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THE Fisherman

No. 25
June 19, 2008

page 18
**pending
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page 6
**heads up for
BIG BASS**

**109!
BIG BAY
BOOMER**



page 9

**THE SEARCH
for better science**



WEEKLY PUBLICATION



Some of the fish netted during a NEAMAP trawl on May 16 off Cape May.

Surveying The Data:

A Look Inside The NEAMAP Project

The Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program aims to improve fisheries information and fisheries management.

By Karen E. Wall

Jimmy Ruhle looked at the computer monitor over his right shoulder, then nudged the throttles on the *Darana R*, increasing her speed slightly as she cruised along no more than a mile off the coast of Cape May.

"That should put us in the right range," he said, eyeing the computer's measurements on the opening of the trawling net.

The he returned to his original train of thought. "I got involved because I wanted to help improve the data."

"And these guys do a heckuva job."

"These guys" were the scientists from the Virginia Institute of Marine Sciences (VIMS) who had taken over the *Darana R*, turning the commercial trawler into a floating science lab, with one purpose: to supplement and improve the data gained from trawl surveys conducted offshore by

the National Marine Fisheries Service with data from independently conducted inshore trawl surveys.

That effort, known as NEAMAP – the Northeast Area Monitoring and Assessment Program – resulted from growing concerns about the quality of the information being used to manage the fisheries along the East Coast. In October 1997, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) approved a resolution to begin developing "a coordinated fisheries-independent sampling program in the Northeast region," according to the NEAMAP web site.

The data they gather is one part of the basis for the stock assessments on the fish species that are covered by fishery management plans up and down the East Coast. Frustration has grown within both the recreational and commercial fishing communities as regulations have continued to tighten on some stocks that have shown a significant improvement.

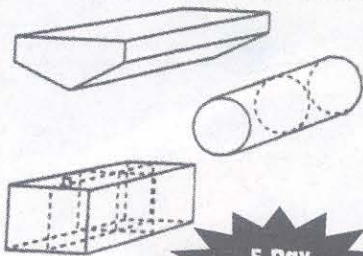
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Capt. Jimmy Ruhle (left) and his deckhands, son Bobby and Rigoberto Rodriguez (far right) deploy the net for the trawl.



Questions about every aspect of the science being used to determine those regulations – especially regarding the stock assessments – have increased.

That's why Ruhle, who's been a commercial fisherman for 47 years, got involved. "I got sick of hearing about their 'best available data,'" Ruhle said. "Best Available Data – B-A-D. I wanted to help improve it."

"I don't mind backing off when I know a species is in trouble," Ruhle said, "but I'm seeing more of some species that are supposedly overfished than I've seen in my entire career."

GETTING INVOLVED

NEAMAP is, in many ways, a direct descendant of SEAMAP, a similar surveying and monitoring program that covers the Atlantic coast from Cape Hatteras south around the tip of Florida and into the Gulf of Mexico. Jim Gartland, the lead scientist on the NEAMAP trawl survey, said the ASMFC saw how SEAMAP was working and felt a similar effort would benefit its fisheries management efforts as well.

Though it was initiated in 1997, it wasn't until 2005 that the money was in place to conduct a pilot survey, Gartland said. Between 1997 and that pilot survey, a panel was convened to help design not only the survey, but the gear involved as well, down to the very net itself. Ruhle chaired the panel, and Gartland said that when it came time to find someone to perform the trawls, after some searching around, they realized there was no better option to perform the trawls than someone so involved in designing the net.

"He knows better than anyone how it's supposed to work," Gartland said, and added that if there is a problem with it, Ruhle and his crew – which includes Ruhle's son, Bobby, and mate Rigoberto Rodriguez – are able to repair it.

In the fall of 2006, the ASMFC came up with enough money to perform a pilot survey, marking 100 stations from Montauk to Cape Hatteras, Gartland said, and the NEAMAP survey was able to sample 98 of them.

But as 2007 approached, there was not enough money to continue the survey. The cost of conducting surveys in the spring and fall runs between \$900,000 and \$1 million, Gartland said. Then the Northeast Fisheries Science Center offered to assist if the survey was expanded to cover from Martha's Vineyard to Montauk as well. Gartland said they didn't even have to think twice about it, and in the fall of 2007, the survey sampled 150 sites from Martha's Vineyard to Cape Hatteras, providing a wealth of data never looked at previously.

WHAT'S IN A SAMPLE?

Each sample consists of a 20-minute tow through a specified sampling site. Gartland and Ruhle said they have a list of primary sites as well as secondary,

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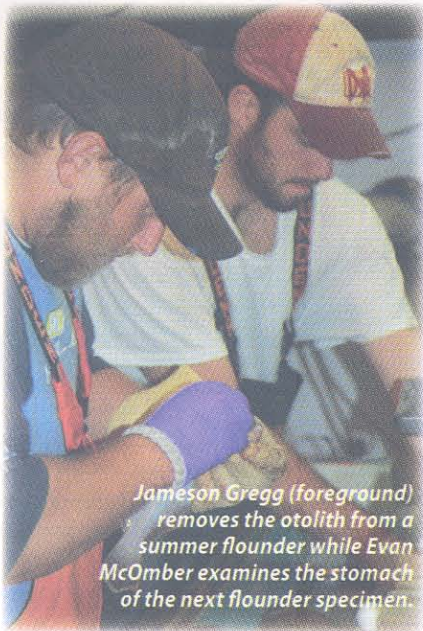
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DESIGN

UNEQUALED
STRENGTH/SIZE RATIO

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SMOOTH ROTATION

UNIQUE
ONE PIECE BODY

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Jameson Gregg (foreground) removes the otolith from a summer flounder while Evan McOmber examines the stomach of the next flounder specimen.

backup sites if something – such as the existence of fish pots – prevents them from sampling a primary spot.

