Mississippi At-Sea Observer Program

Overview & Results from 2016 - 2024

Background

- Program began in 2016 under NFWF funding
  - State funding in 2021
  - RER funding began in 2022
    - Data standards consistent with Alabama and Florida
- At-Sea Observer activities run concurrent with the Red Snapper season
- 182 Observer trips completed

Vessel Participation

- Participation is voluntary
- Participating vessels include both state and federal for-hire
  - 8 Federal vessels (6-pack and multi-passenger)
  - 3 State vessels
- Vessel compensation is $300/trip
- All vessels operate as charter boats – no head boats
- Vessel access is contingent with 6-pack rules

At Sea Observations

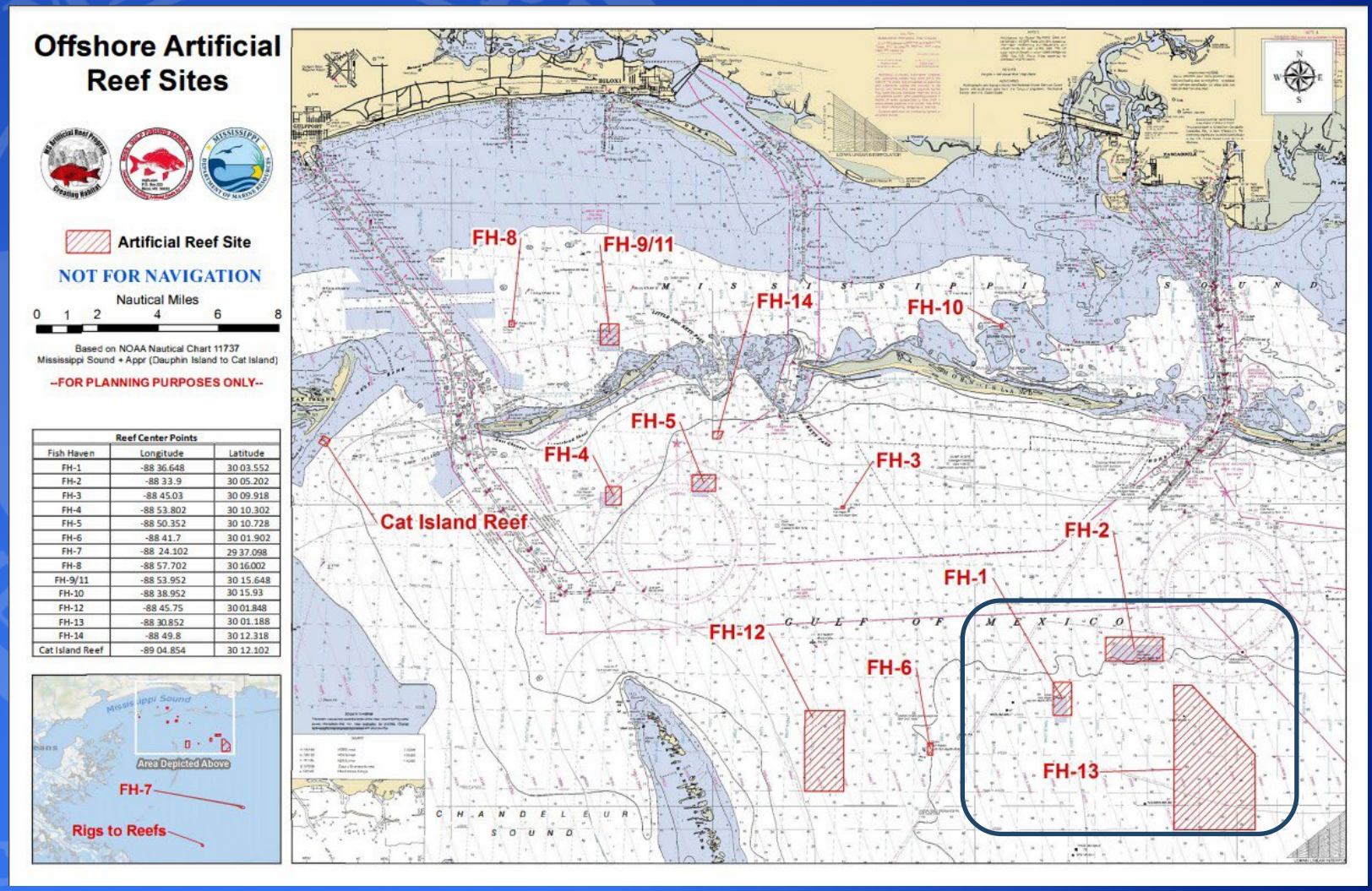
- Primary Observations
  - Area / depth fished
  - Number of discards
  - Fish Lengths
  - Barotrauma levels
  - Catch & release methods
  - Condition of fish upon release
  - Predator interactions

