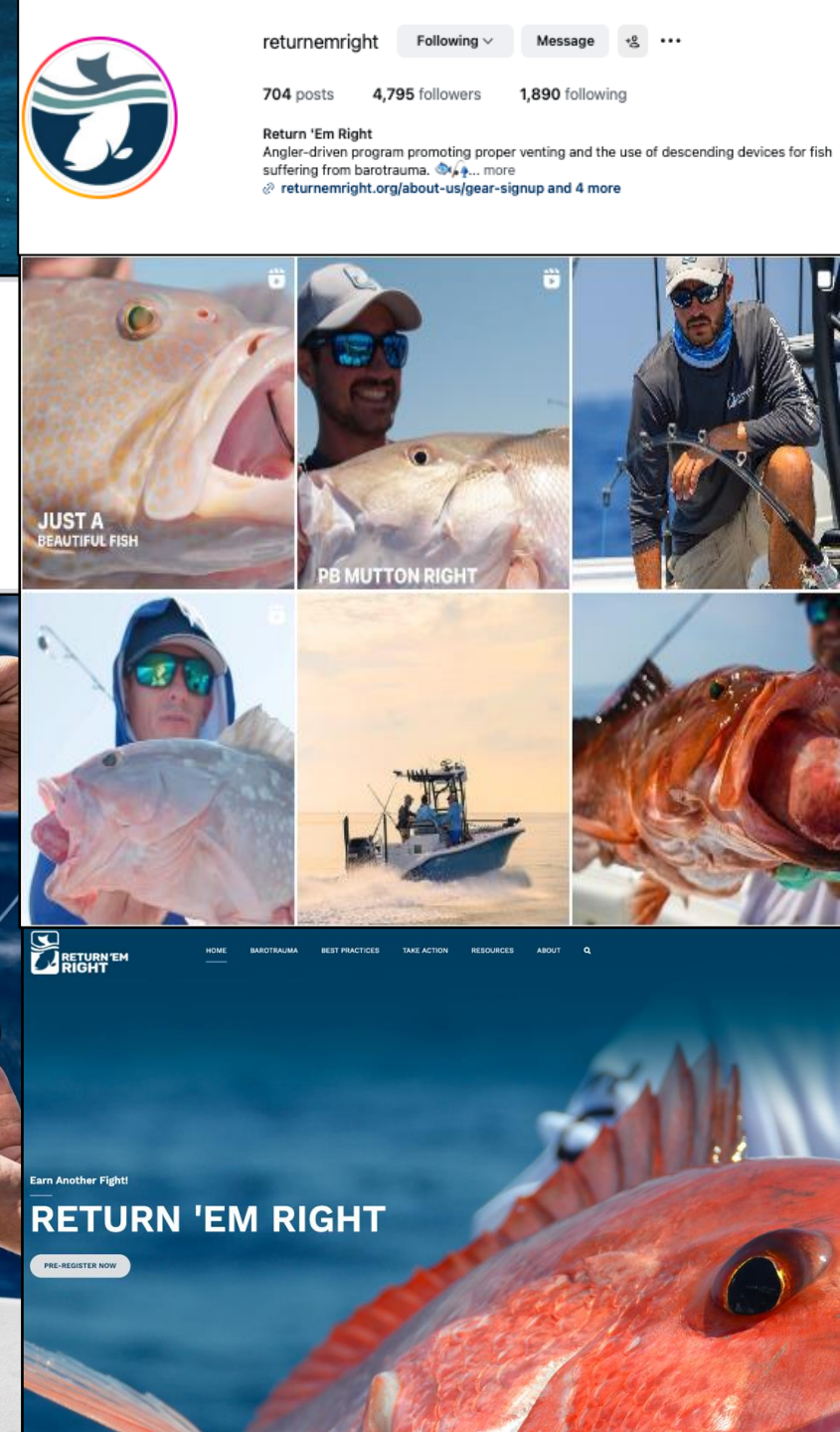
Return 'Em Right

- Duration: 7 years + expansion
- Funding: *Deepwater Horizon* Oil Spill
- Partners: GSMFC, Florida Sea Grant, NOAA RC
- Component
 - Education & outreach
 - Fish descending device (FDD) distribution
 - Research & monitoring
- Goals
 - Reduce mortality in reef fish resulting from barotrauma and release
 - Improve angler experiences with release gear
 - Improve the overall health of reef fisheries



