



# FISHED PAST **THE** LIMIT

RECREATIONAL  
FISHING IS  
BOOMING, BUT  
A NEW STUDY  
SHOWS THAT  
WE MAY BE  
LOVING OUR  
FISH TO DEATH

## When Izaak Walton wrote

*The Complete Angler* in 1653, the Englishman did more than just pen what has become known as the Bible of Fishing. Walton spawned a sport that 350 years later has grown into a favorite American pastime. Many think fishing cultivates a respect for nature, so when researchers released a report in 2004 that accused recreational anglers of endangering some prized coastal species, anglers were stunned. It was as if old Izaak Walton himself had been caught exceeding his creel limit.

The study, which appeared in the September issue of the journal *Science*, claimed that recreational anglers are contributing to the depletion of red snapper in the Gulf of Mexico, red drum in the Atlantic and bocaccio in the Pacific, among other species. By tabulating catch totals reported by states and the National Marine Fisheries Service over the past 22 years, the scientists determined that recreational anglers account for five percent of the take—a tiny amount, but more than double previous estimates. The study made clear what some anglers have long suspected: “Fishermen do have an impact,” says John Torgan, a lifelong Rhode Island angler and spokesman for the environmental group Save the Bay.

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The recreational fishing lobby, however, took offense and attacked with all the ferocity of a bluefish ripping through a school of herring. The report was “junk science” and a “bunch of malarkey,” said the Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA). “Hogwash,” wrote a Florida fishing columnist, reflecting the views of other hook and bullet writers.

Whatever anglers think of the study, one fact is undisputable: Americans love to fish. The number of saltwater recreational anglers has grown to 10 million, a 20 percent increase in two decades. Freshwater anglers are even more numerous. Nearly 13 million people fly fish at least once per year, according to the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA). That number includes two million “enthusiasts” who fish 15 or more times yearly. All told, there are 34 million fresh and saltwater anglers 16 years or older. Include children, and the number rises to 50 million.

## A Multi-Billion-Dollar Sport

Recreational fishing is big business. The sport creates one million jobs, from fishing guides in Montana to charter boat captains and crewhands in the Gulf of Mexico to rod and tackle shop employees nationwide. And these anglers spend \$36 billion annually, according to the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation. For their part, fly anglers are also prolific spenders, doling out more cash for clothes, rods and gear (an average of \$2,457 every two years) than participants of any other sport, including notoriously expensive skiing, according to the OIA.

Like all multi-billion-dollar industries, recreational fishing has given rise to a cadre of interest groups, from organizations that lobby on the sport’s behalf to conservation groups. The RFA has grown to 75,000 direct members since forming in 1996. By opposing tougher catch restrictions on recreational anglers, the group hopes to become “the NRA of fishing,” says cofounder and executive director Jim Donofrio. Other trade groups include the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation (responsible for the “Take Me Fishing” television commercials that run during sports broadcasts) and the American Saltwater Anglers. Trout Unlimited, which focuses on freshwater, is a strong

proponent for conserving spawning habitat, while the Izaak Walton League of America, formed in 1922 by 54 sportsmen concerned about raw sewage discharges, has become a 40,000-plus-member nonprofit dedicated to protecting fresh waters (as well as other outdoor resources) from pollution. Walton would be amazed.

## Where Did All the Fish Go?

Recreational fishermen have always had a tense relationship with the commercial fishing industry, and rightly so. Starting with the unthinkable—the collapse of mighty cod stocks in the North Atlantic—international fishing fleets are guilty of “taking what they can for short-term profit and then moving on,” writes Richard Ellis in *The Empty Ocean*. Anglers need only tick through the species that have crashed over the past few generations—bluefin tuna, swordfish, sharks, marlin netted as “bycatch” and discarded overboard—to understand the magnitude of commercial fishing’s impact. ▶

## ARE WE TAKING THE LION’S SHARE?

Conventional wisdom says recreational fishing makes up only a small portion of the overall take. But a few fish per person times millions of anglers is adding up quickly. The following shows the percent take by recreational anglers in the Gulf of Mexico, South Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

**gag:** 56%  
**red snapper:** 59%  
**bocaccio:** 87%  
**red drum:** 93%

In years past, recreational anglers in small boats could hook tuna within sight of the shore. No more.



