

Recreational Access to Southern Flounder

While the proposed changes to the management of the Blue Crab fishery have drawn a lot of attention, it's important to remember that there are other very important issues on the agenda for next week's MFC meeting.

One of these issues is the vote to send Amendment 4, to the Southern Flounder FMP, out for public comment and AC review. Amendment 4 contains only one option for the MFC to consider, to increase the recreational allocation of the quota to 50% in 2025, or not.

The intent behind Amendment 4, and Amendment 5 which is also currently being developed, is to increase "recreational access" (and only recreational access) while maintaining the rebuilding requirement of a 72% reduction.

That's right, the State is currently working on two Amendments, at the same time, both with the same goal, to increase recreational access to the Southern Flounder resource.

Why just recreational access?

Has recreational access been more severely restricted, by Southern Flounder management, than commercial access has?

Absolutely not!

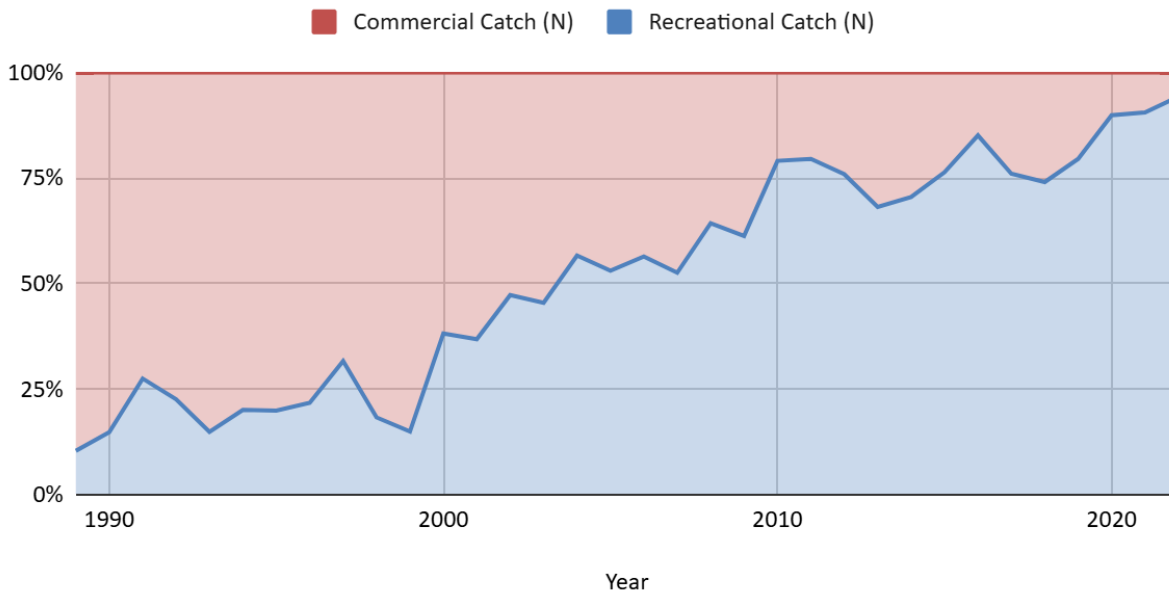
Unlike commercial access, which relies solely on harvest, recreational access can be either harvest or catch and release, depending on individual angler preference.

That said, in order to determine the impacts of management on overall "recreational access" you have to look at total catch (harvest and releases) over time.

Below is a graph, based on DMF data, showing total catch, in numbers of fish, for both sectors from 1989-2022. We chose to use numbers of fish, rather than pounds, because we feel it's more representative of what's actually occurred, due to changes in size limits

and the absurdly low average weight DMF has assigned to recreational discards, of just 0.21 pounds per fish.

Recreational Catch vs Commercial Catch of Flounder (1989-2022) in Numbers of Fish (N)

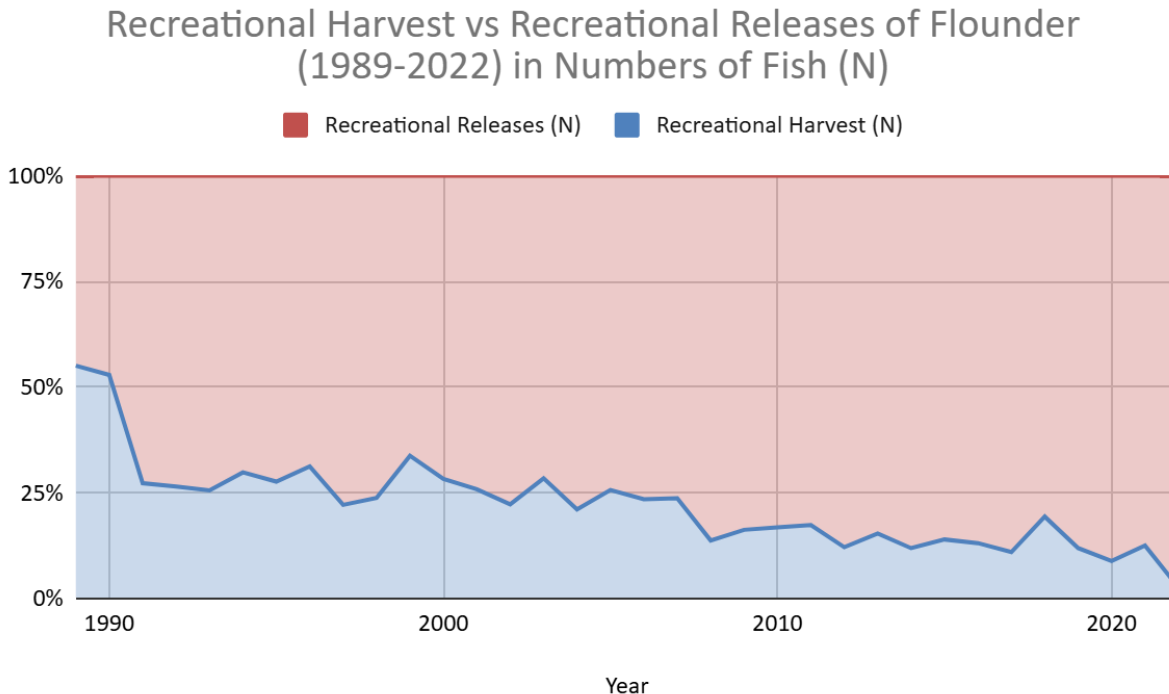


As you can see, recreational access, at least the ability to catch flounder, has increased dramatically as regulations have increased. In fact, recreational catch now makes up a higher percentage of the combined total removals, for both sectors, than commercial catch ever did, even at its peak in the mid 90's.

The truth is, after decades of "managing" the Southern Flounder fishery, the only quantifiable benefit has been to recreational access, which has increased 10-fold!

On the other hand, over the same time period commercial harvest (Access) has been reduced by more than 90%.

Admittedly, recreational harvest has been reduced, not as severely as commercial harvest, but it has been significantly reduced. In comparison, the other aspect of recreational access, catch and release fishing, has grown exponentially and as a result so have recreational dead discards.



While the State claims to have taken actions that would reduce total removals (harvest and dead discards), in both sectors, by 72%, they failed to implement management measures that would reduce recreational dead discards. Instead, they've allowed releases and subsequent dead discards to increase over time, choosing to "account for dead discards" rather than manage them.

Simply put, the DMF and MFC chose, once again, to only manage harvest and are deducting the fish killed by catch and release anglers from the Total Allowable Landings (Harvest).

As a result, the recreational sector has continually exceeded their Total Allowable Catch until, in 2024, their harvest season was closed.

To make matters worse, the MFC chose to increase the recreational allocation, above traditional levels, essentially penalizing the commercial sector for their own failure to effectively manage recreational removals.

