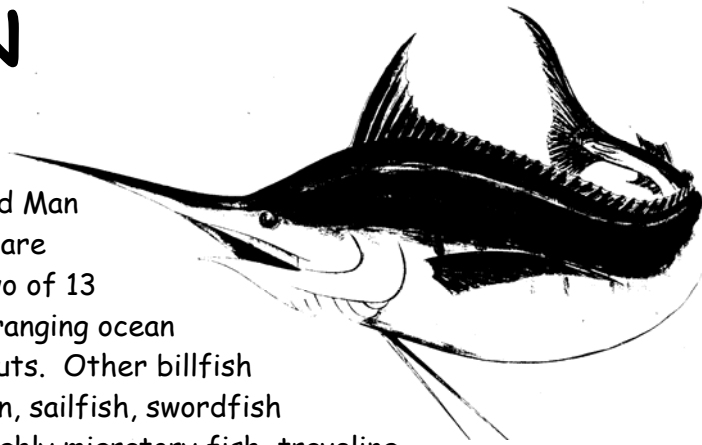


BLUE MARLIN

Perhaps best known as the fabled adversary of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," the blue marlin - there are Atlantic and Pacific varieties - are two of 13 species known as billfish; large, far-ranging ocean giants named for their spear-like snouts. Other billfish include black, white and striped marlin, sailfish, swordfish and spearfish. The blue marlin is a highly migratory fish, traveling across vast ocean areas to feed and spawn. Blues prefer tropical to sub-tropical waters offshore and feed on a variety of fish and squid. They are a fast-growing animal, reaching between 10-14 feet in length, with adult females growing to over 1,200 pounds. But these beautiful behemoths are disappearing from the world's oceans. Marlins are at the top of the ocean food chain, and have few natural enemies. They are not biologically designed to sustain the kind of heavy fishing pressure they've been subjected to for the last four decades.



MARLINS, "ACCIDENTAL VICTIMS" OF COMMERCIAL FISHING, ARE AMONG THE MOST THREATENED FISH IN THE ATLANTIC. Billfish are solitary animals that exist in relatively small populations. They are caught for sport and for food around the world. By far the largest number of marlin, however, are killed as "bycatch." Many thousands of these large ocean predators die as incidental catch on non-selective fishing lines and in nets set to capture other species. In 1998, 96 percent of the total catch of marlins and sailfish in the Atlantic was taken in commercial fisheries for tuna and swordfish, primarily on multi-mile drift longlines. Thousands are drowned each year in purse seine fisheries netting tuna. The situation is much the same in the Pacific.

AT THE CURRENT RATE OF FISHING, SOME SPECIES OF MARLIN COULD BE GONE IN LESS THAN 10 YEARS. According to a recent study by a panel of international scientists, the Atlantic blue marlin population has been reduced to two-fifths of what is considered a safe and healthy level. In 2003, blue marlin were being fished out at an unsustainable pace, 4 times faster than they can reproduce. (The status of Pacific blues is unknown.) But the white marlin, found only in the Atlantic, is in the most dire condition. The number of whites has declined over 90% since the 1960s. The population is currently estimated to be 12% of what fishery scientists believe it should be. With these threatened fish being removed 7 times faster than they can replace themselves, some biologists fear that, without aggressive action, white marlin could be headed toward extinction, with blue marlin not far behind.

THE U.S. IS ONE OF A FEW COUNTRIES WITH STRICT BILLFISH PROTECTIONS IN PLACE. INTERNATIONAL CONSERVATION IS JUST GETTING UNDERWAY. The U.S. outlawed the commercial sale of Atlantic marlin, sailfish and spearfish in 1989, in order to head off a rapidly developing market for the thousands of billfish caught accidentally by our tuna and swordfishermen. (Although swordfish are considered a billfish, in the U.S. they are the target of a major commercial fishery and managed separately.) The U.S. also has strict limits on the taking of billfish by recreational fishermen. In fact, anglers concerned about the fate of these big game

fish have voluntarily reduced the number they bring to the dock by more than 90% since the mid-1980s, so that today American billfishing is virtually all catch-and-release.

OCEAN RESERVES ARE NEEDED TO PROTECT MARLIN FROM "FATAL INTERACTIONS" WITH LONGLINES. Even though the directed commercial fishery for billfish was shut down years ago, bycatch in the U.S. pelagic longline fleet is still responsible for 9 out of 10 marlin killed in U.S. waters, which in recent years has averaged over 3,000 fish a year. That's because fishing with longlines is like laying an underwater minefield. The average mainline used in the U.S. and foreign longline fisheries is 25-40 miles long. From these drifting lines hang thousands of hooks that remain in the water for 12 hours or more. Although the target species are high-value tunas and swordfish, any pelagic animal capable of taking a hook is a potential - and likely - victim, including sharks, sea turtles and marine birds. To reduce fatal longline interactions with non-target and protected species, the U.S., in response to a lawsuit by the National Coalition for Marine Conservation (NCMC), has closed over 130,000 square miles of coastal waters to longlining, although these no-longlining zones primarily benefit swordfish, sharks and sailfish. Additional areas are being put off limits to protect endangered turtles.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IS KEY TO PROTECTING BILLFISH WORLDWIDE. Any effective conservation program for highly migratory marlins must be international in scope. Because marlin are a byproduct of commercial fishing worldwide - kept and sold if it profits the vessel, thrown back if it doesn't - billfish conservation is not a high priority for most fishing nations. Finally, that's beginning to change. ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, is the body responsible for billfish management in the Atlantic. No comparable international body exists in the Pacific, although ICCAT's record is hardly worthy of imitation. Not until 2000, in fact, did ICCAT get serious about halting the long and precipitous decline of marlin populations. That year, under pressure from the NCMC and others, the commission recommended cutting landings of blue marlin by 50% and white marlin by 67%, while asking fishermen to release all live billfish. These measures are still in place, and it remains to be seen whether or not these measures, if fully enforced, will be enough to start depleted marlin populations on the road to recovery.

THE NATIONAL COALITION FOR MARINE CONSERVATION (NCMC) SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS TO IMPROVE BILLFISH CONSERVATION: The main focus of billfish conservation must be minimizing the number of fish killed as bycatch in other fisheries. The most viable means of avoiding this bycatch is creating ocean reserves where known feeding, spawning and nursery grounds are off limits to indiscriminate fishing gears. The U.S. should analyze marlin "hot spots" and enact additional closed areas to protect these fish in our home waters. We should also explore changes in fishing gear and practices, such as the use of circle hooks and short "soak times" to increase release survival. Anglers, who already release 9 of 10 billfish, must take every possible precaution to make sure these fish live. New studies are needed to assess the post-release survival of fish released by both commercial longliners and sport fishermen.



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