

SC Dolphin Tagging Study

April 2005

A Golden Fish from Mexico

Over the many years which I have been involved in mark and recovery studies on fish, I have learned that you just can not predict which fish is going to be that treasure chest of golden information. About the only solid fact that I have come up with is that the healthier the fish is when released, the better its chances of survival are. Long term survival is basic to recovery of a tagged fish but it does not guarantee it. Nor does it increase the odds that a particular fish will bite a hook again. This is why every tagged fish is important.

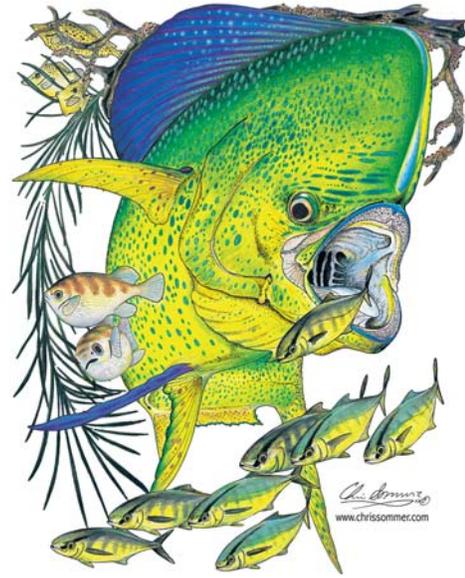
This story starts out on May 15, 2004 off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina. It involves a boat that has tagged 18 dolphin for the project over the past two years. The Farmer's Tan owned by Billy Walker of Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina tagged four fish this day. One of the fish would be caught 69 days later 150 miles to the north off Wilmington, North Carolina. The other three dolphin seemed to join the thousands of other tagged dolphin that just disappear into the ocean's vastness never to be heard from again.

But this was not the case. The second part of this story involves the charter boat "Tauro" which fishes off Majahual, Mexico, an ocean resort area just north of the border with Belize. On April 10, 2005 Ruben Vizcaino was fishing aboard the Tauro in roughly 1,500 feet of water off Majahual when he caught a nice 28 pound, 41 inch fork length dorado (Spanish name for dolphin). On a closer look at the fish, they discovered a tag belonging to the South Carolina Dolphin Tagging Program.

This dolphin known as K035498 had to travel a minimum 1,221 miles to get to its recovery location during its 330 days of freedom. This is based on the fish immediately heading south, traveling through the Florida Straits and going around the western tip of Cuba into the Yucatan Channel. However, it is more likely that this fish, like the other dolphin tagged by this boat on the same day, went north first. It may have only gone to North Carolina or it may have gone up into the Mid-Atlantic Bight before turning south. Regardless of the route taken, it is the first documentation of a dolphin moving from the US's east coast to Mexico's Caribbean coast.

Fish are known to utilize existing currents to aid their movements such as how dolphin use the Gulf Stream off the east coast of the US to assist their spring movement northward. Fish are not known to swim against ocean currents if they can help it. With this in mind, it may well be possible that this dolphin actually rode a southerly counter-current on the east side of the Gulf Stream back to the Caribbean. Where it may have entered the Caribbean Sea is up for speculation. In any case the distance this fish actually traveled would be considerably greater than the 1,200 miles currently listed.

When Todd Scofield originally caught this dolphin aboard the Farmer's Tan, it measured 24 inches in fork length and probably weighed about 4.5 pounds. Gauging from the



size reported at recovery, the fish had grown 17 inches in fork length and had gained about 23.5 pounds in the 10.8 months of freedom.

If we estimate the fish's age at release at roughly five months, then this dolphin was only 16 months old when it was recaptured. Thus you have a 28 pound fish that is 41 inches long in fork length and is only 1 ¼ years old. Dolphin are truly remarkable animals.

This movement could be written off as just abnormal travel by an odd dolphin except for the fact that other tag recoveries show similar supporting movements by dolphin. The SC Dolphin Tagging Study received information on two obscure tag recoveries involving dolphin tagged off the west coast of the Island of Cozumel, Mexico. One fish was recovered off the US's Gulf coast and the other off the east coast of the US. So K035498's movement may not be a random at all.



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2005 Bahamas Billfish Championship to Aid Dolphin Study

The internationally renowned Bahamas Billfish Championship has stepped forward to offer assistance to the dolphin research project. Mr. Al Behrendt, who directs the BBC, recognized that the series was in the unique position to assist the SC Dolphin Tagging Study in an area that is a high priority. With the primary focus of the world class tournaments being marlin, few of the many dolphin caught by participating boats are brought in making them prime candidates for tagging in the dolphin study.

The BBC will make dolphin tagging kits available to participating boats at each of the captains meetings. Each tournament will provide an incentive to the fishermen to tag fish for this research by offering special awards for the tagging of dolphin.

This study, as well as many fishermen who fish the Bahamas and the east coast of the US, support the theory that most of the large dolphin caught from Cape Canaveral northward actually come from the east side of the Bahamas riding the Antilles Current into the Gulf Stream. But very few dolphin have been tagged in the Antilles Current off the eastern side of the Bahamas and there have been no tag recoveries to support this theory.

With the cooperation of such a conservation minded program as the BBC, it is hoped that a large number of dolphin will be tagged off the eastern Bahamas this spring. This will be a major step toward answering the question about how these fish relate to the US dolphin population.

The 2005 BBC schedule is:

Marsh Harbour Championship - April 17 - 22, 2005

Harbour Island Championship - May 1 - 6, 2005

Spanish Cay Championship - May 15 - 20, 2005

Treasure Cay Championship - June 5 - 10, 2005

Boat Harbour Championship - June 19 - 24, 2005

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Fishermen Needed Prior to 1 August 2005

Entering its fourth and final year in 2005, the dolphin study is in need of experienced offshore boat owners who are concerned enough about the future of dolphin to tag and release their smaller catches for science. Boat owners who fish in the **Mid-Atlantic Bight, Gulf of Mexico and eastern Bahamas** are needed to tag dolphin to help answer questions about the movement of dolphin from their regions.

Anglers interested in participating in this study can register at <http://dolphintagging.homestead.com> or should contact the project leader listed at the end of the newsletter. Anglers will not be registered to tag dolphin after August 1.

2005 Program Sponsors

Shimano



The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and the Dolphin Tagging Study are proud to announce that **Shimano Corporation** and the **Don Coffee Company** of Olafee, Kansas along with **Star Rods** of the **Sea Striker Corporation** out of Morehead City, North Carolina have again generously agreed to support this research project. For the third consecutive year, these companies have shown their strong commitment to the conservation of our valuable fisheries resources through the generous sponsorship of the annual incentive awards.

At the end of the year, three fishermen who participate in the SC Dolphin Tagging Study will receive a Shimano Tiagra 50 on a top quality Star Standup rod for their contributions to the study. These outfits will be given to the private boat owner, charter boat owner and individual angler tagging the most dolphin during 2005.

The SC Dolphin Tagging Study is designed to utilize private sports fishermen as the backbone of the project. Fishery managers recognize that anglers along the US east coast are concerned about the future health of the dolphin stocks, and would be interested in getting involved. The project was designed to capitalize on this army of volunteers to carry out the tagging of dolphin along the US's Atlantic and Gulf coastline. A project of such magnitude would have been cost-prohibitive without the support of volunteers.

For more information on the project, visit

<http://dolphintagging.homestead.com> or contact

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