

Species Profile: Cobia

Cooperative Efforts Seek to Improve Management of Stock

Introduction

Avidly pursued by recreational anglers as ready biters and fierce fighters, cobia support recreational fisheries throughout the South Atlantic and into the Mid-Atlantic region. A fast growing, moderately lived species, they occur most abundantly from Chesapeake Bay through the Gulf of Mexico, preferring to stay close to structure to feed and find shelter from predation. While the 2013 stock assessment indicated overfishing was not occurring and the stock was not overfished, spawning stock biomass has experienced a general decline since 2002. A benchmark stock assessment is scheduled for 2019 through the SouthEast Data, Assessment and Review (SEDAR) process.

Landings are driven by the recreational fishery, with the commercial fishery primarily being a bycatch fishery. The Commission approved the Interstate Fishery Management Plan (FMP) for Atlantic Migratory Group (AMG) Cobia in October 2017. The FMP was initiated due to recent overages of the federal annual catch limit (ACL) for AMG cobia, which disrupted fishing opportunities and jeopardized the health of the stock. The Commission FMP introduces state-specific allocations of a coastwide recreational harvest and maintains the commercial regulations set under the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) FMP.

Life History

Cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*) are distributed worldwide in tropical and warm temperature waters. They occur along the Atlantic coast from Nova Scotia to Argentina, and are most abundant in U.S. waters from Chesapeake Bay south through the Gulf of Mexico.

Male cobia typically reach sexual maturity by 2 years (generally 2 feet long), while females are sexually mature by 2-3 years (generally 3 feet long). Females grow to be larger than males, and may reach 6 feet and weigh up to 100 pounds. An extended spawning season occurs from late June to mid-August along the Southeastern U.S., and from late summer to early fall in the Gulf of Mexico. Cobia are broadcast spawners; a single female may spawn many times each season. Cobia make seasonal migrations, wintering in the south and moving north for the summer months. They are drawn to structure to feed and find shelter from predation. Juveniles and adults are often found around live bottom, wrecks, and buoys, as well as flotsam and seaweed mats. Their diet consists primarily of fish and crustaceans.

Commercial & Recreational Fisheries

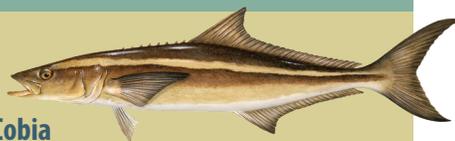
Enthusiastically pursued by recreational anglers, cobia support an important recreational fishery throughout the South Atlantic and into the Mid-Atlantic region. Primary methods include bottom fishing with natural bait as well as sight-casting, which has gained popularity in recent years. The annual recreational harvest of AMG cobia, found along the US Atlantic coast from New York to Georgia, has varied erratically with little trend since 2005, ranging from 328,000 to 1.7 million pounds. Landings have increased within the past two years. In 2015 and 2016, recreational anglers landed approximately 1.7 million and 1.3 million pounds of cobia, respectively. These are the two highest values in the time series, which extends back to 1981. These harvests resulted in significant overages of the federal ACL and federal fishery closures in 2016 and 2017.

The commercial fishery is on a much smaller scale, but has increased from 2011 to 2016. Primarily a bycatch fishery, it is has been associated with the snapper/grouper hook and line fishery and troll fisheries for many South Atlantic species, although more directed fisheries have recently developed in some areas. Commercial restrictions are consistent throughout the range, with a 2 fish per person possession limit, 6 fish vessel limit, and a 33" fork length minimum size limit. The two greatest commercial harvests in the time series, which extends back to 1950, occurred in 2015 (83,000 pounds) and 2016 (84,000 pounds).

Stock Status

Two cobia stocks are recognized off the U.S. Atlantic coast; AMG cobia and Gulf of Mexico Migratory Group (Gulf cobia), occurring throughout the Gulf of Mexico and extending to Florida's east coast. The SAFMC manages the Atlantic stock, and is allotted a small portion

Species Snapshot



Cobia

Rachycentron canadum

Common Names: black kingfish, black salmon, ling, lemonfish, crabbeater, prodigal son, black bonito, sergeantfish, yew, cubby

Management Unit: New York to Georgia

Family: Rachycentridae

The name originates from the Greek words 'rhachis' (spine) and 'kentron' (sting), and was inspired by the dorsal spines that make up the first dorsal fin.

