

recreational fishery and threatens to undermine the conservation ethic developed by this user group.

- C. There is a rapidly expanding domestic tuna longline fishery which has a higher billfish bycatch than the historical swordfish fishery.
- D. The current statistical and scientific data base is inadequate for stock assessment and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. A long term biologically sound management regime, either domestic or international, will not be possible until an adequate and accurate data base is available.

6.0 MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

The following management objectives have been developed for the billfish fishery in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and Caribbean EEZs:

- A. Maintain the highest availability of billfishes to the U.S. recreational fishery by implementing conservation measures that will reduce fishing mortality.
- B. Optimize the social and economic benefits to the nation by reserving the billfish resource for its traditional use, which on the continental U.S. is almost entirely a recreational fishery. In the Caribbean, the fishery is both a recreational and small-scale handline fishery where billfishes are used as food.
- C. Increase understanding of the condition of billfish stocks and the billfish fishery.

7.0 DESCRIPTION OF THE FISHERY

7.1 Description Of The Stocks

7.1.1 Distribution

The marlins and sailfish are widely distributed over the Atlantic Ocean (including the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea) from about 35° South latitude to 45° North latitude. All three species are migratory and, as a result, there are marked variations in their seasonal and geographic abundance within the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone.

The sailfish is primarily an inshore species, with the densest concentrations of adults occurring over the continental shelf and/or near land masses. This species is available year-round off the lower east coast of Florida and the Florida Keys, but is found in greater numbers during winter. In summer, sailfish are also abundant within the EEZ in the northern and northeastern Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic coast of the U.S. from northeast Florida to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. In Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands they are caught during October through April.

Tagging results indicate considerable movement of sailfish between the Florida Keys and the Miami-Stuart area and some interchange between the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic.