

ONE ANGLER'S VOYAGE

After spending over 50 years on and around the water, I have realized that without strong fisheries laws and effective conservation measures, the future of salt water fishing, and America's living marine resources, is dim. Yet conservation is given short shrift by national angling organizations and the angling press. I hope that this blog will incite, inform and inspire salt water fishermen to reclaim their traditional role as the leading advocates for the conservation of America's fisheries.

Thursday, May 7, 2026

MAGICAL THINKING: SOUTH ATLANTIC RED SNAPPER EFPS

Managing the red snapper fishery, and particularly the recreational red snapper fishery, in the South Atlantic has proved to be one of the most intransigent challenges for East Coast fisheries managers.

It's not because the fish are scarce.

While that was a problem once, with the stock declining to just three percent of its spawning potential in 2009, subsequent efforts have rebuilt it to the point where it is no longer overfished, and no longer experiencing overfishing.

But that didn't solve the biggest problem facing red snapper managers. Red snapper have become abundant enough that a lot of them are being caught by anglers fishing for other varieties of bottom fish when the red snapper season is closed, and those snapper are being caught in waters deep enough to make barotrauma a real problem. As a result, scientists believe that many of the red snapper that are caught during the closed season and returned to the water by anglers die after being released.

To compensate, the recreational red snapper fishery in the South Atlantic has been burdened with a very short open season, which has ranged from just one to nine days, with recent seasons at the shortest end of that spectrum. Even that hasn't been enough to fully constrain anglers to their annual catch limit. As a result, a group of commercial fishermen have sued, asking a court to compel the National Marine Fisheries Service to get the recreational kill under control. In late 2024 NMFS, recognizing the merit of the commercial fishermen's arguments, entered into a settlement agreement to adopt regulations that would end recreational overfishing by June 6, 2025.

On January 14, 2025, NMFS came up with a proposed regulation, Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery in the South Atlantic, that would not only have gotten overfishing under control, but would also, because of decreased dead discards, have nearly triple recreational and commercial red snapper landings. However, it would also have

required a section of ocean off northern Florida to be closed to all bottom fishing, from December 1 through the end of February.

The recreational fishing community found the proposal completely unacceptable. They wanted to be able to land more red snapper, but didn't want to reduce their high dead discard rate, if that meant closing the bottom fishing season off northern Florida for three months during the winter.

That might sound selfish, irresponsible, and wasteful; the sort of thing that you might expect from a spoiled child rather than a group of supposedly rational adults. Yet, as it turned out, the recreational representatives were able to make their arguments to the only people who might think that such a juvenile response made sense—the incoming administration in Washington.

Thus, under the new administration, the final version of Amendment 59 did not include the three-month bottom fishing closure; but it did revise the definition of overfishing, the definition of an overfished stock, the acceptable biological catch, and the annual catch limits (including sector catch limits) for South Atlantic red snapper, which allowed it to declare that overfishing was no longer occurring. As if someone waved a magical wand, NMFS' concerns about recreational overfishing just seemed to disappear.

The commercial folks apparently didn't believe in magic, though, because they're suing NMFS again, arguing that Amendment 59 will allow recreational overfishing to continue, and harm commercial fishermen as a result.

But even with those changes, the recreational fishermen weren't all that satisfied with Amendment 59. While it let them keep pouring out dead, discarded red snapper during the closed snapper season, it didn't let them kill more fish to take home. So like a child who wheedles another piece of cake out of Grandma after their parents say "No," organizations affiliated with the recreational fishing industry pushed to have state agencies manage red snapper, knowing that the states would allow anglers to land the snapper denied them by both good science and federal law.

And so, just a few days ago, NMFS announced that

“NOAA Fisheries Issues Exempted fishing Permits Authorizing State Management of Recreational Harvested [*sic*] Red Snapper in the South Atlantic in 2026.”

Apparently, state management of the South Atlantic red snapper stock, under the recently approved exempted fishing permits, is going to bring us another magical moment. For if you recall, *under federal fisheries management*, the 2025 recreational red snapper season in the South Atlantic *lasted only two days*, and at that was twice as long as the season set for 2024.

Yet, now that *state fisheries managers* have been allowed to wave their sorcerers' wands, Florida anglers will be able to enjoy *a 39-day season*, broken up into 30 days in May/June and three three-day periods in October, while Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina anglers will be allowed to *fish for 62 consecutive days* in July and August.