Foundation

- Branding
 - Independent of partners
 - Guided by anglers, grounded in science
- Digital media
 - Web: returnemright.org
 - Social: @ReturnEmRight
- Education module
 - Easily accessible to anglers
 - Short and concise
- Procure release gear
- Program launch – May 3, 2022



Education Module

- Software: Articulate Rise

- 1) Registration form

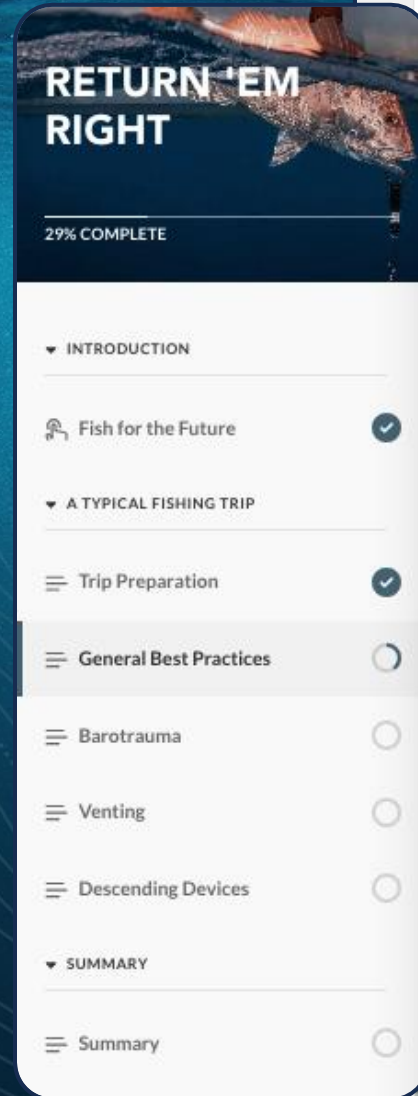
- 2) Eligibility questions

- 3) Content

- General best release practices
- Barotrauma
- Venting & descending

- 4) Gear distribution

- 100% off discount link
- Pay shipping & handling (as of May 13, 2026)

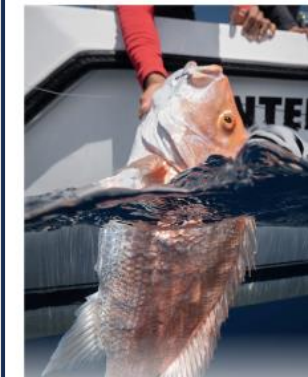


As a fish is retrieved from depth, the swim bladder will expand, often causing the stomach to be pushed out of the mouth of the fish.

Signs of Barotrauma

Recognizing when a fish is experiencing barotrauma is crucial to knowing if it needs additional help returning to depth. **Click on each information icon** below to learn about the signs of barotrauma.

Bubbling Scales



Make sure you **click each information icon** before proceeding!



Education Module



Training
54,329
Completions



Release Gear
Boxes
51,419
Distributed

Rate your experience (overall)

Scale: poor (0) to excellent (5)