Albacore tuna

As a child, Torgan wandered the docks of Rhode Island's Port of Galilee and admired the 1,000-pound bluefin tuna hooked during the annual Labor Day tuna tournament. As a teenager, he worked on charter boats and once saw a school of 500-pound tuna engaged in a feeding frenzy. "The ocean boiled." Now in his mid-30s, Torgan rarely sees a "giant" (a tuna larger than 300 pounds). In years past, recreational anglers in small boats could hook tuna within sight of the shore. No more. "The offshore fishing fleets," Torgan says, "have pursued these giants to the point of near extinction."

But industrial fishing trawlers are not the only culprits. For trout anglers in the West, a multi-year drought is reaching a crisis stage. Their drinking water reservoirs depleted, municipalities such as Denver are drawing more water out of rivers and leaving less for the fish. Shallower waters heat up, stressing the fish and escalating mortality. "There's simply not enough water going downstream," says David Nickum, executive director of Colorado Trout Unlimited.

And then there's the threat of invasive species. In the fall of 2004, a Northern Snakehead—an Asian native known as the "Frankenfish" because it eats nearly anything and wriggles across

land—was found in the Great Lakes. Another invasive, the Asian carp, is working its way up the Mississippi River, eating up other species along the way.

Other threats include the degradation of wetlands and salt marshes—nurseries for fish—due to sprawl, storm water runoff, timber cutting, agriculture and fossil fuel extraction.

Despite the bad news, recreational fishing continues to boom. What gives? For one, catch-and-release policies allow many anglers to hook the same fish. In addition, some species—such as the striped bass prized by Northeastern coastal fishermen—have returned in abundance thanks to conservation measures. Wildlife officials have also boosted the sport by pumping rivers, lakes and streams full of hatchery-raised fish such as rainbow trout. "We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the fishing is generally pretty good," says Nickum, who grades Colorado's trout fishing as a B.

In the Pacific Northwest, hatcheries have replenished salmon


stocks in the Columbia, Willamette and Deschutes rivers, as well as in Washington's Puget Sound. "Hatcheries have allowed recreational fishermen to put salmon on their dinner tables," says Kaitlin Lovell, salmon policy coordinator for Trout Unlimited. On the flip side, wild salmon are faring poorly. Unfortunately, Lovell says, hatchery fish could impede the recovery of wild salmon by breeding with and diluting their genes. Hatchery fish may be fun to catch, but they are to a wild coho what a feedlot steer is to a free-ranging bison.

### Looking for Solutions

To protect coastal fisheries, some researchers have suggested marine reserves with no-take zones. While reserves shrink the area in which fishermen can cast their lines, advocates point out that these off-limits areas become nurseries that help rejuvenate fish stocks in adjacent waters. But closing areas to recreational anglers is highly contentious. Rather than eliminate recreational fishing, the RFA sees the value of marine protected areas as an effective management tool. Along the Atlantic Coast, the RFA is working on a proposal to divide the quota of summer flounder evenly between recreational and commercial fishermen, rather than the 60 percent to 40 percent split that now favors commercial operations.

Others propose cutting the number of commercial charter boats, some of which use the same technologies as commercial fishermen to find and catch fish. "Those for-hire boat captains with all the latest fish-finder gizmos should be regulated more like commercial fishermen," says Felicia Coleman, lead author of the overfishing study in *Science*. "They have nothing in common with the guy standing out there alone on the flats casting into the blue."

Proposed solutions for protecting inland fisheries are even more obvious, but perhaps more difficult to implement—toughen the Clean Water Act and Clean Air Act, protect wetlands and riparian areas, ensure adequate flows in rivers and streams. Conservation-minded weekend anglers have much less political clout than the industries that threaten fish and water quality. But when they do rise up, recreational anglers are heard in Washington: Sportsmen—both anglers and hunters—persuaded the Bush administration to cancel plans to ramp up oil and gas drilling along the Rocky Mountain Front. And conservation groups say recreational anglers can help their sport by supporting more federal funding for fish passages and barrier removals such as the demolition of Virginia's Embrey Dam, which will be complete in 2006 and open 150 miles of the upper Rappahannock River to shad runs.

For her part, Coleman was stunned by the backlash her study on recreational fishing caused. "It was not meant to be an indictment of recreational fishermen," says the Florida State researcher. "It's a wonderful sport." But, she adds, fishermen must be mindful: "We don't want to love our fish to death." 

## SHOW ME THE MONEY

No matter how you dissect it, fishing is big business in the US.

### \$2,457

Amount fly anglers dole out on average for clothes, rods and gear every two years

### 1 MILLION

Estimated number of fishing-related jobs in the US, from fly fishing guides in Montana to tackle shop employees

### \$36 BILLION

Amount spent per year by US anglers, according to the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation