

Fishermen's Perspectives on Conservation Options for Cold Water Corals in the United States

Seminar Presentation Abstract

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Although scientists have recognized cold water corals¹ for more than a century, protection of the resource has only recently begun to gain more widespread attention as an issue of concern in the marine environment. In recent years, several countries have begun to take action to protect this resource, as some believe that it is currently under severe threat from human activities and is of ecological importance as it may serve as an important nursery ground for commercially important fish species. Building on work conducted in Nova Scotia, this research proposes to consider the resolution of the following problem from the perspective of the resource user, the commercial fishermen.

The problem regarding cold water corals arises since it has been recognized that these corals have life history characteristics that make them particularly vulnerable to disturbance. Due to a growing consensus that cold water corals are threatened by human actions such as bottom trawling (targeting bottom dwelling species), many scientists and non-governmental organizations are calling for a ban on bottom trawling. A problem arises because there is no clear mandate in the United States regarding how to approach protection of cold water corals which leads to a debate on how the issue should be addressed. In addition, international concern exists regarding cold water corals found outside national jurisdictions. In order to advance action internationally, the U.S. needs to show action domestically.

The primary focus of this research is to answer the question: "What are the perceptions of commercial fishermen within the North Pacific and Mid-Atlantic regions regarding the issue of coral water coral conservation in the United States EEZ?" This includes sub-questions such as: How do fishermen view cold water corals? Do fishermen think they are damaging corals? Do they think there is a problem? How do fishermen think the situation should be resolved? In addition, this research hopes to provide regional insight by considering whether there are comparisons that can be made between fishermen in the U.S. and Atlantic Canada.

This research will be conducted as a mail survey of federal fisheries permit holders in the Mid-Atlantic (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina) and North Pacific (Alaska) regions. The survey instrument will be developed through interviews in each of the regions and once complete, mailed to a random sample of permit holders in each region. Results of the surveys will be analyzed and recommendations for domestic federal policy options will be made.

¹ In this research, the term cold water coral refers to those that are found in waters below 50 meters, do not contain symbiotic algae, and are not associated with a tropical reef.