Field	Mean	Min	Max	St. Dev	Responses
Rate	4.95	0.00	5.00	0.22	23070



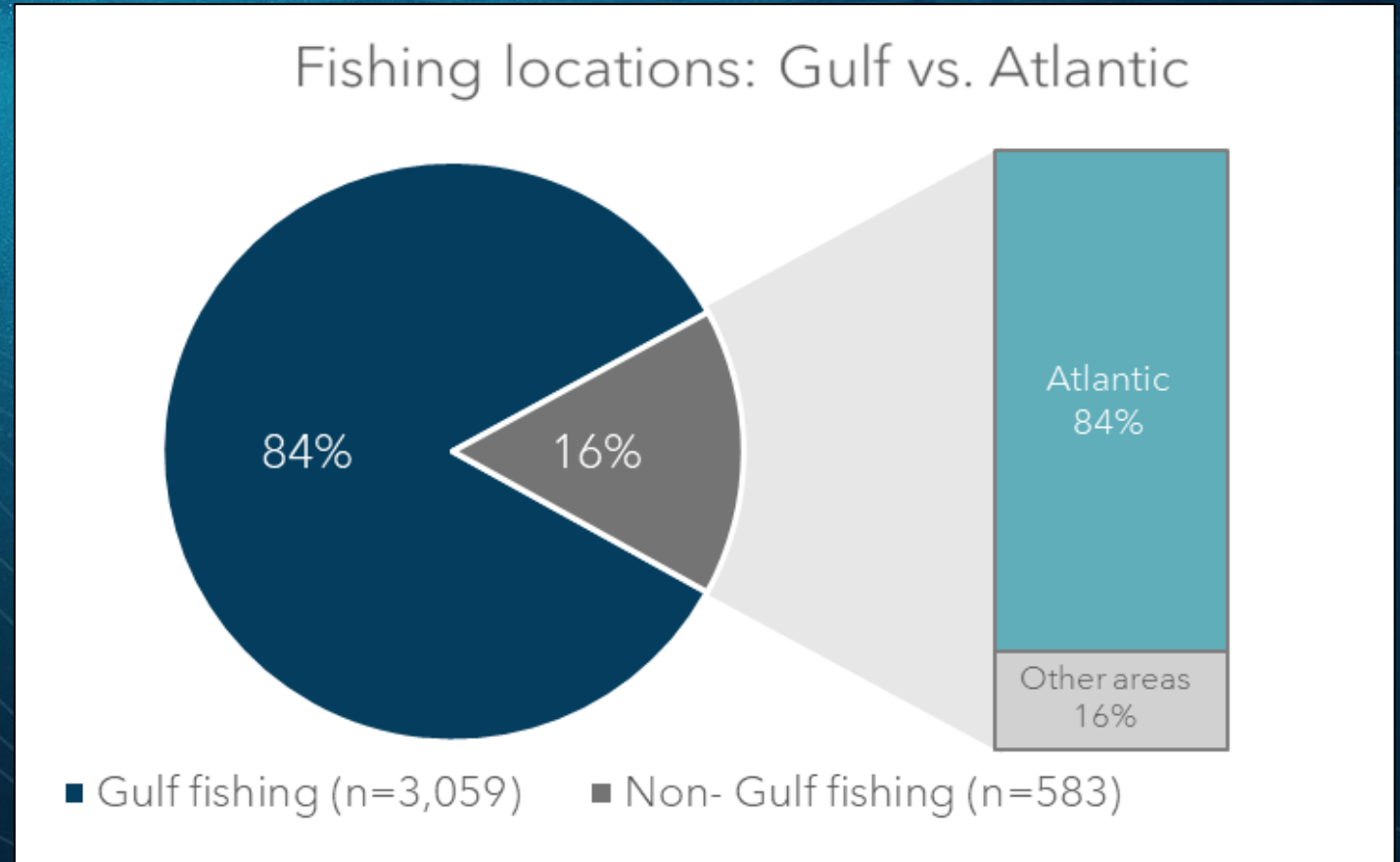
Source	Count
From another angler	13,097
YouTube	8,973
Other	7,701
Facebook	5,768
Magazine/Newspaper	4,646
Other Social	2,664
TV/ Radio	2,122
In-Person Presentation	1,181
Search Engine	1,529
Instagram	767

- 85% delivered to Gulf states
- 6.2% to NC, SC, or GA
- 45% of FL in Atlantic counties



