RFL Notes:

Your Fishing Licence Fees at Work improving recreational angling opportunities.

March 2011

Counting the catch – quantifying the recreational catch of Southern bluefin tuna in south western Victoria

The popularity of fishing for southern bluefin tuna (SBT) in south western Victoria has increased over the past five years. For example, there were over 500 boats targeting tuna near Portland, Port Fairy and Warrnambool over the weekend of 22/23 May 2010 (most of which were recreational fishing boats). The Recreational Fishing Licence Grant program has funded a project that will provide the first scientific estimate of the size of the recreational fishery for SBT in south western Victoria.

Southern bluefin tuna

SBT are:

- A pelagic fish, which occur in oceanic waters normally on the seaward side of the continental shelf
- A big powerful fish that can grow to approximately 2.25 m length and weigh 200 kg
- Long lived (up to 40 years), slow growing and late maturing (8–12 years)

Highly migratory; SBT migrate along the west coast of Australia and across the Great Australian Bight and around Tasmania and then along the southeast Australian coastline to northern NSW.

Worldwide, the species consists of a single population. The only spawning ground is between Australia and the island of Java in the Indonesian archipelago. SBT are vulnerable to overexploitation.

Southern blue fin tuna - Photo courtesy Australian Marine Conservation Society

Global history

Southern bluefin tuna are over fished globally. For several years the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) has been working on a management strategy to guide the setting of global quotas and to pursue stock rebuilding.

In 2009, the CCSBT Extended Scientific Committee:

- Found that the stock was still in a poor state with low likelihood of recovery under current catch levels
- Recommended meaningful cuts in SBT catches.

Australia has agreed to cut its average annual SBT allocation for commercial fishing by 20% in line with new international catch targets.

Australian perspective

In Australia the SBT commercial fishery is managed by Australia Fishery Management Authority using output controls called Individual Transferable Quotas. For the 2011 season the Australian commercial catch limit has been set at 4015 tonnes.

In Australia there is no formal allocation of SBT quota to the recreational fishery, although individual angler catches are restricted by State fisheries regulations. The total catch in the Australian recreational SBT fishery is currently unknown.

Victorian Requirements

In recent years, a world class off-shore game fishery for SBT has developed in south western Victoria. This fishery has captivated Victoria's anglers who enjoy the social values of game fishing. The development of this specialised fishery has also provided economic benefits to western Victoria.

World class off-shore game fishery for southern bluefin tuna

The extent of this fishery, its catch, social and economic importance to the Victorian community is unknown.

It is important for Victoria to have scientific information on the size of the recreational SBT catch in light of the:

- Commonwealth's intention to investigate and ultimately include recreational fishing in national and global management arrangements for SBT
- Conservation status of the SBT stock globally.

This information will allow Victoria to assist the Commonwealth fisheries agency on future management arrangements for SBT.

Measuring the catch

With funding from the Recreational Fishing Licence Grant program and the cooperation of anglers, scientists from Fisheries Victoria will collect information over the 2011 SBT season (usually February to June) in south western Victoria.

During the SBT season researchers will be:

- At boat ramps in Warrnambool, Portland and Port Fairy seeking information from anglers about how many SBT they caught
- On charter boats capturing information as the anglers land SBT.

In addition, experienced and avid SBT anglers will be asked to record their fishing activities in a diary.

All this information will be analysed and in January 2012 Fisheries scientists will be able to report the size of the Victorian recreational catch of SBT.

Benefits to anglers

Recreational fishing in Victoria will be improved as a result of this research in the following ways:

- Estimates of total annual recreational SBT catch will help to secure the national and global sustainability of this species, with the aim to continue great SBT fishing opportunities in waters adjacent to Victoria
- Anglers will gain an improved understanding of the opportunities provided by the game fishing/charter boat sector – particularly in south western Victoria
- Fisheries managers will gain new information which will assist the development of future management arrangements for this sector and for recreational fisheries more broadly, potentially with regard to developing resource sharing arrangements between the recreational and commercial fishing sectors in Australia.

For more information about this project, please contact James Andrews at DPI Queenscliff (03) 5258 0111.

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