

TBF's Tag & Release Program: Setting the Record Straight

Started in 1991, The Billfish Foundation's Tag & Release Program is a cornerstone of the work TBF does to conserve billfish and ensure billfishing for future generations. Since its inception, the program has grown to become the largest active billfish database in the world with over 220,000 records from across the globe. While most avid offshore captains and anglers have become familiar with TBF and our Tag & Release Program over the years, there are still some misconceptions and unawareness out there that needs to be dispelled.

What is the importance of tag & release information?

The vast majority of information that is used for managing fish stocks is derived from catch statistics and data from commercial fisheries. However, for billfish species (other than swordfish) there are no directed commercial fisheries and therefore data on marlin, sailfish and spearfish is very limited. To date, the vast majority of knowledge on billfish comes from traditional tagging programs. While traditional (spaghetti) tags individually do not give as much data as a satellite tag, the small cost of tags means that the volume of tags deployed has provided more information about billfish populations in general. Tag & release (fish released with no tag) data gives us a better understanding of growth, migration, and habitat use that are necessary to properly manage billfish stocks. The data also gives insight into fishing trends. For instance, on TBF's release cards anglers are asked to fill out not just the species and number fish they released, but how many hours they fished, how many lines they fished, tackle used and boat information. This information reflects the amount of effort, time, and money that anglers spend in their pursuit of billfish and can be used to deduce fishing trends as well as promote the socioeconomic benefits that sportfishing brings.

What does TBF do with its tag & release data?

Perhaps the most frustrating misconception about TBF's Tag & Release Program is what the data is used for and where the data goes. In the past, there arose a very misinformed rumor that TBF has sold the data to commercial fisheries. This is of course far from the truth and when you take into account the facts it is almost laughable to consider. Commercial fisheries have at their disposal a tremendous amount of resources including satellite technology, remote sensing, forecasting, and money that is vastly greater than that of sportfishing anglers. The amount of data TBF generates in a year is not even a drop in the bucket compared to that of commercial fisheries given the number of days their boats spend on the water fishing and the technology they use. To better understand this, just think that one longline boat is capable of deploying 30 miles of line with more than thirty thousand hooks in single set. In a single season one commercial boat covers more water and fishes more than any sportfishing captain could in his lifetime!

The reality is that each year the information accumulated by TBF is submitted to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) who is responsible to compiling data from numerous sources and then submitting it to the relevant international fisheries management organization (i.e. the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) or the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC)). This data is utilized in stock assessments and to better understand and better

manage billfish populations by providing a basis for creating any new regulations. Socioeconomic data derived from tag & release data is invaluable in demonstrating the benefits that come from sportfishing, influencing policy in the favor of billfish conservation and promoting the practice of catch & release. In many developing countries, policy makers are usually completely unaware of how many people visit their countries and contribute to local economies. Government officials may not even know what a billfish is, but certainly know the importance of attracting foreign money and this information is invaluable in promoting sportfishing and responsible management practices to protect billfish.

Of course, TBF also uses its tag & release data for many of its own projects. The huge volume of tag & release data offers us a tremendous amount of research opportunities to explore including exciting topics like trend analysis, oceanography, biology, habitat use, fishing practices and even societal patterns.

Does tagging hurt the fish or its chance of survival?

When proper tagging procedure and safe handling practices (see link below) are followed, tagging billfish with traditional spaghetti tags has not shown to affect the health or post release survival of billfish. Satellites tagging studies as well as the number of billfish recaptured each year have proven this. The use of circle hooks with live or dead bait has also drastically improved the post release survival of billfish. In addition, research conducted by the Swiss Federal Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology has revealed that fish do not feel pain in the same sense that we as humans do. The mechanism in humans responsible for sending a signal of pain is known as a nociceptor and are not present in most fish. Instead, the reaction of fish to getting hooked (or another stimulus that a person would consider painful) is just that; an involuntary reaction to a stimulus. (Think of when you put your hand on a hot surface and immediately pull your hand away).

Misconceptions that tagging may result in long-term damage to a fish have likely arisen from people who do not take the time to properly tag, revive and release billfish in good health. TBF promotes that the welfare of any billfish should be the top priority for anglers out there and if conditions do not permit for crews to properly and safely tag a fish it is not worth the potential harm to the fish to attempt to tag it. For this reason, in tournaments where high numbers of sailfish or white marlin are released, TBF does not promote tagging since crews may rush or 'speed tag' and potentially harm a billfish as they are more focused on getting lines back in the water and maximizing the amount of time fishing. When done properly, billfish are no worse for the wear after tagging as evidenced by billfish that have been recaptured as long as 14 years after being tagged!

You need to be a TBF member to tag and use the Tag & Release Online Database (www.tagbillfish.org)

WRONG! Anyone who would like to participate and tag fish can purchase tags and tagging equipment and register to use our online database. While TBF is a membership based organization and we encourage people to join, it is only through the help of captains and anglers that makes our Tag & Release Program possible. Our goal is to make tagging as easy as possible so as to generate as much data as possible to ultimately better manage billfish stocks. Tags are sold almost at cost and even commercial fishermen who are interested are encouraged to tag billfish. In fact, there are many captains

tagging swordfish in the south Florida buoy gear fishery that over the years have provided a tremendous amount of data and a significant number of recaptures.

We that this article has cleared up any of misunderstandings or misconception you have heard about TBF's tagging program and has encouraged you to get involved yourself. As was mentioned earlier in this article, it is only through anglers and captains that makes the program possible and ensures the future of billfish for everyone to enjoy. Please feel free to contact us at Tag@billfish.org if you have any questions, concerns or would like to know how you can participate in our Tag & Release Program.

For more information on our tagging program and proper tagging procedure, please visit www.tagbillfish.org.