It's nothing short of miraculous that just switching over from federal to state management will lead to seasons that are 20 to 30 times as long as those previously permitted by NMFS, presumably all without overfishing or doing any harm to the stock at all.

But, as was the case with Amendment 59, there are some people out there who just don't believe in magic.

The Ocean Conservancy deemed the exempted fishing permits and the move to state management

"An end run around sustainable management,"

while observing that

"Just last year, NOAA's own analysis showed that a two-day recreational fishing season was needed to prevent overfishing. There is no doubt that these exemptions to allow months-long fishing seasons will lead to overfishing, while new, unproven data collection measures mean we likely won't even realize the fish are declining until the damage is done."

The organization's press release goes on to say,

"Ocean Conservancy has used available data to estimate the amount of fish that could be caught with exempted permits. The annual catch limit for the recreational sector is 22,797 fish. A recent two-day red snapper fishing season in Florida alone resulted in 24,885 landed fish, which exceeds that limit. A simple expansion using this Florida landings rate, and ignoring the contribution from other states which will have even longer fishing seasons, suggests that as many as 485,000 fish could be landed in a 39-day season. This is over 20 times the annual catch limit—a clear violation of the Magnuson-Stevens Act."

The Environmental Defense Fund expressed similar sentiments, while also noting that

"Recreational fishing is an American pastime, and responsible innovation is critical to managing fisheries for the future. But NOAA's decision allows states to sidestep core federal safeguards that exist to prevent overfishing at a time when South Atlantic red snapper remains overfished [*sic*] and under a rebuilding plan. These permits go well beyond the limited, pilot-scale purpose of exempted fishing permits and instead function as an alternative system without enforceable catch limits or accountability measures required by law."

So how did we get to this point, where someone within NMFS or its parent, the Department of Commerce, seems to have contradicted NMFS' findings from a year ago, and has suddenly decided that a season 20 times as long as last year's won't lead to overfishing—even though last year's two-day season did?

We might find part of the answer in the cover letter that Roger Young, the Executive Director of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, sent to Commerce Secretary Howard

Lutnick on January 23, 2026, along with Florida's state management proposal. After two introductory paragraphs, Mr. Young got down to business:

“First, we want to reinforce our appreciation for your unwavering commitment to **rein in bureaucracy and return the power of fisheries management and conservation to the states where it belongs**. Unfortunately, based on an initial review of the commentary and questions within NOAA's response letter, it appears that NOAA intends to delay the success of our shared goals. To ensure that this is not the case, we determined that directly responding to you, rather than through NOAA, was crucial to our shared success. To that end, to mutually maintain the momentum that our teams have built over the past year, it is abundantly clear that direct involvement from our offices is crucial. If not, based on precedent, career NOAA staff will **inevitably create a bureaucratic blockade at the behest of status-quo defending adversarial interests** to prevent Florida's EFP from going into effect in May 2026. Given the social, economic, and cultural importance of recreational fishing in Florida, we greatly appreciate your leadership in seeing Florida's application through to approval so **Floridians can enjoy their God-given rights to recreate, and enjoy, our natural resources**.

“Under President Trump's leadership in 2017, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross blazed a trail in the Gulf of America to state management in recreational Red Snapper fishing. Bureaucratic intransigence and inertia at NOAA were guiding anglers to the dead end of federal regulators' overreach. By 2018, all five states in the Gulf of America were firmly in control of their destiny and managing this public fishery for the benefit of the public. The number of days of fishing proposed Gulf of America-wide by NOAA Fisheries in **2017: three days**. The number of fishing days announced by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis in **2025: 127 days**.

“Based on Florida's experience in seeking assignment of state management authority in the Gulf of America, much of NOAA's response appears to potentially **delay action under the guise of 'data' collection**—the same tactics that led Congress to force NOAA to accept and approve state EFP's [*sic*] in the Gulf of America given the **weaponization of NOAA under President Obama**... [emphasis in original]”

The letter provided a master class in ass-kissing, emphasizing everything—“rein in bureaucracy,” “bureaucratic blockade,” “status-quo defending,” favorable mention of Trump's first term, and even “weaponization” of a federal agency by “President Obama” (although “Barak *Hussein* Obama” might have been worth a few extra points)—that was likely to hit administration hot buttons.

