

5. PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Ocean region (where fishing grounds overlap sea turtles) and roughly 5% of the total effort in terms of number of hooks set per year in this area.

Research on Hawaii-based longliners by the Council, NMFS and the fishing industry has developed an array of methods for mitigating longline-seabird interactions. Recent trials with a new side-setting longline technique have shown that seabird interactions can be reduced to almost zero. The Council has recently recommended the establishment of a model swordfish longline fishery to conduct trials with sea turtle mitigation technology developed by NMFS in the Atlantic. This new method of fishing employs 18.0 circle hooks and mackerel bait, which in the Atlantic reduced loggerhead turtle interactions by 92% and with leatherback turtles by 97%. The model fishery will also offer further opportunities to test turtle mitigation technology, and to serve as a demonstration of environmentally responsible longline fishing for foreign longline fleets that fish in the Pacific.

5.3. ECOSYSTEM-BASED MANAGEMENT

In 1996, NMFS convened the Ecosystem Principles Advisory Panel (EPAP) to assess the extent to which ecosystem principles are used in fisheries management and research and to recommend how such principles can be further implemented to improve management of US living marine resources. Based on the recommendations from the EPAP, the Western Pacific Council integrated many of the basic principles and policies of ecosystem-based fisheries management into its Fishery Management Plan for Coral Reef Ecosystems. The Council recognizes that the Coral Reef Ecosystems FMP represents just the first step in developing Fishery Ecosystem Plans as recommended by the EPAP. The Council also acknowledges that the complexities involved in ecosystem-based management will require years of research, development and understanding of ecological systems that produce and support fishery resources.

To begin working toward incorporating ecosystem-based management principles into all FMPs and development of true Fishery Ecosystem Plans, the Council will convene an Ecosystem-based Management Workshop next year to explore this complex approach to fisheries management. Of immediate importance is gaining an understanding of the relationship between managing fisheries on an ecosystem and trophic interaction levels rather than managing fisheries by traditional

single species management approaches. An initial approach will be to consider the fishery resources managed by the Council broadly split between those confined to the island archipelagoes that comprise the Western Pacific Region and the highly migratory species that range across the pelagic ecosystem of the Pacific Ocean. It is also of equal importance to understand the implications of ecosystem-based management in light of the National Standards required by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Recognizing that ecosystems are neither static nor predictable, the basic tenants of ecosystem-based management must be founded on an adaptive management approach.

5.4. ACCESS BY INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The Western Pacific Council will continue to focus on providing adequate access to marine resources by indigenous communities in the US Pacific islands. The Council's Indigenous Program seeks to establish the legal, scientific and historical bases to justify preference rights for Native Hawaiians, Samoans, Chamorros and Carolinians in the Council's geographic area of authority. The Council will continue to develop and strengthen support for preference rights of the indigenous people of the US Pacific islands to provide opportunity and access for the native people in fisheries. In addition, there is growing interest in investigating contemporary applications of traditional conservation methods used by indigenous Pacific islanders. The Council sees an opportunity to accommodate this growing interest through the Council process and will continue to work with Congress to recognize indigenous fishing rights and increase the benefits that indigenous peoples derive from fisheries.

5.5. STOCK ASSESSMENTS

The Western Pacific Council has placed a major focus on conducting stock assessments to implement the new biomass-based overfishing control rules. The Council will hold a Bottomfish Stock Assessment Workshop in January 2004 and a Coral Reef Stock Assessment Workshop in February 2004 to initiate this new priority. A stock assessment for striped marlin is expected by early 2004, and region-wide stock assessments of mahimahi, wahoo, opah and pomfret species are priorities for the future.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The fisheries in the Western Pacific Region are unique compared to other US fisheries. The physical differences are striking, as the Region comprises a scattering of small islands across the tropical Pacific with an immense collective EEZ, little coastal shelf and an economic reliance on fisheries for highly migratory pelagic species. Fish and fishing have unique socio-cultural significance for the indigenous peoples of the Western Pacific Region, and it was primarily with this in mind that the interests of island indigenous peoples were embodied in the Magnuson-Stevens Act. NMFS also recognized the unique characteristics of the US Flag Pacific Islands which lay behind the

decision which led in 2003 to the creation of the Pacific Islands Region, with a new regional office and science center in Honolulu.

The challenge for the Western Pacific Council is to manage fisheries within its jurisdiction for the benefit of the people of the area and to participate at the international level in the management of highly migratory stocks. This will require mainstreaming best practices for minimizing bycatch of species such as sea turtles and seabirds and incorporating principles of ecosystem-based management into all existing FMPs. Equally essential is the Council's continued work to provide indigenous communities access to marine resources so that this rich cultural tradition may persist for future generations.