

Monkfish

Fishery Management Plan

Species Managed Under Fishery Management Plan (FMP)

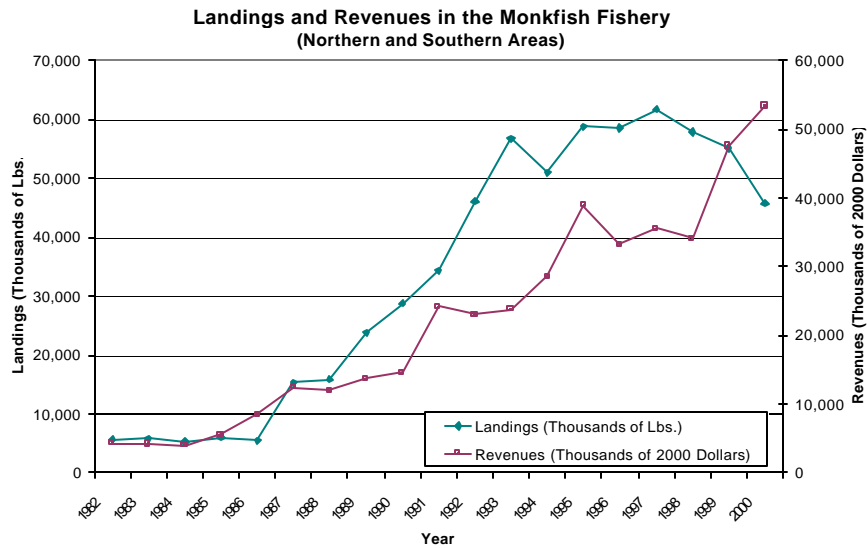
The monkfish (also known as goosefish) is a member of the anglerfish family Lophiidae, bizarre fishes distinguished by an appendage on the head known as the illicium which has a fleshy end (esca) that acts as a lure to attract prey within the range of its large mouth. Monkfish have a large, bony head and are harvested for their livers and the tender meat in their tails. The species is distributed widely throughout the Northwest Atlantic, from the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, and is known to inhabit waters from the tide-line to depths as great as 840 meters across a wide range of temperatures. Adults have been found on a variety of substrate types including hard sand, gravel, broken shell and soft mud. Spawning occurs in May and June from Cape Hatteras to southern New England. Mature females, which are slightly larger than males, produce a non-adhesive, mucoid egg raft or veil which can reach 18-36 feet in length and ½-5 feet in width. During spawning this large mass of eggs can account for up to 50% of a female's body mass. Monkfish are managed as two stocks, a northern stock from Maine to Cape Cod, Massachusetts and a southern stock from Cape Cod to North Carolina.

Management Plan Overview

During the early 1990s fishermen and dealers in the monkfish fishery addressed both the New England and Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Councils with concerns about the increasing amount of small fish being landed, the increasing frequency of gear conflicts between monkfish vessels and those in other fisheries and the expanding directed trawl fishery. In response, the Councils developed a joint fishery management plan that took effect in November 1999. The FMP is designed to stop overfishing and rebuild the stocks through a number of measures, including: limiting the number of vessels with access to the fishery and allocating days-at-sea those vessels; setting trip limits for vessels fishing for monkfish; minimum fish size limits; gear restrictions; mandatory time out of the fishery during the spawning season; and a framework adjustment process.

History of the Fishery

Reported landings of monkfish increased dramatically from the late 1970s until the mid-1990s and have remained high. Burgeoning markets for monkfish tails and livers in the 1980s allowed fishermen to fish profitably for monkfish, landing increasingly smaller monkfish as the stocks became depleted. Since the implementation of the FMP, however, vessels are more commonly landing large, whole monkfish for export to Asian markets. Revenues have generally increased since the mid-1980s and the relative value of monkfish is currently at its highest point since 1996.



Fishery Status

While monkfish is not currently overfished in the northern stock area, it is in the southern area, and overfishing is occurring across the entire range of the species. Biomass declined during the 1980s and 1990s but has stabilized or increased since then. The average size of monkfish caught in Northeast Fisheries Science Center (NEFSC) trawl surveys has declined and there are fewer older, larger fish in the population. Abundance has increased in the northern region in recent years, suggesting increased recruitment. Biological and population data are insufficient at this time to conduct an age- or length-based stock assessment for monkfish, and the stock is currently managed using biomass indices derived solely from the NEFSC trawl survey data. Because so few monkfish are captured in these surveys, this data alone may not be an adequate means of determining stock status. In early 2001, the NEFSC and monkfish fishermen cooperated on a comprehensive trawl survey using commercial fishing vessels. The survey was very successful in advancing the scientific understanding of monkfish distribution and biology and population characteristics.