Of course, Roger Young's letter missed a couple of important points. When he argued that “there is nothing in [the] Magnuson-Stevens [Fishery Conservation and Management] Act (MSA) that dictates an EFP's harvest be included in annual catch limits,”

he not only ignored National Standard 1, which states that

“Conservation and management measures shall prevent overfishing...”

but seemingly implied that it was acceptable for an annual recreational catch limit of 22,797 fish to be overfished roughly twentyfold—by more than 450,000 fish, if the Ocean Conservancy’s calculations are correct (which they may not be, as in the real world, such an extreme level of removals would probably lower abundance and catchability to the point that the 2025 fishing mortality rate, achieved over a 2-day season, could not be maintained for the full duration of the 39- or 62-day seasons planned for 2026)—so long as that overfishing occurred pursuant to an exempted fishing permit.

The letter was also quick to criticize the 3-day federal waters red snapper season in the Gulf of Mexico in 2017, while failing to mention that such short season was adopted in order to offset the excessively long state waters seasons allowed by state fisheries managers in that year.

But given Roger Young’s intended audience, it is highly unlikely that such omissions were ever noted or, even if someone had noticed them, that they would have had any influence on the outcome. The entire purpose of his letter was to move the decision making on the exempted fishing permits away from the scientists and subject matter experts at NMFS, and put it in the hands of people who couldn’t tell a red snapper from a red herring on their best day.

Thus, the South Atlantic states’ exempted fishing permit requests received an enthusiastic response; on May 1, 2026, President Donald Trump himself declared, in a social media post,

“WE JUST DELIVERED A HUGE WIN for our Great Fishermen and Anglers in FLORIDA, GEORGIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, and NORTH CAROLINA! We have just officially approved ALL STATE PERMITS for the 2026 Red Snapper recreational season. For years, our GREAT FISHERMEN have been punished with VERY short Federal fishing seasons despite RECORD HIGH fish populations and the States begging to oversee these permits. The incompetent Biden Administration tried to SHUT DOWN THE OCEANS to our Fishermen, entirely. We love and respect our Fishermen and, unlike the Democrats, will only do good for them. To all those who fish ‘Red Snapper’—TRUMP and NOAA are delivering for you. ENJOY!! President DONALD J. TRUMP.”

And there you have it.

In 2025, anglers in the four South Atlantic states managed to harvest an estimated 38,048 red snapper—15,251 fish over the annual catch limit—even though the federal red snapper season only lasted for two days. In 2026, that catch limit will remain unchanged, but even with state management extending the red snapper season to 39 days in Florida and 62 days in the three other South Atlantic states, South Atlantic red snapper landings are expected to remain at sustainable levels.

Maybe those folks who believe that there is something magical about state-level fisheries management are onto something.

Sunday, May 24, 2026

TRUTH, THE FIRST CASUALTY: SOUTH ATLANTIC RED SNAPPER

Some have said that

“Truth is the first casualty of war,”

and that statement is as true of political battles over natural resources and it is of military conflicts.

And over the last couple of decades, along the southeastern coast—both the Gulf and the South Atlantic—there is probably no fish that has been a greater focus of political battles than the red snapper.

I’m not sure why that is.

I’ve caught the things, and they’re fun to catch, but nothing exceptional. Amberjack pull a lot harder, and sails are quite a bit more fun. I’ve eaten them, too, and the meat is OK, but in my view no better than yellowtail, mangroves, muttons, or some of the other fish I’ve caught off South Atlantic shores.

But for whatever reason, red snapper seem to be particularly good at inspiring fights, at least fights involving recreational fishermen, the recreational fishing industry, and just about everyone else, who the recreational folks repeatedly try to blame for the problems that they, themselves created.

The latest conflict has arisen over the National Marine Fisheries Service issuance of exempted fishing permits, that will allow red snapper anglers in Atlantic Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina enjoy fishing seasons 20 or 30 times longer than they were granted last year, and perhaps exceed their annual catch limit by as much as 2,000% or more, without suffering any consequences at all (outside of a possible decline in the red snapper population).

That latest conflict is where the truth about recreational red snapper fishing in the South Atlantic comes in. Not just one truth, or two, but a few of them.

The first important truth is that there are a lot of red snapper in the South Atlantic. Some big year classes have pushed up abundance, measured in numbers, although biomass is probably still significantly below what it was during the mid-20th Century, because most of the fish are still relatively small.

The second is that anglers are catching lot of those red snapper. As one typical recreational commenter noted on a charter boat’s Facebook page,

“giving REC guys two days [season] for a fish that there’s zero chance your [sic] not catching them, shit you probably going to burn a ton of gas money just to go throw away Red snapper all day.”