Interesting Facts

- Cobia is the only species in the family Rachycentridae.
- They are a close relative of remoras, suckerfish known for attaching to large marine mammals, sharks, and ships using a suction disk on top of their heads.
- They migrate seasonally, wintering in the Gulf of Mexico and moving up the coast as far as Massachusetts in the summer.
- Cobia feed primarily on crabs, squid, and fish, but will also follow large animals (sharks, turtles, manta rays) to scavenge what they leave behind.
- They are one of the best candidates for warm, open-water marine fish aquaculture due to their fast growth rate and the high quality of their flesh.

Maximum Size: 6.5 feet, 172 pounds

Life Span: 14 years old

Stock Status: Not overfished nor experiencing overfishing



Photo (c) Aaron Game

of the Gulf stock's ACL to manage the Gulf cobia which extend along the Atlantic coast of Florida. Genetic studies continue to explore appropriate stock boundaries, and an upcoming 2018 Stock Identification Workshop may result in modifications to these boundaries.

The 2013 SEDAR stock assessment indicated overfishing was not occurring and neither stock was overfished. ACLs were established as a precautionary measure to prevent the stocks from reaching an overfished status. Despite the stock status, the last assessment showed a general decline in spawning stock biomass since 2002. Since the assessment, recreational harvests have continued to be highly variable and exceeded the ACL (620,000 pounds) in 2015 and 2016. Future overages could lead to the stock becoming overfished. The stock status is expected to be updated by the upcoming SEDAR stock assessment in 2019.

Atlantic Coastal Management

In 2017, the Commission approved the Interstate FMP for AMG Cobia. Complementing many aspects of the SAFMC's cobia regulations for federal waters extending from Georgia through New York, the FMP was initiated in response to recent overages of the federal ACL for AMG cobia. Managing the recreational ACL on a coastwide basis has resulted in federal closures and significant fishing opportunities and jeopardizing the health of the stock.

Under the Interstate FMP, the recreational fishery is managed with a one fish bag limit and a minimum size limit of 36" fork length (FL) or total length equivalent. Vessel limits will be determined once individual states set their seasonal restrictions, but may not exceed six fish per vessel. State-specific allocations of a coastwide

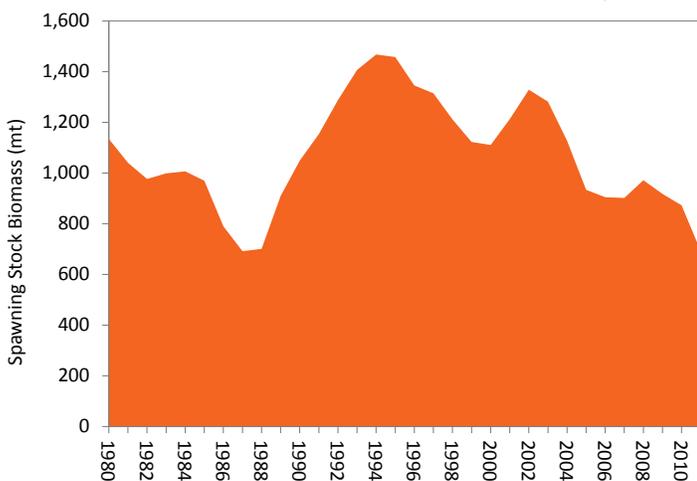
recreational harvest limit that is equivalent to the federal AMG cobia recreational ACL of 620,000 pounds result in the following state-specific soft targets:

- Georgia - 58,311 pounds
- South Carolina - 74,885 pounds
- North Carolina - 236,316 pounds
- Virginia - 244,292 pounds

Recreational harvest of state-specific allocations will be evaluated over a three-year time period. If states exceed their soft harvest targets, states will be required to adjust management measures to achieve the soft harvest target in the subsequent three-year period.

The commercial fishery will maintain the current management measures as implemented through the SAFMC FMP and continue to be managed with a 33" FL minimum size limit and two fish limit per person, with a six fish maximum vessel limit. The federal ACL of 50,000 pounds is allocated to the entire commercial fishery from Georgia through New York. The commercial AMG cobia fishery will close once the ACL is projected to be reached. The FMP provides the opportunity for states to declare *de minimis* status for their recreational fishery if landings constitute less than 1% of the recreational AMG cobia harvest. For more information, please contact Mike Schmidtke, Fishery Management Plan Coordinator, at mschmidtke@asmfc.org.

Cobia Spawning Stock Biomass
Source: SouthEast Data Assessment and Review , 2013



Cobia Commercial & Recreational Landings
Source: ACCSP Data Warehouse, 2017