So, how do they increase recreational allocation/access while maintaining the 72% reduction for both sectors?

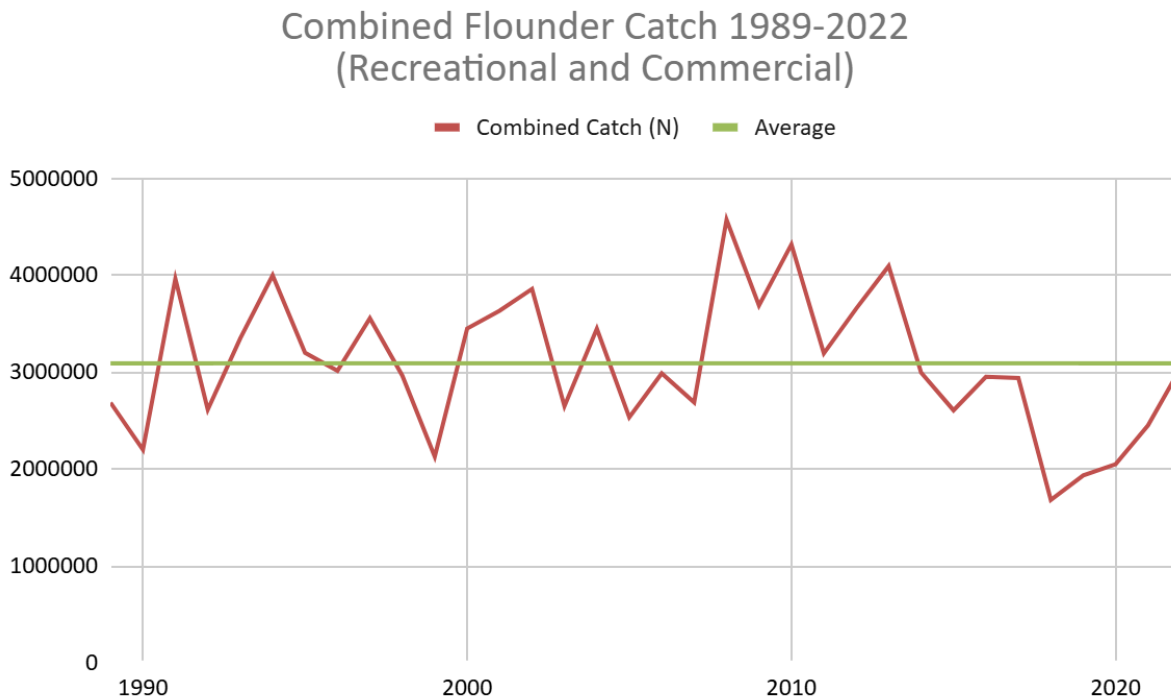
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They don't!

When the 50%/50% allocation is implemented, the recreational reduction will be 47% and the commercial reduction will be a whopping 81%, further decreasing commercial access, for the sole purpose of increasing recreational access.

How does this represent fair management?

If the State continues down this path, no one, commercial or recreational will be harvesting flounder in North Carolina, yet we'll still be catching the same number of flounder as we always have.



Despite what you may have heard, the number of flounder being caught has been stable over time. The only change has been who's catching them and whether they're harvested or not.

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How does overall catch remain stable in a fishery that's supposedly been overfished for 30 years?

This is a question everyone should be asking but no one is. Instead, you're all fighting for a piece of the meager 532,352 pounds the States flawed stock assessment says can be "sustainably" harvested!

I want to make one thing perfectly clear, while we used the Divisions data to make our point, we're not saying this data is accurate. What we are saying is this.

The data used by the Division and the Marine Fisheries Commission to assess and manage the Southern Flounder fishery does not support many of the decisions they've made, including their decision to increase recreational access/allocation at the expense of the States commercial fishermen and seafood consumers.

The same can be said for the Speckled Trout fishery which is also on the chopping block at next week's MFC meeting!

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