



SCIENCE AND MANAGEMENT 101: BYCATCH



Opah at the Hawai'i fish auction.

When out fishing, fishermen do not always keep all of their catch and throw some fish back for a variety of reasons. This is called bycatch.

The legal definitions are a bit more complicated, and it depends on which domestic law or international agreement is consulted. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSA) defines bycatch as fish that are harvested in a fishery that are not sold or kept for personal use. This

does not include fish released alive under a recreational catch-and-release fishery management program. Fish, as defined by MSA, means finfish, mollusks, crustaceans and all other forms of marine animal and plant life other than marine mammals and birds.

The MSA definition includes economic and regulatory bycatch, which are two main reasons fishermen might throw catch back.

- **ECONOMIC DISCARDS** are fish that are discarded because they are of undesirable size, sex or quality, or for other economic reasons.
- **REGULATORY DISCARDS** are fish that are caught but discarded because regulations do not allow fishermen to retain the fish; for example, fishermen may be required to discard fish under a certain size or of a specific species for conservation reasons.

The MSA requires Fishery Management Councils to minimize bycatch when developing management

measures for federal fisheries under its jurisdiction. If bycatch cannot be avoided, the Councils are required to minimize the mortality of the bycatch and released fish to the extent practicable to ensure the extended survival of the fish.

In the Western Pacific Region, fishermen tend to keep and utilize many different types of fish, so bycatch is minimal in many fisheries. In Hawai'i, one of the species that went from a bycatch to a retained status is opah. There wasn't much of a market for them until a popular local chef started using them in his restaurants. Now opah is very popular and gets a good price so fishermen know to bring them back. Less bycatch!

In the Hawai'i and American Samoa longline fisheries, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council has treated protected species, such as sea turtles, seabirds and marine mammals, similar to bycatch and has long supported efforts to reduce fishery impacts on them. 🐟