Gear Use Survey

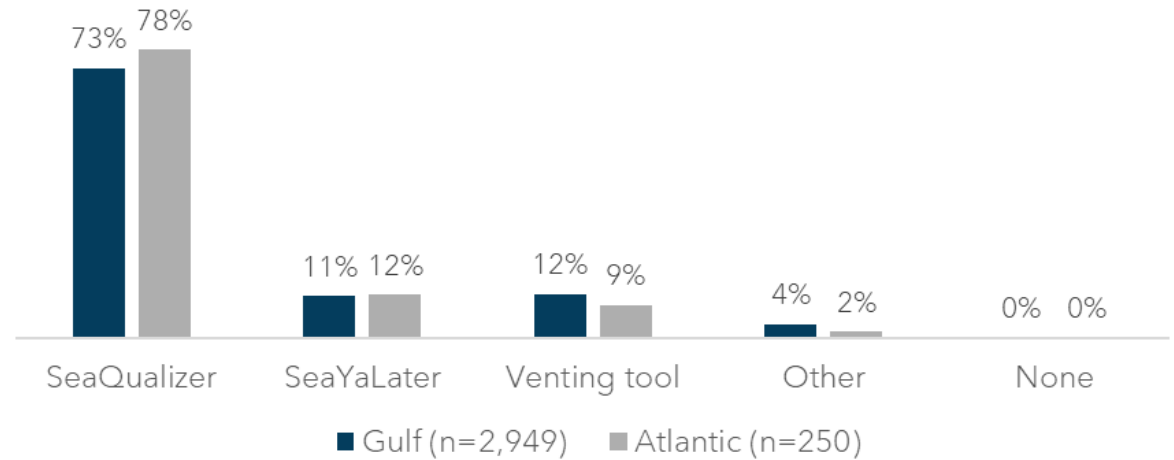
- Distributed to anglers who have had the gear for 6 months
- 84% of anglers report they fish in the Gulf, 16% (n=583) participants said they hadn't fished in the Gulf



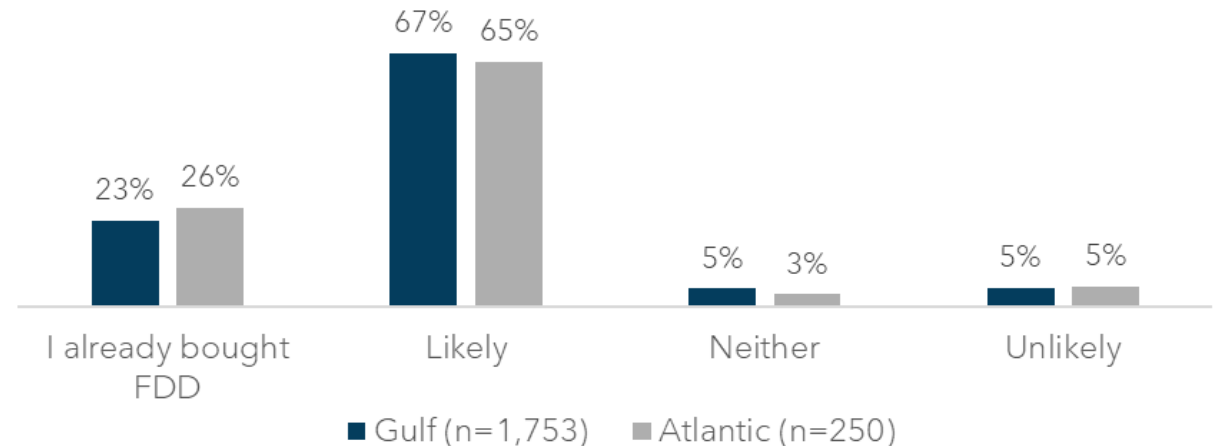
Gear Use Survey

- 93% **extremely** satisfied with package of gear
- 94% reported having no issues with the devices
- ~87% of anglers prefer descending devices
- ~66% were likely to buy descending devices on their own, while ~24% already had

Which release device/tool do you prefer?
2023–2025



How likely is it that you would buy a fish descending device if needed?
2023–2025





Monitoring through Data

GSMFC



- State reef fish validation surveys
- Gulf at-sea observer programs
- Collaborative studies
- Human dimensions surveys

NOAA



- Southeast Region Headboat Survey

FSG



- Education module follow-up surveys
- Gear use survey (6-months after receiving gear)



State Reef Fish Validation Surveys

- FWC, ADCNR, & MDMR
- Voluntary participation
- High-level information
- Private and for-hire recreational anglers
- Self-reported after fishing trip
- Data varies by state

