

Let's Compare Apples to Apples in our Fishery Statistics

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A recent editorial by Jerry Fraser, publisher of the commercial fishing industry news publication *National Fisherman*, caught my attention. The editorial, titled "NOAA Report Reaches to Compound the Interest and Rewards of Sport Fishing," downplayed statements by NOAA in a November press release regarding its annual *Fisheries of the United States* report. While making some worthwhile points about proper comparisons of commercial and recreational fishing's economic contributions, others were off-base, warranting a response in event readers outside of that publication's core audience take note.

Mr. Fraser is correct in saying the \$5.3 billion in 2016 commercial landings do not account for the value created as raw fish landed by commercial harvesters moves through the economy. This is a good point and must be considered when comparing the economics associated with recreational and commercial fisheries. He correctly claims, though NOAA doesn't make the direct comparison, outsiders might erroneously compare the billions in commercial landings to the greater billions spent by recreational anglers, which would be an apples-to-oranges comparison.

So, let's take an apples-to-apples look. Such data are provided in NOAA's *Fisheries Economics of the United States 2015* report, the latest source for fisheries economics insights. This report tells us in 2015 \$5.2 billion in fish and shellfish landed **dockside generated \$52 billion in economic activity** as it moved through the economy, exchanging hands between processors, distributors, wholesalers, retailers and restaurants. The economic effects associated with imported seafood are excluded. This is a multiplier of 10. Very respectable!

This same publication tells us U.S. saltwater anglers spent \$28.7 billion annually. This is the amount spent at retail by anglers, which is not to be confused with their economic impact created as sportfishing tackle and travel dollars move through the economy. Much of the multiplier effect associated with recreational fishing could be said to occur prior to anglers' purchases as raw materials such as metals, resin and cork have already undergone value-added processes to produce fishing tackle. Even with anglers' lower multiplier of roughly two, their overall **economic contribution of \$63.4 billion remains greater than that of commercial fishing** – which is especially notable given anglers take only a fraction of the total numbers and pounds of fish landed by the commercial sector (e.g., two percent of all domestic finfish are harvested recreationally, compared to 98 percent commercially) and anglers do not even pursue many of the same species targeted by our commercial friends.

The *National Fisheries* article states "there is no basis" for the value of the recreational catch. This is simply not true. NOAA spends considerable effort monitoring anglers' effort and catch, and in developing better data collection efforts just as they do for commercial fisheries.

While the seafood industry has 'bottlenecks' in the industry, such as fish houses and other points, that allow for effective and feasible data collection and tracking, anglers do not have such bottlenecks.

The nation's 9 million saltwater anglers begin and end their trips from countless public and private ramps,

docks, backyards, beaches, roadside causeways and more.

Monitoring all recreational landings and trips as is done for the commercial sector, while enviable, will never be feasible. NOAA therefore employs scientific surveys to determine catch, just as is done with household surveys by many other government agencies and private companies.

While the recreational sector supports NOAA's ongoing efforts to develop even better recreational data, to claim there is no basis for recreational estimates is misleading at best.

Finally, a note of caution. Mr. Fraser concludes by implying there is no true economic impact from recreational fishing. He quotes a New Zealand researcher: "Counting [recreational] fishers' spending on groceries and restaurants during fishing trips as an economic impact of fishing... only makes sense if fishers would not have eaten anything if they had stayed home."

This is a living-in-a-glass-house moment. If wild seafood were no longer available, would we not still have plenty of food options available? Aquaculture continues to gain larger and larger shares of American's fish and shellfish diet.

Only a fraction of most American's diets is comprised of wild and aquaculture seafood.

Under Mr. Fraser's implied logic, one would have to wonder if there is truly any economic value to the commercial industry.

I personally think the commercial seafood sector provides the U.S. with significant economic benefits, most of the time from healthy fisheries that do not compete with recreational fishing. As an above average purchaser of wild fish and shellfish products, I'd hate to see these options ever disappear from my menu.

To make sure we have sustainable, healthy fisheries, let's be sure to engage in healthy, reasonable debate based on facts.

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