A third truth, as the above quotation’s “throw away” comment suggests, is that a lot of the South Atlantic red snapper *caught* by anglers aren’t being *kept* by anglers, due both to the 1-fish federal bag limit and the very short federal fishing season, which is open for a day or two and closed for the rest of the year. Instead, all of those over-limit and out-of-season red snapper are returned to the water.

In that regard, it’s also true that anglers release *a lot* of red snapper, in absolute terms; over the past five years, 2021 through 2025, recreational fishermen in the South Atlantic released an estimated 2.2 million red snapper every year.

But a very unfortunate truth is that many of the red snapper that anglers release don’t survive. Release mortality occurs in a host of ways. The simplest is that some fish simply die from the stress of being hooked and released; one study conducted off North Carolina, which employed descending devices to get the fish back down to the bottom quickly, found that almost 94% of red snapper hooded in the jaw survive, while nearly 88% of all deeper-hooked fish die.

Another study, just released this month, was conducted off northern Florida, and found that if red snapper were released on the surface, without the use of a descending device, barotrauma—the damaging effects of pressure changes experienced when the fish was reeled up from the bottom—would result in 46.8% of them dying after release; that study found that if a descending device was used, the release mortality rate fell to just 12.9% after six hours, and 29.0% after 48 hours had passed.

But even assuming that all of the anglers releasing red snapper employed descending devices—which is a vastly over-optimistic assumption—29.0% of 2.2 million red snapper is still *a lot* of dead fish.

Which leads us to the most unpleasant truth of all: That recreational release mortality kills far more red snapper than either recreational or commercial harvest. It probably makes up about 80% of all recreational red snapper fishing mortality.

And *that* truth is the biggest casualty of the current red snapper wars, both because some of the details are being twisted, and because the massive level of recreational red snapper discards is being completely ignored by recreational fishing advocates.

That is nothing new.

Consider, for example, a press release put out by the Coastal Conservation Association, perhaps the nation’s largest, and very likely its most militant, anglers’ rights organization, last September. Announcing that “South Atlantic States Unveil Road Map to Snapper Management;” the substantive portion of that release stated,

“South Atlantic red snapper is currently managed by NOAA Fisheries through the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council. The fishery has come under intense scrutiny in recent years as recreational fishing seasons have been limited to one or two days—and often closed entirely—despite the population being larger than at any time in recorded history. Draconian federal restrictions arise from high levels of uncertainty in recreational catch data collected by the federal government.

“In just the last four months, the governors of Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina voiced their support for a shift to state-led management of red snapper in the South Atlantic in a joint letter to U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick. That was quickly followed by formal letters from congressional delegations from each of the three states reinforcing the call for reform...

“‘This is an incredibly important step in the future of recreational red snapper management in the South Atlantic,’ said Ted Venker, vice president of conservation for Coastal Conservation Association. ‘We are grateful to the South Atlantic states for taking on this added responsibility and for their commitment to bring rational, reliable data and management to this fishery. As we have seen in the Gulf under this approach, we are confident that management outcomes will begin to align with the health of the resource and enhance anglers’ access to it.’

“The process in the South Atlantic is expected to follow roughly the same path as state management in the Gulf, with each state implementing and testing data collection programs through Exempted Fishing Permits...”

Nowhere is the reader told of the huge waste of red snapper—estimated at approximately 475,000 dead fish—that results from recreational fishermen releasing red snapper during the closed season.

Instead of admitting to that incontrovertible fact, the Coastal Conservation Association tries to pull out its favorite canard, that the 1- and 2-day red snapper seasons were due to “high levels of uncertainty in recreational catch data collected by the federal government,” although that’s not even close to true; the percent standard error—the measure of uncertainty—in the release data (used to calculate release mortality) for four out of the last five years was well within the parameters for acceptable data. Admittedly, the uncertainty in the landings data was high, but the actual recreational landings are an order of magnitude smaller than the number of red snapper tossed overboard to die by recreational fishermen.

That’s the truth that the Coastal Conservation Association, the American Sportfishing Association, and all of the other advocates of the exempted fishing permits and extending the South Atlantic red snapper season are trying to sweep under the rug.

They try to pretend that anglers are somehow the victims of an incompetent or uncaring federal government, and hope that the public (because the federal government already knows) never figures out is that ***those 475,000 red snapper dumped and wasted by recreational fishermen represent more than 42 times the number of red snapper landed by the entire commercial***

fishery in the South Atlantic (102,951 pound commercial quota divided by an average 9.19 pounds per commercially-landed red snapper equals 11,203 fish landed commercially).

