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Making a Difference

In the AFTCO Tag/Flag Tournament, the Big Winners Are the Fish

By Charlie Levine

IN THE 1980s, ANGLERS FISHING the offshore canyons along the Northeast and mid-Atlantic coasts enjoyed an amazing tuna bite. As word spread and more crews perfected their techniques, the catch ratio surged. On any given day, you would see huge packs of boats working these deepwater ledges, and few of them went home empty-handed. The tuna caught were often sold at the dock, boxed up and shipped off to Japan. Conservation, let alone tagging, wasn't the preeminent thought in most captains' minds.

One such tuna trip off of New Jersey with Capt. Pete Barrett and AFTCO's Bill Shedd and Greg Stotesbury became the impetus for a new era in conservation.

"That trip always stuck in my mind," says Barrett, a charter captain for 30 years and the former editor of the New Jersey edition of *The Fisherman* magazine. "We went on an overnight trip starting at Hudson Canyon. We caught bigeye, yellowfin and albacore tuna. On our way in, we stopped at an area

known as the Slough and caught some bluefin and small yellowfin as well. On that one trip, we were able to catch all four of the major tuna species in the Atlantic. We tagged 27 tuna and took home fish. I think it really got Bill thinking."

Shedd saw the value of these tuna, not in terms of the price per pound, but as a resource. "We could count hundreds of sport-fishing boats with the naked eye and knew many hundreds more were out of sight," Shedd says. "Very little tagging data was available for Atlantic tuna at that time, as only a handful of fish were tagged each year. It seemed obvious that at some point in the future, there would be management issues with this valuable resource. If we waited until that problem existed to gather tagging and other important data, it would be too late. By the end of the trip, I was set on developing a program to help increase tag and release."

In 1987, Shedd and Stotesbury came up with the Tag A Tuna For Tomorrow program. At that time, the National

Marine Fisheries Service was the main source for tags and tagging data. To help increase access to tags, Shedd convinced NMFS to let AFTCO distribute their tags through tackle stores. "Among other things, we had to ensure NMFS that we could develop a process that would allow us to know where every tag was at any given moment," Shedd says.

While no money was given out, AFTCO generated \$50,000 in tackle awards with help from friends in the tackle industry as an incentive to par-





ticipate. "As it turned out, that was not very effective," Shedd says. "Recognition in fishing magazines and the individual Tag A Tuna flag that people hung on the walls of their homes and the story that went with it proved to be better incentives for future participation."

The program took hold, and many captains and anglers got on board. Capt. Al Anderson, who runs the *Prowler* out of Point Judith, Rhode Island, won his first AFTCO award in 1989 for tagging bluefin tuna. A biologist by training, Anderson started tagging fish in 1968 and has tagged more than 45,000 to date, including more than 5,000 tuna, and won the AFTCO Flag Award 13 times. "Bill Shedd's efforts to elevate the profile of pelagic-game-fish tagging was a tremendous success and, thanks to the effort of the IGFA, became a well-known, highly recognized pinnacle-of-the-sport event," Anderson says.



Capt. Al Anderson poses with one of the 5,000 tuna he has tagged in the name of conservation.



In 1987, AFTCO's Bill Shedd and Greg Stotesbury tagged 27 tuna in one day with Capt. Pete Barrett, sparking the idea to start a tagging tournament.

Captains such as Anderson and Barrett, who were already tagging fish, felt honored once their efforts began to get recognized. Soon, many more captains followed suit. "We learned from Tag A Tuna that what really motivates people to participate is the sense of doing something valuable for the resource," Shedd says.

Two years after the Tag A Tuna program began, the tournament added a billfish category. "In 1990, we created the yearlong AFTCO Tag/Flag Tournament for both captains and anglers in the Atlantic," Shedd says. "It quickly became the most recognized and prestigious tagging awards program — in large part because of the credibility of the wide range of entities who partnered in the effort."

