

N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries Seeks a Good Catch for All



MOREHEAD CITY - A trawler heading into port or a vacationer dropping a line off a pier are common coastal scenes, deceptive in their serenity. For business or pleasure, saltwater fishing in North Carolina occurs against a complex backdrop of legislation, conservation, economics, demographics - and mathematics.

The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) has the difficult task of balancing the demands of a growing coastal population against limited fish stocks. The division's mission is to ensure sustainable marine and estuarine fisheries for the benefit of all the people of North Carolina.

"That's a very simple statement that embodies a lot of complex processes and issues," says Preston Pate, division director.

Part of the N.C. Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources, DMF and its rule-making body, the nine-member Marine Fisheries Commission, have jurisdiction over saltwater fishing and shellfishing in all coastal waters, extending three miles offshore. That includes 4,000 miles of coastal shorelines and 2.5 million acres of estuarine and marine waters. An estimated 5,000 full-time commercial fishermen work these waters; 1.7 million recreational anglers fish them for fun. Both groups account for a big part of coastal North Carolina's economic base.

Managing important fisheries is by

no means a new concept. The 1822 state legislature voted to impose restrictions on oyster harvesting gear, and subsequent regulatory actions led to the formation of the division's predecessors.

More recently, the General Assembly passed the Fisheries Reform Act of 1997. The sweeping legislation restructured commercial licens-

ing, required comprehensive fisheries management and habitat protection plans and mandated more public involvement in policy making. Advisory committees representing a broad spectrum of interests now participate in the planning process.

Including many more people predictably slows the pace, Pate says.

"But it's necessary, and

it's very healthy for us because of the increased stakeholder involvement, and the exposure to the public of what our ideas are during the formation of those plans," he says.

Changing Times

For the most part, the legislated requirements have been satisfied.

"I think, and certainly hope, we've met everybody's expectations," says Pate, who became director about the same time the act became law. Time will tell whether the reforms will have the desired results.

"On a macro level, the implementation of the act has been successful," he says. "The outcome of that imple-

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Preston Pate



The North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries

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Established: Beginnings date back to 1822 regulatory legislation.

Staff: 84 in Morehead City; nine sections, five district offices in addition to Morehead City headquarters.

Mission: The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries is responsible for the stewardship of the state's marine and estuarine resources. Its mission is to ensure sustainable marine and estuarine fisheries for the benefit of all the people of North Carolina.

Departmental Affiliation: The N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries is a division of the N.C. Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources.



mentation and the effects on the resources are less obvious because they take a longer time to manifest themselves.”

Recovery plans are in place for several species that are considered overfished, such as river herring and, along the central and southern coast, striped bass. Red drum, now listed as “recovering” in the latest stock status report, and blue crab, listed as “concerned” also have benefited from management plans.

“Once they’re recovered, then they will be managed in such a way that the population will stabilize at a healthy and sustainable level for both commercial and recreational uses,” Pate says.

The division also works with regional and national fisheries commissions on programs for commercially important species that migrate across state boundaries. Summer flounder, weakfish and striped bass in the Albemarle Sound were the focus of success-

commercial and recreational interests, which led to heated public disputes. The contention has noticeably lessened since 1997. Some people attribute that

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to Pate’s leadership; he deflects credit to the implementation of the reform act.

In all major decisions, the division and the Marine Fisheries Commission deal with issues that mean a great deal of money to a great number of people. Though commercial fishing is in a downturn, beleaguered by a number of troubles, it is still a mainstay in

can be sustained for the future, providing successful fishing opportunities for all user groups.”

The decline of commercial fishing and the related changes in coastal communities is troubling for an organization that has worked with North Carolina watermen for decades. Many fishermen have gone out of business. Those that still fish find more and more docks and seafood houses for their catch pushed aside by population growth and demand for waterfront property.

“I don’t know if there’s anything we can do to stop it,” Pate says. “Some of that growth is inevitable and inexorable. We do recognize it, and to the extent we can have an effect on it or control it or at least consider it in our management decisions, we do.”

Healthy Habitats

The reform act also dictated synchronized efforts to protect, enhance and restore habitats so critical to so many fish, especially in their early life stages. Ninety percent of the East Coast’s commercially important species spend some part of their lives in estuaries, and North Carolina has some of the largest estuaries in the nation.

“That’s why the habitat protection plan in progress is such an integral part of the Fisheries Reform Act,” Pate says. “It’s so important to the future.” The law requires three state rule-making commissions - the Environmental Management Commission, Coastal Resources



ful regional programs.

Recovery of a depleted stock, however, brings yet more management questions.

“When you raise the population levels of striped bass in Albemarle Sound, for example,” Pate says, “what does that do to white perch, largemouth bass, yellow perch and other species, sought after recreationally and commercially, that are either eaten by striped bass or compete with striped bass for the same food source?”

“There’s more awareness now that we have to manage these stocks on an ecosystem basis,” he says. “You can’t, on an individual basis, expect to maintain every population of fish at its highest level, because you’ve got predators and prey.”

In the early 1990s, DMF actions at times displeased both

the coastal economy.

“The commercial fisheries have well documented economic benefits, not only the dockside value of the landings, but the expansion factor that goes beyond that dockside value,” Pate says. “That value sustains a lot of communities in the county. It sustains a lot of individuals within the communities.”

Meanwhile, recreational fishing is growing “at an astounding rate,” Pate says. Its economic contribution is rising proportionately. But so is competition with commercial interests, and with other recreational fishermen, for favored species such as flounder.

“The challenge to us and all involved is that as the number of participants increases, expectations increase,” Pate says. “It’s our charge to make sure that those types of economic values



Commission and Marine Fisheries Commission - to develop a joint plan addressing habitat, water quality and related issues. Work on the plan is still underway.

DMF for years has had its own program for restoring oyster reefs by dumping tons of empty oyster shells in selected places, providing ideal conditions for oyster larvae looking for a place to attach. The division is now coordinating with the N.C. Coastal Federation, a non-profit conservation group, on several oyster reef restoration projects along the coast.

“It’s a good working relationship,” says Sarah King, the federation’s habitat restoration specialist. “They also have an oyster shell recycling program that has been very helpful to us.”

Oyster shells have become an important and scarce commodity in recent years. To increase the supply, DMF established shell drop-off sites for individuals and businesses, and it arranges for

pick-up at community or church gatherings that produce a large volume of shells. The shells are aged to eliminate contaminants before they are barged to favorable sites.

The division has a wide array of other responsibilities, including registering commercial vessels, setting size limits on fish,

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and licensing commercial fishermen, gear, seafood dealers, spotter planes, fishing piers, bait salesman, nonresident commercial vessels and sales of fish at fishing tournaments, among other things. It has its own enforcement branch, the Marine Patrol.

With the coast’s large and diverse groups of fishing interests, no one expects the provisions of the Fisheries Reform Act and division regulations, policies and management decisions to enjoy 100 percent support.

“Unfortunately, the actions we take are going to have an effect on people that they might not see as a benefit to them,” says Jimmy Johnson of Washington, commission chairman. The Fisheries Reform Act brought about many changes. But the challenge that remains before the commission and the division, Johnson says, is trying to manage fisheries for the good of all.

“It would be real easy to make certain species off-limits to certain segments,” he says. “But that’s the easy way out. It would be admitting defeat. It would be saying you can’t do what you’ve been asked to do.”

