

Sheepshead Fishery Overview
South Atlantic State/Federal Management Board
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Introduction

The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) does not currently manage sheepshead (*Archosargus probatocephalus*) through the Interstate Fisheries Management Program. The following is an overview of the life history, commercial landings and recreational harvest, and current state level management.

Life History

Sheepshead are a common marine fish found from Nova Scotia to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The population that ranges from Nova Scotia to Cedar Key is regarded as a subspecies, *A. p. probatocephalus* (Murdy and Musick, 2013). They can be found near jetties, wharves, pilings, and shipwrecks in waters warmer than 15.5 °C (60 °F). Adults mature between 2-5 years of age, with approximate size at maturity for males between 7-14 inches and 9-14 inches for females (SC DNR, 2013). They can grow up to 35.4 inches (2.95 ft) TL with a weight exceeding 9.6 kg (>22 lb), and average size and weight varying along the Atlantic coast. Sheepshead can live up to 35 years (Liao et al., 2009).

Sheepshead spawn in both near and offshore waters within proximity to wrecks and reefs during late winter and early spring, with juveniles inhabiting grassy flats and dispersing to high relief, hard bottom-areas as they mature. Sheepshead are omnivorous, but feed mostly on crustaceans (FWC, 2013) using their strong molars and incisors to crush shell. Studies have shown that prey type (crustaceans vs. small fish) may correlate to relative jaw strength in sheepshead (Crew, 2013).

It is unclear whether sheepshead are a true migratory species. Evidence suggests in both the Gulf and Atlantic regions that sheepshead migrate from nearshore to offshore areas, where as in some instances they inhabit state waters year-round (SC DNR, 2013).

Landings

Sheepshead are sought after in both commercial and recreational fisheries, but are primarily a recreational caught species (figure 1). Over the last 30 years, recreational harvest has made up approximately 74% of the total harvest of sheepshead.

Commercial

Commercial landings for sheepshead have averaged approximately 550,000 pounds annually over the last 30 years, reaching a high of approximately 1.09 million pounds in 1992, and low of approximately 357,641 pounds in 2006. During this time commercial landings have predominately been in Florida, with an increasing proportion of landings in North Carolina (Figure 2). In 2012, commercial landings coastwide in the Atlantic totaled approximately \$397,363.

Recreational

Recreationally, sheepshead on the Atlantic coast are primarily caught in the southern states. Over the last 5 years, Florida has landed over 50% of the harvested sheepshead (figure 3), while also

accounting for the largest percentage of harvest over the last 30 years (68%). The second two highest harvest of sheepshead over the same time period have been in South Carolina (11%) and North Carolina (10%); North Carolina had the seconded highest harvest in 2012 at 32 percent.

Fishery Management

Sheepshead along the Atlantic coast are currently managed at the state level, primarily among the southern states. Current regulations and management measures vary state-to-state (table 1), with a few states within the population range having no management measures for both the commercial and recreational fishery.

Table1. Sheepshead Recreational and Commercial Management Measures

State	Recreational	Commercial
New Jersey	none	none
Delaware	none	none
Maryland	none	none
Virginia	4 fish possession limit	500 lbs trip limit
North Carolina	none	none
South Carolina	14" TL; 10 fish possession limit, not to exceed 30 per boat per day	none; bycatch allowance
Georgia	10" FL; 15 fish possession limit	10" FL; 15 fish possession limit
Florida	12"; 15 fish possession limit	12"; restricted species endorsement required; multiple hook restriction; must remain in whole condition until landed ashore; allowable incidental bycatch up to 50 lbs in shrimp trawls