About the only time that the angling industry and anglers' rights crowd even admitted to all the dead discards was in a May 22 press release issued by the American Sportfishing Association, after a federal district judge in the District of Columbia enjoined the so-called "pilot programs" associated with the South Atlantic red snapper exempted fishing permits. And even then, the release presented things backward, saying that

"the recreational fishery in recent years has been limited to one- or two-day recreational harvest seasons, which has led to excessive discard mortality estimates,"

instead of presenting the unvarnished truth, which is that

"because it produces so many dead red snapper discards when the season is closed, the recreational fishery in recent years has had to be limited to one- or two-day recreational harvest seasons."

And we should note that, when stating a truthful case, one normally states the cause before the effect instead of, as the ASA did, stating the effect before the cause, to sort of hide what's really going on.

But any way one chooses to word things, the truth is the same: ***the estimated 475,000 red snapper discarded dead by recreational fishermen outnumber the 22,797 annual recreational catch limit that anglers are allowed to bring home by a ratio of more than 20 to one.***

I can understand why the angling industry and anglers' rights crowd might not want that truth circulating too widely.

After all, they came up with the exempted fishing permit plan in an effort to kill even more fish, and if the public became aware that something like 95% of the South Atlantic red snapper that anglers are killing now are just feeding the sharks and the crabs, they might try to keep them from killing too many more.

Which brings us to the final truth that the organized red snapper anglers don't really want you to know: That at least some of the waste could have been avoided, and both commercial and recreational landings could have been more than tripled, with no negative impact on the red snapper stock at all.

And NMFS knew how to do it.

On January 14, 2025, the agency issued a proposed Amendment 59 to the Fishery Management Plan for the Snapper-Grouper Fishery of the South Atlantic. The proposed amendment would have resulted in a commercial quota of 346,000 pounds, instead of the current 102,951, and a recreational catch limit of 85,000 fish, instead of just 22,797. The tradeoff was that it would close all fishing for species in the snapper-grouper complex, in all waters north of Cape

Canaveral, Florida and south of the Florida-Georgia line, from December 1 to February 28; that three-month closure, in just that one area off northern Florida, was expected to reduce red snapper discard mortality by at least 24%.

The proposed amendment was no panacea. It's impossible—or at least very difficult—to fish one's way out of the sort of discard mortality trap that has snagged South Atlantic red snapper anglers, for so long as fishing is still going on while the red snapper season is closed, some level of discard mortality will occur. Even during the 39-day (Florida) and 62-day (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina) seasons proposed in the now-enjoined exempted fishing permits, the season would have remained closed, and discard mortality would still have occurred, for 10 or 11 months of the year.

But the proposed amendment was at least way to cut down the waste, and turn some of the discards into landings.

One would like to think that the angling community would have had a well-enough developed sense of responsibility that it might have at least tried to mitigate *some* of the waste of the red snapper resource that it had been perpetuating for years, and supported the proposed amendment.

But that sort of integrity was apparently lacking, for the various recreational organizations went all-out to defeat it, instead.

The American Sportfishing Association called for everyone to “Protect Access to Bottomfishing in the South Atlantic,” which wasn't surprising, since the ASA's members can always sell more stuff if the season is open, and the American Sportfishing Association's overriding job is to help its members sell as much stuff as they can.

Florida Sportsman magazine came out against the amendment. Its advertisers were probably pleased.

And the Coastal Conservation Association came out strongly against, perhaps a little unnerved at being asked to actually conserve something, when creating artificial reefs for anglers to fish on and supporting hatcheries that pump out fish for anglers to catch are more in its wheelhouse these days.

Their efforts were successful. Anglers' waste of nearly half a million red snapper goes on, while the recreational fishing organizations still try to find new and creative ways to kill more of them.

That's why it's important to keep the truth front and center, and not let it be buried alive.

Sunday, May 31, 2026

IS THE SOUTH ATLANTIC RED SNAPPER POPULATION REALLY "LARGER THAN ANY PERSON ALIVE HAS EVER SEEN?"

Political debates can become intense, and there's always a point, no matter who is involved, when the truth tends to get stretched beyond the point of recognition.

When the debate involves saltwater fisheries management, and the various angler advocacy organizations get involved, the standards for "truth" always seem to be set just a bit lower, and the stretching and distortion seem to get a bit worse. Toss in the sort of politicians who are regularly associated with "alternative facts" and you can pretty well picture how things will turn out.

Over the past couple of weeks, I have written about the recreational red snapper fishery in the South Atlantic, and about how "anglers' rights" groups like the Coastal Conservation Association and angling industry groups like the American Sportfishing Association and the Center for Sportfishing Policy have tried to overrule the professional fishery managers at the National Marine Fisheries Service in order to expand the South Atlantic's recreational red snapper season and increase the recreational red snapper kill, by appealing to politicians like Florida's Governor Ron Desantis, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, and others close to President Donald Trump. And I have written about how a federal district court judge in the District of Columbia has issued a temporary injunction, halting any fishing under the exempted fishing permits issued by NMFS that would have allowed the extended season, because their issuance was clearly illegal under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

I thought that, with the temporary injunction issued, I'd move away from South Atlantic red snapper for a while, and take a look at other fisheries issues elsewhere on the coast. But just last Friday, a friend down in Maryland, who is also heavily involved in fisheries conservation matters, sent me a new research report that was too relevant to leave unreported, because it directly addresses one of the most-repeated assertions made by those trying to overturn federal red snapper management in the South Atlantic, and one of the greatest underpinnings of the argument to increase landings.

The Coastal Conservation Association made that assertion in a November, 2025 press release:

"the [South Atlantic red snapper] population [is] larger than any person alive has ever seen."

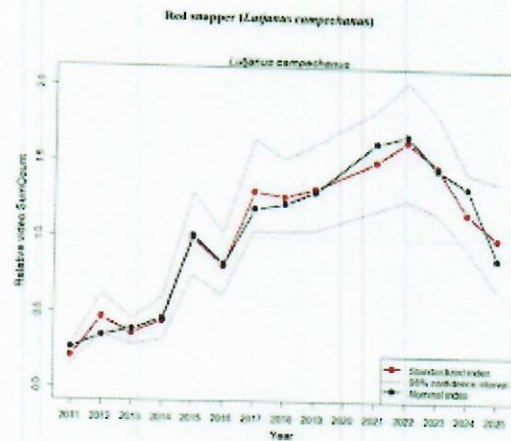
But there's pretty strong evidence that's just not true.

The report that my friend sent me was titled "Relative abundance of select reef fishes from Southeast Reef Fish Survey video data, 2011-2025." As the report itself explains,

“Reef fish species along the southeast United States Atlantic coast (hereafter, SEUS) have been monitored by the Marine Resources Monitoring, Assessment, and Prediction program (MARMAP) and the Southeast Reef Fish Survey (SERFS) with chevron traps since 1990. These trap data have been central components of the stock assessments of many various fish species in the SEUS, and trap indices for a number of species have been summarized annually by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. Beginning in 2011, video cameras were attached to all traps deployed region-wide by SERFS to provide additional information about reef fish relative abundance and seafloor habitat. The goal of this report is to provide video-based indices of abundance for many reef fish species in the SEUS, which complements the summary of trap-based indices of abundance... [citation omitted]”

One of the species included in the video data is Atlantic red snapper, with the data collected at numerous sites that extend from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina to about halfway down the eastern coast of the Florida peninsula, and out to 100 meters (roughly 330 feet) of water.

A graph summarizing the data collected between the start of the video survey in 2011 and the last complete year of data, 2025, looks like this:



The trajectory of the curve certainly doesn't make it appear that “the [South Atlantic red snapper] population [was] larger than any person alive has ever seen” in 2025. In fact, that graph makes it appear as if South Atlantic red snapper abundance might have peaked in 2022, and has been steadily sliding downhill ever since, so that in 2025, it was at its lowest level since 2016.

And, if that trajectory continues, abundance could decline even more this year.

Of course, the video data comes with some warnings. The report advises, among other things, that

“Video-based indices of abundance are not an indication of stock status, the latter of which requires additional information such [as] landings, length and age composition, and life history parameters,”

and

“The ways in which video-based indices of abundance are standardized in this report (e.g., model selection, predictor variables included) may be different from those used in SEDAR stock assessments.”

So the above graph, constructed around such video-based indices, doesn’t tell us anything about whether the South Atlantic red snapper stock is healthy or at risk of becoming overfished—or whether it has become overfished already. That’s up to the folks doing the stock assessments to decide, and we’ll find out what they’re thinking when [SEDAR 90 is released sometime early next year](#).

