

Salton Sea Fisheries Long-term Monitoring

Draft Quarterly Report: Summer 2005

Salton Sea Program
Department of Fish and Game
78078 Country Club Dr., Ste. 109
Bermuda Dunes, CA 92203

Introduction:

The California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) is monitoring the status and trends of the Salton Sea fisheries. This will require a compilation of sampling results over several years. In the spring of 2003, Department personnel started quarterly sampling at fourteen stations around the sea, as the basis of a long term monitoring program. To allow comparison of current and future monitoring efforts by CDFG to past results, the following protocol was adapted from those previously used by researchers at the Salton Sea.

Each quarter, if conditions allow, this protocol will produce about 816 net-hours of sampling. After each quarter's sampling is completed this draft report will be prepared, summarizing the numbers and species of fish netted, and calculating the overall and species-based catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE). This report will also offer qualitative comments on the condition and breeding status of each species. After annual repetitions of seasonal sampling, enough data will be collected to allow statistical tests for significant differences in numbers, seasonality, and site use, by and among the four species of fish.

Methods:

The sampling sites comprise three broad habitat types: pelagic (3 sites), near-shore (8 sites), and estuarine (3 sites). The pelagic sites are in the approximate middles of the north basin, south basin and inter-basin areas of the Sea. The near-shore sites are spaced widely apart, four each, near the west and east shores, to capture as much breadth of habitat as possible. The estuarine sites are in the body of the Sea, close enough to the mouths of the New, Alamo, and Whitewater Rivers, to be under the influence of their outflows. See Table 1. for the exact locations of all sites.

Sampling takes place during each of the putative seasons, as follows: spring- April and May; summer- July and August; fall- October and November; winter- January and February. We will attempt to compress the total sampling period into as few days as possible, to the extent that the weather, equipment maintenance, and personnel scheduling constraints allow. Nets are typically set at one or two sites in the morning, and hauled in after approximately 24 hours. The exact number of hours set is recorded for each net, to the nearest quarter-hour.

Fish are sampled by deploying multi-panel monofilament gill nets with 6 X 30 foot panels of 0.5, 1, 2, 3, and 4 inch mesh. Two nets are set at all sites at the water's surface. The nets are set far enough apart to allow room for maneuvering a boat during setting and retrieval, usually 100-200 meters. The nets at near-shore and estuarine sites are set in 2.5 to 4.5 meters of water, typically 200-300 meters from the shore.

Two additional nets are set at the bottom of water column at the three pelagic sites. The conditions fish experience at the bottom in deep water is different enough from the surface water,

in dissolved oxygen, light, food availability and temperature, that this can be considered a discrete habitat, and thus we sample it as though it were a separate site.

At the time of each set and retrieval, water depth, water temperature, conductivity, salinity, and dissolved oxygen are measured and recorded.

When nets are pulled in the following day, all fish are removed and immediately stored on ice. Data are collected from these fish as soon as possible, almost always the same day they are hauled in.

All fish are identified to species level and counted. For the four sport fish in the Salton Sea, (tilapia, Gulf croaker, orangemouth corvina and sargo) weights, lengths (fork length), sex, physical condition, and reproductive status are recorded. Fish above five pounds are weighed to the nearest ounce. Fish below five pounds are weighed to the nearest half ounce. Lengths of fish under 50 centimeters are recorded to the nearest millimeter. Lengths of fish over 50 centimeters are recorded to the nearest centimeter. The sex of all adult fish is determined by dissection. A sample of at least ten fish of each species is also dissected to determine physical condition and breeding status.

Changes to Protocol after Year One:

Our protocol is designed to elucidate long-term trends in the fisheries. Until very recently, deep water habitats have provided some low level of productivity for the fisheries, and were important habitat components to sample. Since we began sampling, however, our three deep water sites have been completely unproductive, a costly element of our efforts, and the least probable site for fish use, given the severe reduction in population size which we have discovered.

We have therefore temporarily eliminated sampling at the three deep water sites, which reduces our efforts by 288 net-hours, to a quarterly total effort of 528 net-hours. We leave these sites in the protocol, since they will likely provide useful information about population trends and habitat use, should the fisheries rebound to levels which allow robust comparisons among these and the other sampling sites.

All future comparisons of CPUE that we make will be among quarterly data sets that exclude previously sampled deep-water sites from the calculations. The CPUE values for our first year will then be higher overall, but the comparison between years will be valid. Our data are not designed to determine absolute numbers, but to show trends.

Results:

Our Summer 2005 sampling session was conducted from July 14 through August 11. We sampled a total of 527 net-hours at 11 sites.

