

LOG FROM THE OUTER BANKS/THE 2000 ANNUAL SEAMAP TAGGING CRUISE



By Bill Mowitt

Date: Saturday, 1/29/00

Time: 2110 (9:10 PM to the landlubber)

Position: 35.12 N 75.38 W Just southwest of Cape Hatteras, approximately 5 miles offshore.



The NOAA ship Oregon II got underway this morning at 0830, after waiting for daylight to make the run out of the shoals around Morehead City. The scientific party was made up from members of various coastal State agencies, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service. So far the seas have been relatively calm, ranging up to three feet, and winds have been blowing in the 15-20 knot range. Outside air temperature is in the mid thirties. So far so good with the weather, although they are predicting a low pressure system will move through tomorrow evening, which may make things a bit rougher. We started fishing about 3 in the afternoon, setting two trawl nets, one off each side of the ship. It took a few sets to get all the kinks out of the gear, the deck crew, and especially the scientists! All seems to be working well now--all we need now is the rocks! (oops--stripers. I discovered that they are only called rockfish in Maryland--and I'm the only Marylander aboard). We've only gotten four so far. We are knee-deep in juvenile croaker, spot and weakfish, however (literally knee-deep after a few of these tows). Other than the small things, we've caught a

moderate amount of dogfish, a few skate, and three monkfish (while delicious, they definitely win the "Ugliest Fish" contest--they seem to be all mouth and teeth. The real high-light so far has been the four foot Atlantic sturgeon that appeared in one haul--these are pretty rare along the coast these days, and are under a forty-year fishing moratorium. We tagged it three different ways and sent it along its way. All right gotta run-- I hear the penetrating whine of the trawl winches--another bag is coming aboard. Doing science out here is like having Christmas once an hour--you can never wait to see what surprises await you in the cod-end!

Date: Sunday, 1/30/00

Time: 1615

Position: 35.38 N 75.24 W About half way between Hatteras and the Oregon Inlet, a few miles off the beach.



ONE OF THE LARGER FISH CAUGHT ON SUNDAY!

The weather continues to be not that bad (knock on wood)--its quite gray and cloudy, with intermittent showers, but warmer--in the mid forties, with 20 knot winds and four foot seas. The much discussed low-pressure system seems to be spooling up--the barometer is starting to drop. The stripers continue to elude us--mostly. We did have one good tow just off Cape Hatteras where we got 43 tagged. The thing that stands out most to me is the large sizes compared to what we see up in the Bay--most of the fish we are getting are nearly three feet long. I've only seen one so far that would be below the eighteen inch limit in the bay! We've made a few adjustments to the nets so they are fishing a bit cleaner--meaning less shoveling of juvenile croaker, spot and weakfish. We've also moved up into the land of the bay anchovy (a favorite of mine--the subject of my masters' thesis). During daylight hours we are constantly followed by a cloud of seabirds. A lot of diving gannets (which to me look like blue-footed boobies)-their distinctive "Waak-waak-waak" cry always make me think they find something funny about all these orange-jacketed humans catching tons of fish and just shoveling them off the stern for them to feast on. We're seeing scads of juvenile seagulls in light-brown plumage, and also plenty of pelicans. We're quite popular with the avian set. Other than the fishing, we're all preparing to watch the Superbowl. With its DSS system, the Oregon II gets about 10 times as many TV channels as my rabbit-ears back home! I'll be able to catch the first half, but will be on watch starting at 2000, so I'll miss the second half--Go Rams! Operations are ongoing, 24 hours a day.

Date; Tuesday, 2/1/00.

Time: 1600 hours

Position: 36.15 N 74.45 W Just north of Duck, NC



"ONE OF THE TAGGING TEAMS AT WORK"