Ed Scott, the former head of the NMFS Atlantic tagging project called Shedd and asked if AFTCO could put together a tagging-awareness program to include billfish. "He wanted us to expand on the very successful Tag A Tuna tournament, which had greatly increased awareness of, and participation in, the tag and release of bluefin and yellowfin tuna."

Hundreds of captains and anglers started participating in the event — no

entry fee required. By simply tagging fish and handing in the corresponding tag cards, crews gained automatic entry into the tournament, and the event continually grew. "The best year of our program has always been the most recent year," Shedd says.

For that reason, many in the sport-fishing community were surprised when Shedd announced that 2006 would be the final year of the Tag/Flag. When AFTCO lost access to tagging data from The Billfish Foundation, they had no choice but to end the tournament, which used data from both TBF and NMFS to determine the winners of the yearlong event, according to Shedd. However, the tagging legacy they started 20 years ago continues on today.

Move to the Pacific

With success in the Atlantic, a division soon began in the Pacific, where awards were presented at the United Anglers of Southern California annual banquet.

"While Tag/Flag is best known for helping to increase tagging participation in the Atlantic, the Pacific offers a clear example of its value," Shedd says. "In the 1990s, almost all marlin caught in Hawaii were brought ashore.



The Tag/Flag Tournament helped spread the word of conservation and changed the view of anglers around the world.

According to Kona charter captain Gene Vanderhoek, that changed in large part due to the Tag/Flag Tournament. Gene was one of the first to begin tagging marlin in Hawaii. He won the Pacific Captain of the Year Award and received a great deal of recognition. He started receiving charters from anglers who previously fished on other boats, but wanted to fish with a captain who would release their marlin. Today more than 75 percent of the marlin caught in Kona are released."

Capt. Peter Hoogs, who runs the *Pamela*, a 41-foot Kona-based charter

boat, also helped spread the word about tagging in Hawaii. Hoogs first tagged a billfish in 1971 and won the Pacific Blue and Black Marlin Award in 2002 and 2005. "I think most of the Kona charter fleet is involved with the tagging program to some extent, and the tournaments as well," Hoogs says. "It's a big misconception that we kill all our billfish in Hawaii, and it really needs to be shown that that's not the case."

Off the coast of Guatemala, Capt. Ron Hamlin tagged and released thousands of sailfish, winning numerous awards. But for Hamlin, tagging is a way



By tagging fish and filling out the tag cards, captains and anglers provide valuable information for scientists.

of giving back to the sport, and it's not the trophies that motivate him, although he does appreciate the accolades (he has won the Pacific Sailfish Award seven times). Hamlin began tagging fish long before any awards or recognition was given out. "I tagged my first sail off the *Sail Ahoy* as a mate in 1963," he says. "I continued to tag as a captain from the early '70s on with the *Big Blue*, the *Prowess*, the *Marauder* and the *Emotional Rescue*, tagging blues, whites, sails, swords and giant tuna."

Hamlin saw the program grow tagging interest in the Atlantic and change perceptions in the Pacific. The tournament also helped the public understand that big-game fishing isn't about killing large fish. Many charters began calling, seeking to learn more about tagging and conservation. "All anglers interested in tagging know that if they fish with me on the *Captain Hook*, they get to leave their name in history as a conservationist," Hamlin says.

Using the Data

Tag return rates are less than 1 percent, which means thousands of tags must be deployed before you see any real results. Once a tagged fish is retrieved, the information is extremely valuable. Scientists can determine growth patterns and migration routes. For anglers, this same information can help them find the fish.

"I tag for selfish reasons," says Capt. Paul Ivey, who won the Atlantic Captain of the Year Award four times from 2000 to 2005. "I don't do it for the

The Birthday Tag

Capt. Paul Ivey, who has won the AFTCO Atlantic Captain of the Year Award several times, did most of his tagging in the fertile waters off of Venezuela. In 2002, he fished off Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic for the first time. While fishing on the *Blue Fox*, he tagged white marlin and some blues as well. On the way back to Venezuela, the crew made a pit stop in Puerto Rico for some boat work, but managed to get a bit more fishing in.

