

Great Goliath Grouper Count

By Betty Staugler

Water LIFE / Sea Grant



On June 2nd and 3rd trained divers from across southwest Florida participated in the Great Goliath Grouper Count (GGGC). The GGGC is a Florida Sea Grant pilot project designed to provide a regional snapshot of goliath grouper size distribution and minimum abundance values for designated nearshore and offshore artificial reefs in Southwest Florida. Project partners sampled approximately 60 sites between Collier and Pinellas Counties.

Although the data is still coming in from the various counties, preliminary results from 45 surveyed sites reporting so far show a total of 213 goliath groupers counted. Four boat teams (thirteen volunteers/divers) participated from Charlotte County covering thirteen artificial reef sites. These reefs included The Capt. Jeff Steele, Tremblay, Novak, M14, Stump Pass, Mary's, Phosphate Dock, Charlotte Harbor Reef, Boxcars, Pegasus, Charlie's Twin Barges & 88 Steel and Culverts. The greatest goliath grouper counts reported by the Charlotte teams came from the Twin Barges, Boxcars and Phosphate Dock.

Survey participants included local government staff, charter captains and volunteer divers. All of the participants attended a required training session on survey methods prior to conducting the survey.

This was important in ensuring that data collected across the region was done so in a uniform way. The data collected during our survey will be analyzed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Results are expected in mid August.

Survey participants collected data on goliath grouper abundance and size distribution at each location as well as information on site conditions (i.e. reef materials, reef size, maximum relief, depth, visibility and temperature). Documenting site conditions will assist managers in determining how habitat characteristics may affect goliath grouper distribution.

Management of the goliath grouper, the largest member of the seabass family, has become an intensively debated issue in recent years. Historically, goliath grouper was relatively common and highly conspicuous in portions of its range. However, it proved to be vulnerable to fishing pressure and due to significant declines in abundance through the 1960s-80s, taking of goliath grouper was prohibited in U.S waters in 1990. In 1994, goliath grouper was listed as critically endangered on the IUCN World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Species. The species has since been protected in Brazil (2002), Puerto Rico (2004) and the US Virgin Islands (2004).

Following the granting of protected



species status, abundance has appeared to increase over the past decade, but the extent of the recovery is not clearly understood. Information on historical abundance is limited and not precise. Likewise, information on perceived increase in abundance over the past decade is limited and it is difficult for fisheries managers to truly understand the extent to which it has recovered throughout its geographic range.


The most recent stock assessment (2004) indicated that goliath grouper in Florida waters were recovering, but that the population may not experience full recovery until 2020 or later. Because the harvest of goliath grouper is prohibited, the conclusions of the stock assessment were made in the absence of certain types of biological information that is typically available for other species through the

examination of harvested individuals.

Plans for future stock assessment: The Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission will conduct a statewide assessment in 2010 and the National Marine Fisheries Service will conduct a more comprehensive assessment in 2014.

The GGGC was an opportunity to provide resource managers with data that can be used in the 2010 stock assessment as well as stock assessments planned in the future. While our pilot project was regional in scope, it is hoped that the GGGC will eventually be implemented as a statewide project that will incorporate a wide participant base.

Betty Staugler is the Florida Sea Grant Agent for Charlotte County. She can be reached at 941.764.4346. Sea Grant is a University of Florida IFAS program.



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