Table 2. shows the numbers of fishes sampled at each site. Total numbers of fish sampled, with CPUE in parentheses, were: 3,605 tilapia (6.847). All sites produced fish this quarter, with the exception of the Whitewater River estuary. Our sampling at the Test Base site produced a remarkable haul of 1,176 fish, surpassing our previous single largest haul of 1,096 fish, which was also from the Test Base site, during last summer's sampling period. Incidental catches included a single striped bass, and a single sailfin mollie.

Tilapia were in three approximate size classes, as discussed below. Extremely hot weather, the lengthy handling time required for such large numbers of fish, and the resultant autolysis of the fish, reduced our opportunities to measure all fish this quarter. To establish the size classes in the following table, 1,416 fish, or about 40% of the samples, were measured

directly. The sizes of the rest of the fish were inferred from the net panel in which they were collected. For all fish, no sex, stomach contents, or condition data were collected.

Discussion:

We are in our third year of monitoring the Salton Sea fisheries. Chart 1. shows a comparison of all results for tilapia, by season. Note that the scale is logarithmic, for ease of viewing. Although denoted as years 2003 and 2004, the Winter seasons’ sampling actually took place in January and February of the following calendar years.

Our sample size this season was the largest for tilapia since we began monitoring the fishery. The CPUE from this season’s sampling represents a 42% increase compared to our results from last summer’s sampling period. We previously predicted a relatively robust tilapia fishery in 2005. This expectation of an expanding tilapia population has been born out by our sampling results, increased angler success*, and somewhat perversely, by the persistence of widespread fish kill events.

The sizes of individual tilapia were consistent with our observations of repeated successful reproduction and recruitment, and the development of age structure in the population. The following table presents the range of sizes and their relative percentages in the last six quarters’ sampling results.

Sample Period	Size Class 1.			Size Class 2.			Size Class 3.		
	Range (mm)	n	%	Range (mm)	n	%	Range (mm)	n	%
Spring ‘04	67-70	4	22	134-173	14	78	----	0	---
Summer ‘04	60-70	785	31	120-160	1,751	69	180-200	8	<1
Fall ‘04	64-79	11	2	120-197	615	98	265-290	4	<1
Winter ‘05	----	0	---	125-197	34	100	----	0	---
Spring ‘05	----	0	---	132-194	45	100	----	0	---
Summer ‘05	60-73	1,152	32	123-175	2,443	68	228-308	10	<1

No Gulf croaker, orangemouth corvina, or sargo were sampled this period. These three marine sport fish species have been undetectable by gill netting since mid-May, 2003. This represents 4,919 nets hours of effort. In addition, none have been detected in fish kills, or presented by anglers during the last 12 months.

* We infer increased angler success from anecdotal sources such as self-reported results by anglers at the Salton Sea State Recreation Area, and informal contact with anglers by DFG Wardens. We have not undertaken any formal gathering of angler data, such as creel censuses.

Table 1. Locations of Sampling Sites

SITE NAME	HABITAT TYPE	UTM COORDINATES
Whitewater River	Estuarine	11S 0587948
		3707343
New River	Estuarine	11S 0621567
		3666958
Alamo River	Estuarine	11S 0628480
		3675635
North Shore	Near-shore	11S 0598465
		3709237
North Wister	Near-shore	11S 0628368
		3685497
Bat Caves	Near-shore	11S 0607427
		3699864
South Salton City	Near-shore	11S 0604971
		3682198
North Desert Shores	Near-shore	11S 0589366
		3699424
The Dome	Near-shore	11S 0596997
		3690022
The Cliffs	Near-shore	11S 0615062
		3691509
Test Base	Near-shore	11S 0608813
		3672196
North Basin	Pelagic	11S 0596156
		3701218
Inter-basin	Pelagic	11S 0606837
		3689452
South Basin	Pelagic	11S 0618275
		3678697

Table 2.

Date	Site	Net-hours	Tilapia	Croaker	Corvina	Sargo	Other	Total Fish	CPUE
7/15/2005	The Dome	48	44	0	0	0	0	44	0.92
7/15/2005	South Salton City	49	9	0	0	0	0	9	0.18
7/22/2005	The Cliffs	49	239	0	0	0	1	240	4.88
7/22/2005	North Wister	49	196	0	0	0	0	196	4.04
7/27/2005	Whitewater River	47	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00
7/27/2005	North Desert Shores	48	36	0	0	0	0	36	0.75
8/2/2005	Test Base	47	1176	0	0	0	0	1176	25.02
8/2/2005	New River	48	525	0	0	0	0	525	11.05
8/5/2005	Alamo River	48	81	0	0	0	0	81	1.71
8/11/2005	North Shore	48	427	0	0	0	1	428	8.99
8/11/2005	Bat Caves	48	872	0	0	0	0	872	18.36
Totals		527	3605	0	0	0	2	3607	6.851

Other fish included a striped bass at the Cliffs and a sailfin mollie at North Shore

Chart 1.

Tilapia Year-to-Year