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Reef Fish Validation Form

2 0 2 2						
1. Year	Month	Day	2. Sampler ID	3. County	4. Site	5. Time

		8. Mode ☐ Private ☐ Charter	9. If charter trip, ☐ Single trip length: ☐ Multi-Day	10. Trip ☐ Yes completed? ☐ No
6. Vessel Registration or CID #	7. # Anglers			

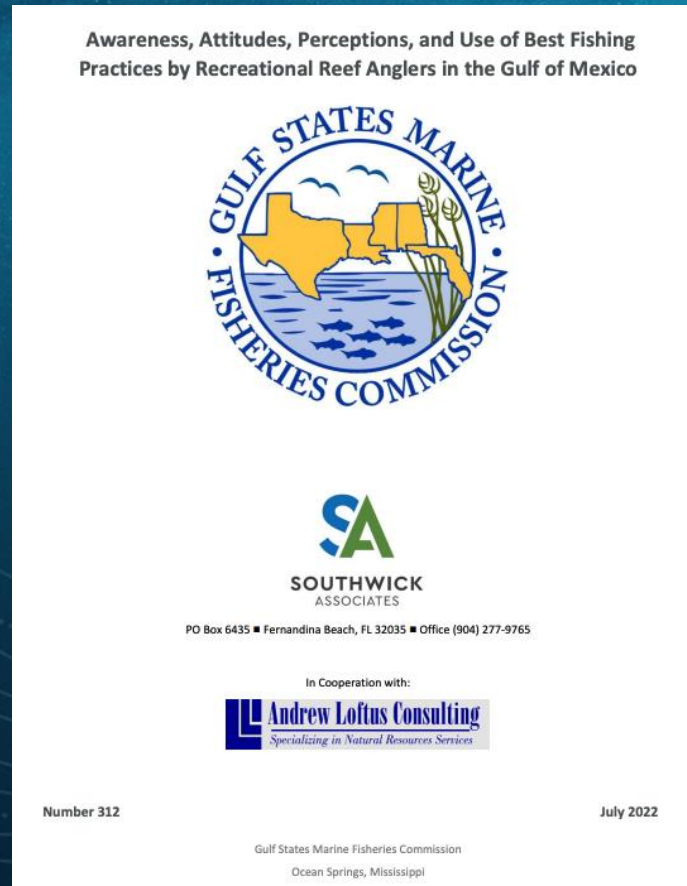
11. Was the majority of your fishing effort today..... ☐ 3 miles or less from shore ☐ 3 to 9 miles from shore ☐ more than 9 miles from shore	12. Was the majority of your fishing effort in an artificial reef zone? ☐ Yes ☐ Don't Know ☐ No ☐ Refused <i>(If "No", "Don't Know", or "Refused", skip to Q.14.)</i>	13. Which artificial reef zone did you spend the majority of your fishing effort in? ☐ Nearshore ☐ Don Kelly ☐ Dr. Bob Shipp ☐ Tatum Winn S ☐ Hugh Swingle ☐ Don't Know ☐ C.M. Blankenship ☐ Refused ☐ Tatum Winn N
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14. Were reef fish caught during this trip today? ☐ Yes ☐ No <i>(If "No", skip to Q.15.)</i>	# Retained	# Discarded Dead	# Discarded Alive	# Descended Alive W/FDD	15. FDD on board? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't Know ☐ Refused	All Retained Observed? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Yes ☐ No
RSN						
GRT						
GAJ						