Dockside Sampling

- Fish Level Data Recorded
  - Lengths
  - Weights
  - Sex
  - Otoliths for Age / Growth
  - Gonad Stage

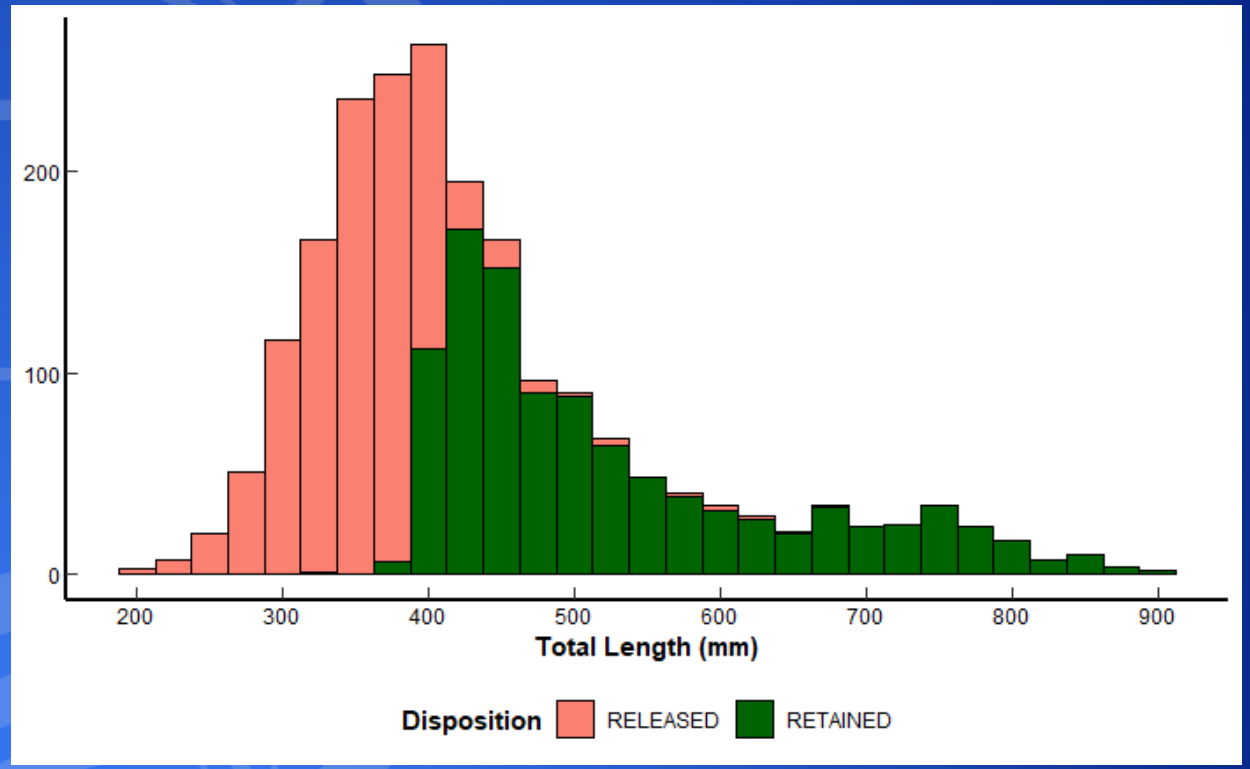
Areas Fished

- 88% of Observer trips completed on Fish Havens 1, 2, and 13
- 12% of for-hire effort in areas to the south of fish havens
- Avg bottom depth of 71 ft



Catch and Discard Statistics

- 4,939 fish observed
- 98% total fish were red snapper
- 2,531 fish discarded (51%)
- 2,408 fish harvested (49%).
- Avg Length of discards – 14.33”
- Avg length of harvested – 21.25”