"We tagged six blues on my birthday, July 14," he says.

One of those fish, it turned out, followed Ivey back to Venezuela. Three months after tagging those fish on his birthday, Capt. Jimmy Grant re-captured one of the blue marlin on Venezuela's famous La Guaira bank.



publicity. I tag fish to help gather data. I'm interested in where these fish go."

With information gathered from the early days of the program tagging tuna, fishery managers saw that tuna did in fact cross the Atlantic, meaning that catches overseas affect the population of fish off the U.S. "NOAA told us not to worry about the French fleets catching up tons of tuna, yet some of the fish I had tagged were re-caught off Africa," Barrett says.

"During the 1980s, everybody was going to the canyons for tuna," Barrett says. "The charter boats had this term, 'rolling the doughnut,' which meant you got skunked. Back then, nobody was rolling the doughnut. But we realized the one thing missing was that no one was tagging these fish, so we couldn't capture any information."

As the 1990s came around, Barrett began to see more guys rolling the doughnut. He became an advisor to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, and the numbers proved what his eyes were seeing — the tuna were disappearing.

Impressive Numbers

Since the inception of the AFTCO Tag/Flag awards, captains and anglers have tagged thousands of fish. Here are a few facts that stand out in Bill Shedd's mind:

- In 1999, Ron Hamlin tagged 1,477 sailfish in the Pacific.
- Sam Jennings won the Atlantic Blue Marlin Angler Award from 2003 to 2006. In 2006, he tagged 105 blue marlin.
- Capt. Al Anderson tagged 1,063 Atlantic tuna (bluefin, yellowfin, albacore and bigeye) in 1999.
- Bob DeGabrielle finished up strong in the Tag/Flag, winning the Atlantic Angler of the Year Award in 2003, 2004 and 2006.
- In 2002, AFTCO brought back swordfish to the competition, marking a significant rebound in the fishery.



The 2006 winners of the Tag/Flag Atlantic division. Back row (left to right): Rob Kramer (IGFA) and Bill Shedd. Middle row: John Jennings, Jules Boudreau, Capt. Burt Moss, Capt. Gary Cannell and Capt. Ray Rosher. Front row: Bob DeGabrielle and Capt. Bubba Carter.

"Tagging of these fish helped scientists prove that yellowfin and tuna in the Atlantic make the crossing into European waters and the Mediterranean," Barrett says. "Frank Mather was among the first scientists to make this argument for bluefin tuna, but the tagging done by captains and anglers in the Atlantic proved that yellowfin also make the crossing."

As more data became available, it was apparent that a global approach would be the only way to conserve the dwindling populations of tuna. The battle still rages today, but thanks to tagging, scientists have more data to help fishery managers base their decisions.

When asked how many tag returns he's had on tuna, Anderson says, "I'm not sure of the exact number, but they certainly number in the hundreds. NMFS had so many of my transatlantic tag returns that they eventually stopped reporting on it in their annual newsletter. Although NMFS indicated budgetary reasons for publication cessation, those knowledgeable indicated a number of their scientists supporting the two-stock/little-mixing theory were embarrassed. It also threatened the federal funding for their research. Politics at its finest."

The Tag/Flag program also made an impact on the local tournament scene. More events introduced tag-and-release categories or installed an all-release format. "The Tag/Flag program really did raise the level of consciousness. It showed that the only way we could learn anything about these fish was to poke a tag in them," Barrett says. "The information received helped raise the value of tuna as a resource and a game fish."

Promoting conservation and tagging efforts remains an uphill battle today, but thanks to the forward thinking of men such as Bill Shedd and Greg Stotesbury, not to mention the countless captains and anglers who take the time to tag fish, we now know more about migratory fish than ever before. The AFTCO Tag/Flag competition will be missed, but the work of all those involved will never be forgotten.

"Bill has a very unique way of looking at things, and he's very energetic and passionate about conservation," Barrett says. "Bill is constantly working behind the scenes. A lot of people might not know it, but he's done great things to help the resource. It was his enthusiasm that got so many people to tag fish."