Human Dimensions Surveys



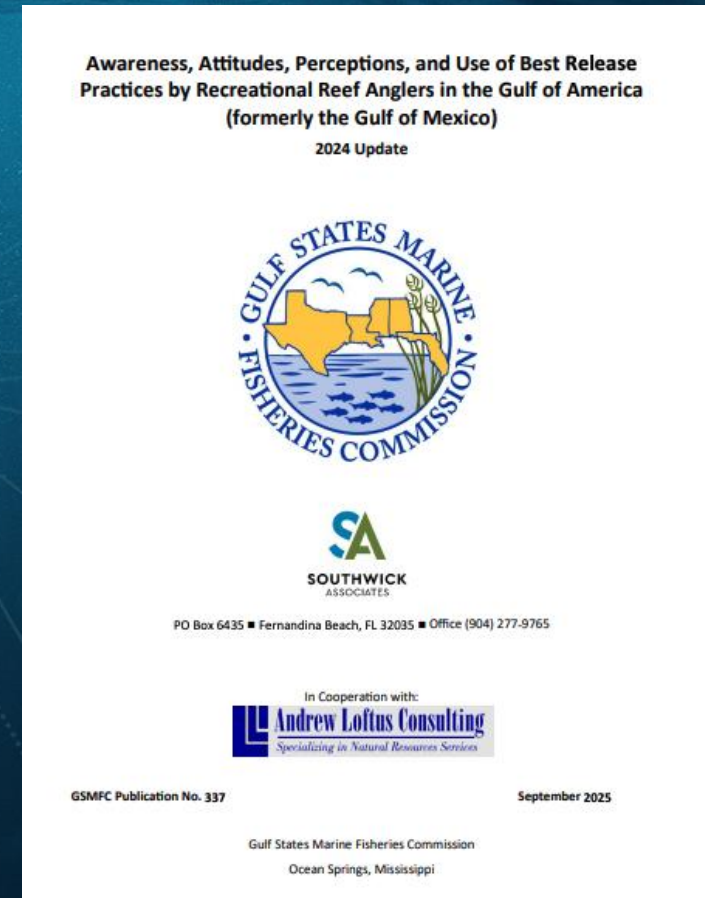
- 2021 Survey Sample



<https://www.gsmfc.org/publications/GSMFC%20Number%20312.pdf>

3-year change

- 2024 Survey Sample



<https://www.gsmfc.org/publications/GSMFC%20Number%20337.pdf>

Measuring Change: Key Findings (2021-2024)



- Gulf Reef Fish Anglers:

- Awareness of FDD's rose from 32% to 58%
- Confidence in ability to return fish to depth rose from 56% to 71%
- Anglers aware of RER rose from 4% to 30%

