

STATE-MANAGED SPECIES – SHEEPSHEAD

Goal and Objectives

None

STATUS OF THE STOCK

Life History

Sheepshead are a relatively large and long-lived member of the porgy family that ranges from Nova Scotia, Canada to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico south to the Atlantic coast of Brazil. They are generally found year-round in North Carolina's coastal waters ranging from inshore brackish waters to offshore rocky bottom. Juveniles are associated with shallow vegetated habitat as well as hard structures that offer protection. As sheepshead grow larger, they move to more typical adult habitat including oyster reefs, rocks, pilings, jetties, piers and wrecks. Migration patterns based on mark recapture studies have not documented large scale north-south movements. Movement instead tends to be towards inlets during the fall and winter when adult sheepshead migrate to ocean waters to spawn.

Sheepshead are omnivores, meaning they eat plant material as well as animals (barnacles, crabs, oysters). Sheepshead grow quickly up to age 6, and then their growth slows. After their first year, sheepshead average 10 inches, at which less than 50 percent of the individuals are sexually mature. Most sheepshead mature at age 2 (12 inches) and all sheepshead are mature by ages 3 to 5 (14 inches). In North Carolina, sheepshead commonly attain a length of 20 to 25 inches with weights ranging from 5 to 15 pounds. The maximum reported age in North Carolina is 29 years.

Stock Status

The Division is continuing to collect data from recreational, commercial, and independent sampling efforts to estimate trends in abundance of sheepshead; age structure, maturity, and other biological information is also being collected.

Stock Assessment

Currently, there is not a stock assessment for sheepshead in North Carolina.

STATUS OF THE FISHERY

Current Regulations

In 2015, the NCMFC implemented a 10-inch fork length (FL) minimum size limit for both recreational and commercial fisheries. There is a recreational bag limit of 10 fish per person per day or per trip (if a trip occurs over more than one calendar day). Commercial fishing operations are limited to 300 pounds per trip with two exceptions; gig and spear operations are limited to 10 fish per person per day or trip (if a trip occurs over more than one calendar day), and pound net operations are exempt from the commercial trip limits.