But Ruhle said that part of the process has been made more efficient by the cooperation provided by commercial fishermen up and down the coast.

“It was unprecedented, the cooperation we got,” Ruhle said. They assured the commercial fishermen that whatever information they provided would be used only for the survey, Ruhle said, and they not only provided information on bottom hazards not seen on the ocean charts, including where their pot strings lie, they even provided information on spots that were safe for trawling, even when they appeared not to be on the charts.

“There was one spot (in a primary sampling area) I wouldn’t have dared to trawl, because on the charts it looks like a pile of rocks, but one guy said it was a good spot, and he was right,” Ruhle said.

“I did more than 300 tows (for NEA-MAP) before damaging a net. I don’t do that well on my own.”

That cooperation, Ruhle said, was because the commercial fishermen believe in the need to improve the data to improve the regulatory climate. With the quota on summer flounder continuing to shrink, when fishermen such as Ruhle see more than they’ve ever seen in their years on the water, they’re motivated to help fix the situation, he said.

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During the 20 minutes of the tow, David Lange, one of the scientists working with Gartland on the project, monitors the net readings provided by sensors in five spots on the net – one on each of the net's doors, one in each wing and one on the head rope of the net. Each tow must fall within a narrow range of measurements. The wings, which are at the main opening of the net, are kept between 13 and 14 meters apart; the door spread, in the midsection of the net, is between 32 and 34 meters, and the head rope height – the distance from the top of the net opening to the ocean floor – is between 5 and 5-1/2 meters.

Ruhle hits those numbers every time, Gartland said. Each tow averages 2,000 pounds or less, Gartland said. Once Ruhle and his crew bring the net on board, Gartland and his team of scientists from VIMS – which included Evan McOmber, Kevin Spanik and Jameson Gregg – begin sorting everything the net brings up, from the largest skates and dogfish to butterfish and squid no bigger than your thumb.

"We try to gather up every last one," Gartland said as he picked up a few straggling juvenile butters from the tarp under the net. Once sorted, they weigh the fish to get an aggregate weight for the catch of each species, and then measure each one to get a length of each fish and they release as many as possible.

While Gartland and Lange measured baskets of dogfish and skates in the rain, below deck in the fish hold, McOmber, Spanik and Gregg were busy weighing and examining a handful of samples of each of the priority species netted in the trawl. McOmber would call out the species number, and then each specimen would get a number as well. He weighed each specimen – even down to those thumbnail-sized butterfish that barely caused a flicker – then carefully opened each one's abdomen to check its stomach. "Number 3, full," he said, as he passed an American shad to Gregg, whose job it was to slice into each fish's head and remove its otolith – comparable to the bone in a human ear – to check the specimen's age. From there, the fish was handed to Spanik, who bagged each specimen's stomach – whether full or empty – for further examination.

They were also checking older fish for their level of maturity and whether they were spawning, had spawned out, or were in a resting state, Gartland said.

That information is gathered for each 20-minute trawl they do, whether they bring up a ton of skates – as happened during trawls off Montauk – or a smaller haul of fish, as happened on the Cape May trip that day. The 150 sites are sampled during a 21-day period, meaning they performed between eight and 12 trawls per day, Gartland said.

After all the trawls were completed, the information logged was to be checked for entry errors and Gartland expected to have a report ready in a month or so after that, he said.


PROBLEMS IN THE FUTURE?

Ruhle said the frustrating part of being involved in NEA-MAP and on the panel that helped design the net and the trawl survey is that the advice solicited from the panel is now being ignored.

The nets that were developed for use on the near-shore trawls are also slated to be used for the trawl surveys by NMFS' new research vessel, the *Bigelow*, both Ruhle and Gartland said. While the idea of using the same net sounds good on the surface, Ruhle said he foresees a big problem with it, namely the fact that the *Bigelow* is significantly larger than the *Darana R*, and as such, Ruhle said, the net won't work as well or as accurately. Even more frustrating, Ruhle said, was that he spent 10 days aboard the *Bigelow* helping the NMFS scientists define settings that would make the net work most efficiently.

"They changed them right after I left," Ruhle said. Other commercial fishermen sitting on the panel with Ruhle sent a letter in April to Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher, the Undersecretary of Commerce in charge of oceans and atmosphere, expressing their concerns about the fact that NEFSC ignored the panel's advice on the gear settings and the survey design, among other issues.

"They think they know everything. They think that because they have a Ph.D they know more than some dumb fishermen."

"They need to realize we're the experts," Ruhle said. 

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