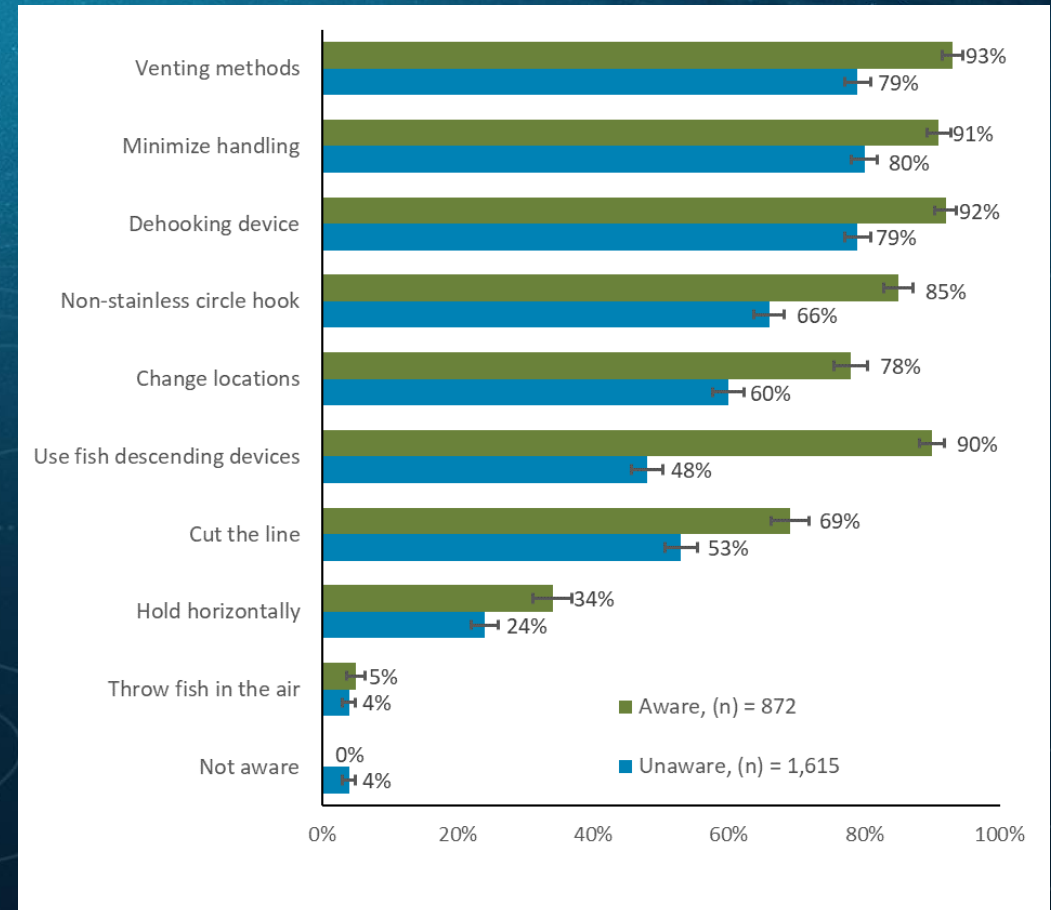


- Anglers familiar with Return 'Em Right (2024)

- Higher awareness of best practices
- Greater knowledge of barotrauma
- Higher intention to use release devices
- More confidence in releasing fish

Angler's Awareness of Best Release Practices

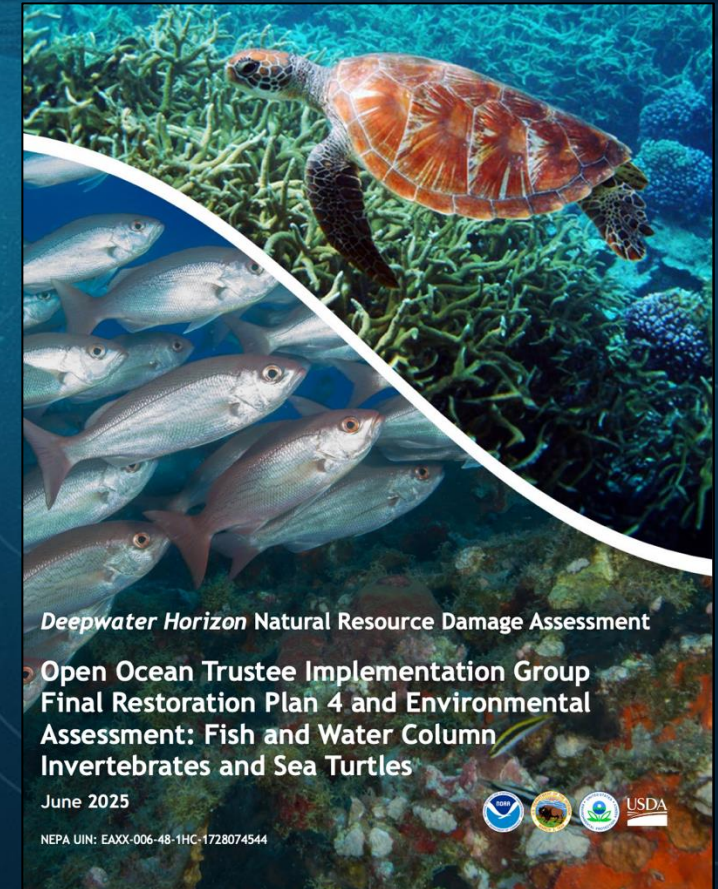
Green = RER aware; Blue = RER unaware





Expansion into the South Atlantic

- Education, outreach & gear distribution
 - **Soft launch:** May 13, 2026
 - SA reef fish anglers eligible for gear
 - **Hard launch:** June 2026
 - Coordinated communications push encouraging SA anglers to learn best release practices
- Research and monitoring
 - Expanding human dimension surveys to the SA
 - Explore opportunities to work with state agencies on monitoring descending device use in the SA
- Coordination
 - Expanding collaboration with Sea Grant and states
 - SA Council staff representative on the RER team



<https://www.gulfspillrestoration.noaa.gov/media/document/ootigfinal-rp4eafor-public-final-review-51225508>



CORE
PARTNERS





Thank You &
Questions?

@ReturnEmRight