But what the above graph *can* tell us is the trend in red snapper abundance, and it clearly shows that the South Atlantic red snapper video-based abundance index has *declined* by 30% or so between 2022 and 2025, and that such declining trend may well be continuing.

So no, we probably don’t currently have a larger South Atlantic red snapper population “than any person alive has ever seen,” if only because most people alive are more than three years old—even if some of the folks trying to extend the recreational red snapper season seem to reason like three-year-olds much of the time.

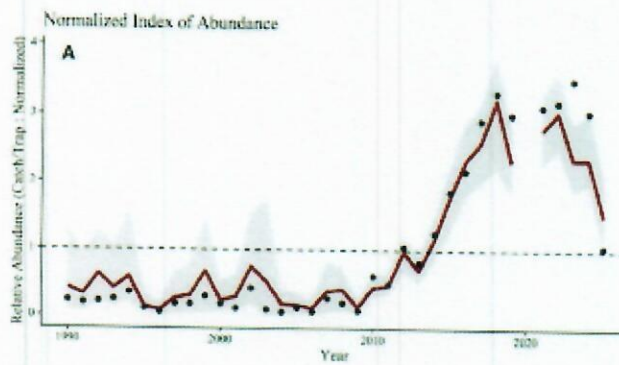
Still, it’s easy to argue that the video-based index is only one indicator of South Atlantic red snapper abundance, and that other indicators may reach other conclusions. Thus, it’s only logical to turn to [another recently-published report, “Reef fish trends in relative abundance from a fishery-independent survey in waters off the southeastern United States,” which uses data generated from the Southeast Reef Fish Chevron Trap Survey, as conducted during the years 1990-2019 and 2021-2025](#).

That report provides a 35-year time series (interrupted only in 2020 due to the COVID 19 pandemic) of relative abundance of multiple species, including Atlantic red snapper, and provides a reliable baseline against which to gauge current red snapper abundance. The underlying survey is deemed “fishery-independent” data, meaning that its data is collected solely by researchers, without any reference to catch or landings by the commercial or recreational fisheries. That is a very important consideration for the tightly-regulated South Atlantic red snapper, as

“Fishery-dependent (FD) measures of abundance, such as fishery landings, are affected by management actions and industry practices, making it difficult to separate population level responses from changes in fishery behavior and management actions in FD data. Fishery-independent (FI) data are collected in a way that is independent of regulations such as minimum

size limits, seasons, and quotas imposed on industries for managed species. When fisheries are highly regulated, FI surveys often become the only method available to adequately characterize population size, age and length compositions, and reproductive parameters, all of which are needed to assess the status of stocks. The use of adequate FI data also decreases assessment uncertainty over FD information alone.”

The Chevron Trap Survey is conducted at multiple locations between Cape Hatteras and St. Lucie Inlet, Florida. It has also generated a relative abundance index of Atlantic red snapper, based on the number of fish caught in the chevron traps. A graph of that index, depicting relative abundance between 1990 and 2025, looks like this:



It’s not exactly the same curve that we see for the video-based index, but once again, we see the highest relative abundance—presumably coinciding with the population’s peak—in 2023 (based on the point estimate) or 2018 (the peak of the normalized curve), and then a steep decline in relative abundance in the past few years, to levels last seen in 2015 (based on the normalized curve) or 2014 (based on the point estimate).

Either way, the chevron trap data seems to confirm that the South Atlantic red snapper population in 2025 was not larger “than any person alive has ever seen,” and given the steepness of the decline, it isn’t unreasonable to assume that abundance will be even lower in 2026—and very possibly beyond.

That trend strongly suggests that 2026 is probably the wrong time to provide anglers a longer season, that will almost certainly lead to them overfishing the red snapper resource.

Those arguing for a longer recreational red snapper season might try to argue that, because the video cameras are mounted on chevron traps, that the two indices of abundance are measuring the same thing, and so are not really different surveys. However, the scientists who produced the last South Atlantic red snapper stock assessment in 2021 disagree:

“The working group recommended *dome-shaped selectivity* for the chevron trap index and *flat-topped selectivity* for the video index. Those recommendations were adopted in the assessment, and the two indices were input as separate time series.”

What that means is that the two indices measure the abundance of different age classes of fish. The chevron traps tend to capture a few age classes of fish (generally, fish less than 600mm—about 24 inches—long and perhaps four years old), and under-sample older and larger fish. The video cameras, on the other hand, probably miss some of the older/younger fish, but once snapper grow large enough to be readily detected in the videos, continue to provide good samples of fish throughout the older/larger age classes, although their ability to determine the precise size and age of fish more than ten years old may be questionable.