Well, we've finally found the fish! We've tagged nearly 3,000 so far--including over 900 in one four hour watch yesterday! There is a semi-friendly competition among the three watches of scientists to see who can tag the most fish. It is mostly friendly, but, well, lets just say that there was a rules committee formed. Send a bunch of bureaucrats to sea and what do they do? Form committees! The fish we are getting are mostly smaller--in the 15 to 18 inch range--but there sure are lots of them! We're probably averaging a couple hundred per tow in certain areas. If we keep up this pace, it should be a record-setting year for number of rockfish tagged (the record: in 1994 5,302 fish were tagged). As a matter of fact, we're having more tags rushed down to Duck, NC, tonight, as we should have used up the 5,000 we brought along by sometime tonight or tomorrow! The ship's small boat runs into shore at Duck, NC to get more tags.") Of course all these fish mean lots of work for us scientists. This is billed as a 'cooperative tagging cruise,' supported by the many state and federal agencies that have an interest in striped bass. We have people on board from the National Marine Fisheries Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, and of course the Maryland DNR! So far, everyone has been very cooperative indeed! There is no way one watch could process the hundreds of fish that are coming aboard at a time, so everyone pitches in to help out. Some of us are starting to get a bit sleep deprived, but we had a brief respite of light catches this morning. The run into Duck for more tags should provide a respite as well. The weather continues to cooperate--its cool--in the low 40's, but 15-20 knot winds keep us (and the fish) well chilled. That's great for the fish--cold air temperatures lower their stress levels--but a bit harder on the taggers! Still, it could be a lot worse. The seas are still pretty flat. We've only had one day where we were really rolling, and only a couple of scientists temporarily lost to seasickness. Hopefully the good conditions and good fishing will keep up!

Date: Wednesday, 2/2/00

Time: 1730

Position: 35.53 N 75.31W North of the Oregon Inlet.



The weather warmed up a bit today, with temperatures reaching into the 50's. If I seem to be discussing the weather a lot, that's because it matters so much out here. On shore, discussing the weather is a platitude-something to fill conversational space. At sea, changes in the weather have a direct impact on virtually all facets of life-it becomes a preoccupation. Anyway, certain DNR scientists spent the delay basking in the first warm sunshine of the cruise. Sitting up outside on one of the upper decks with sunglasses, a magazine and a lawn chair in near 60 degree warmth, it was hard to tell that I was on a research ship and not on the 'Lido Deck' of the Love Boat! While completing one tow, we were tantalized by a huge flock of seabirds a couple of miles off to starboard who were wheeling and diving, clearly working on a school of small fish. Any commercial fishermen will tell you that's the place to be! As the birds work what was probably a school of herring or menhaden from above, the stripers are probably working them from below. As a marine scientist I have always been told that the open ocean isn't always homogenous, but that there are 'patchy' distributions and concentrations of fish and other animals. It is one thing to learn this in a lecture, quite another to see it in action! For some reason, the school of bait fish had concentrated in this one spot, bringing all their predators along with them. Anyway, we finished up one mildly productive tow, and went charging off towards the birds. Things looked pretty good on the fish finder/ depth sounder. We woke up the watches that were asleep so we had 'all hands' available. The catch did not disappoint! Both sides of the deck were covered in stripers, and we had three teams tagging the fish at once! The catch overwhelmed our live wells-we ended up having to throw approximately 100 fish overboard to ensure the tanks weren't too crowded. By the time the last fish went over the side approximately one half hour later, about 600 fish had been tagged!

Date: Thursday, 2/3/00

Time: 2100

Position: 34.39 N 76.25 W South of Cape Hatteras



All kinds of interesting things happened today. After getting reasonable catches of stripers this morning, we managed to hang up our trawl nets on some underwater obstructions. Fishing operations were delayed for a few hours while we changed one net and repaired the other. On the next trawl, we managed to hang up the port net (again!) and fill the starboard net so full of juvenile croaker, spot and weakfish that we couldn't even bring it aboard! We had one of the crew hang out of the scupper and cut the bag open to release the fish. Incredibly, we managed to snag the one striper in the bag with a boat hook! Anyway, the port net is beyond on-board repair, so we finished up they day fishing only the starboard net. As we started moving south, the fish once again began eluding us. Our hardhats got progressively more decorated through the week (pictured at left). By this evening, it was time to start heading back south to make port tomorrow morning. As we made our way further off shore to clear Cape Hatteras, we started encountering 20-30 knot winds, and the waves started picking up accordingly. I ended up on the bridge, watching our bow smash through the 6-8 foot seas. A few were large enough that while standing in the bridge 15 feet above sea level, there was so much spray you felt like you were in a car wash! It was exciting enough that I ended up staying on the bridge all through dinner, just so I wouldn't miss any of the action (a few other scientists skipped dinner for other reasons!). I had the unique experience of seeing several dozen sunsets tonight-we were pitching enough that just as the sun was about to set, every time we pitched up on a wave you could just see the top of the sun, and as we pitched back down, it would disappear below the horizon. Then we would pitch up, it would briefly reappear, etc. etc. All in all, it was a spectacular ending for our last day at sea. The Oregon II returned to Morehead City on February 4th. The cruise was a spectacular success-over 6,400 rockfish were tagged, using nearly every tag available on the east coast! Many of these fish will be caught and their tags reported by recreational and commercial fishermen, providing scientists and managers with valuable data for years to come.