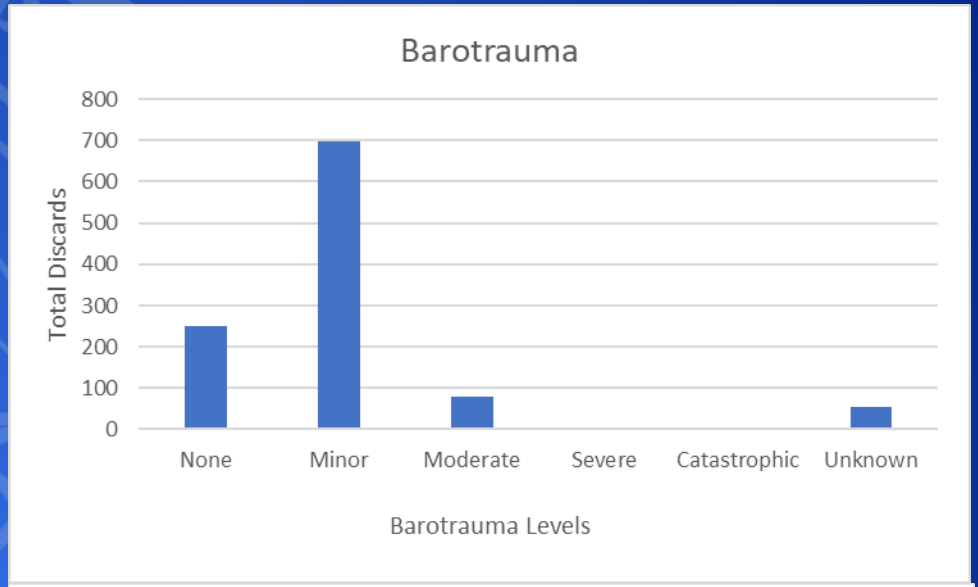


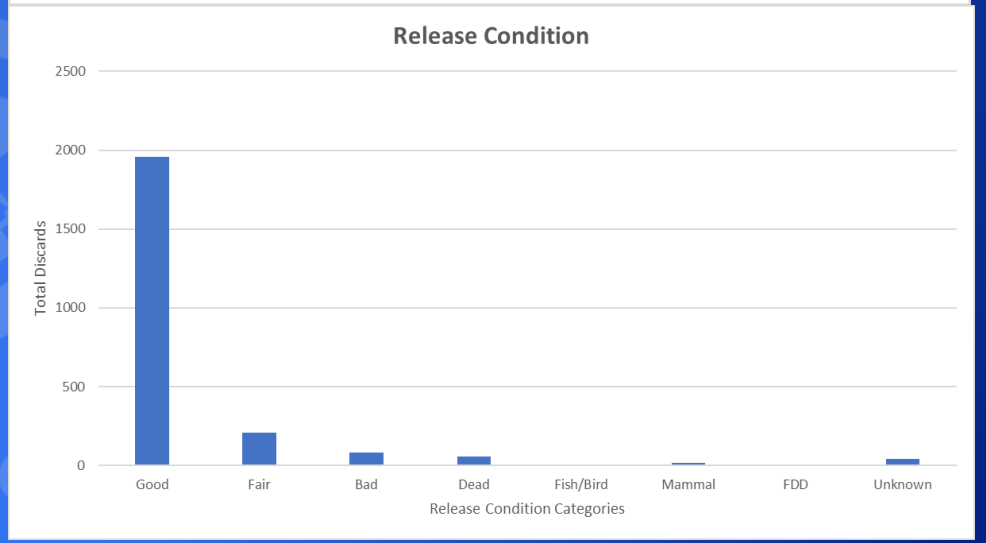
Tags and Recaptures

- Began tagging in 2022
- 622 reef fish tagged (55% of total discards)
- 33 Recaptures
- Recapture Rate = 5.3%
- All but one reported in the same vicinity as initial capture

Barotrauma and Release Condition

- 84% of reef fish discards had a good release condition and did not struggle at the surface after release
- With the average fishing depths at ~70 feet, most barotrauma levels were minor
- Predator interactions were rarely observed but dolphins were present for the majority of trips





Alternative Uses of Observer Data

- Metrics associated from the fishery often show contrast across and within years
- These metrics can be used to inform trends in the overall fishery
- By combining multi-state observer data alongside other fishery dependent observations, a suite of metrics could be potentially developed as management alternatives to supplement monitoring removals

Questions?