So, when both the chevron trap index and the video-based index show a sharp decline in South Atlantic red snapper numbers, that suggests that the decline might be occurring in multiple age/size classes.

That could be significant, because the 2021 stock assessment informs us that

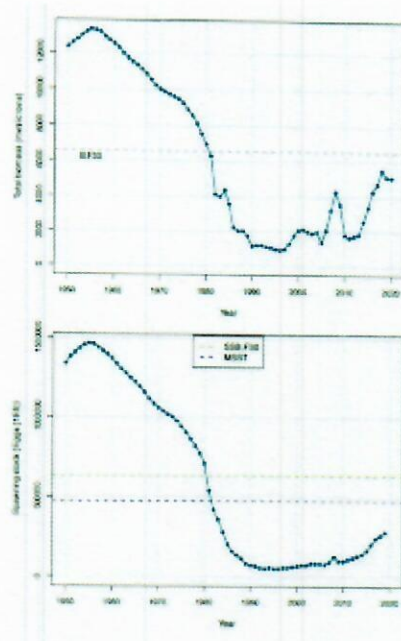
“Total estimated abundance was...at its highest level at the end of the time series, comparable to estimates in the 1950s and 1960s, but with a more truncated age structure... The highest recruitment values were predicted to have occurred in the mid-1960s, 2006-2008, and in the terminal six years of the assessment (2014-2019).”

All of that is consistent with the pattern shown in both graphs of relative abundance, with South Atlantic red snapper abundance rising rapidly after 2014, when a period of high recruitment began, and peaking right around the time that the stock assessment was released. While that recent high abundance might not actually have been higher “than any person alive has ever seen,” since it was “comparable to estimates in the 1950s and 1960s,” and plenty of folks alive today, including myself, were alive to see things back then, it was still a very solid level of abundance. However, the late 2010s South Atlantic red snapper population differed from that of the 1950s and 1960s in one critical respect: It had “a more truncated age structure,” and age structure has a major impact on the fecundity of the stock.

The stock assessment states that

“Spawning stock biomass is modeled as population fecundity (number of eggs).”

So even though South Atlantic red snapper abundance, measured in numbers of fish, might have been about as high in 2019 as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, because the age/size structure of the population was truncated, and the current population made up mostly of younger, smaller fish, by some of the most critical measures, including biomass and, most importantly, the number of eggs produced, the population remains at relatively low and arguably unsustainable levels, as the two graphs below show.



Given those facts, the claim that “the [South Atlantic red snapper] population [is] larger than any person alive has ever seen” becomes essentially meaningless, even if it were true, because abundance alone doesn’t tell the whole story.

Still, if the graphs correctly captured the increase in red snapper abundance leading up to the last stock assessment, there’s no reason to believe that they didn’t also accurately capture an abundance decline in the years since, so the claim about the largest population anyone alive has ever seen is most probably wrong.

Even so, the proponents of a larger South Atlantic recreational red snapper kill aren’t likely to go away quietly. They will argue that “the science is bad,” and try to obfuscate the truth by attacking the video and chevron trap data, while referencing other studies that suggest that the South Atlantic red snapper population is larger than the stock assessment reveals.

But this is when red snapper become red herrings.

Because, when assessing fish stocks, absolute population abundance is less important than population trends. The models used to assess stocks can change, certain data previously used may be excluded from future data runs, and new data streams may be added. Assumptions about natural mortality and the survival of released fish may change. And when that happens, the estimate of total abundance—both present and past—may change as well, even though the status of the stock remains the same.

But even when model and/or some of the underlying assumptions change the estimates of spawning stock biomass, the *trends* in biomass and fish abundance generally remain close to the same. Regardless of the models used, a declining *trend* ought to be cause for concern.

The plain truth is that we don't *know*, with any certainty, how many red snapper were swimming off the South Atlantic coast in the mid-1950s, when the population reached a peak. We don't *know* how many were swimming around during the lows of the 1990s, during the recent highs of the late 2010s or, for that matter, how many are swimming around today. The best we can do is review the data and provide a reasonable estimate.

But what we *do* know is that at least two long-term indices of abundance are showing that there are fewer red snapper swimming off the South Atlantic today than there were even four years ago.

And that means that when someone tells you that “the [South Atlantic red snapper] population [is] larger than any person alive has ever seen,” they are also probably telling you a very intentional lie.