



SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES

The Nature Conservancy prioritizes sustainable seafood, thriving fishing communities and a healthy ocean. In pursuit of these objectives, TNC's mid-Atlantic ocean management and sustainable fisheries team pursues two overarching strategic priorities:

1. Strengthen the foundation of the ocean food chain
2. Restore and protect healthy habitat to serve as productive fish nurseries

Over the past year, TNC focused on improving fisheries and the habitats that support them. Of particular interest is the menhaden fishery, the largest on the Atlantic Coast and a foundation of the ocean food chain.

MENHADEN MANAGEMENT

Often called the most important fish in the sea, the Atlantic menhaden is a forage fish that plays a critical role in our marine ecosystem. It is an essential food source for dolphins, whales and various larger fishes, but also harvested for use in commercial products. To address decades of unregulated fishing, The Nature Conservancy works with fishermen, marine scientists, charter boat captains and other partners to rebuild menhaden populations. Nearly 80% of the total allowable coast-wide catch of menhaden is allocated to Virginia, making this state critical to conservation.

The past year has been pivotal for this small, yet mighty, fish. First, TNC worked with a wide array of partners and legislators to pass historic legislation in Virginia that empowers natural resource managers, rather than legislators, to set rules for the Atlantic menhaden fishery. Even more importantly, state, regional and federal fisheries managers are moving towards a more holistic, ecosystem-based approach. Rather than focusing on individual fish species, they will consider the interdependency and unique interactions among species and their environments that combine to form a productive and healthy ecosystem.

People depend on the ocean's vast supply of fish as a source of food, income and recreation, yet a stable ocean ecosystem also depends on an intact food chain. The Atlantic menhaden fishery serves as a test case for balancing the needs of people and nature. TNC is working to change the definition of overall fishery health for the Atlantic menhaden through science-based catch limits that are safe for the whole ecosystem and that ensure predators such as birds, striped bass, humpback whales and other marine life have sufficient prey. Transforming the largest Atlantic Coast fishery will pave the way as we work to apply sustainable management to other species that are vital to the ocean food web.

Our Virginia

Humpback whale in school of menhaden © Sutton Lynch; hiker © Jack Looney



OUR CONSERVATION ACTIONS

Defended Authority of Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission

When Virginia-based Omega Protein, the largest menhaden fishing company, refused to follow rules established by the 15-state Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, TNC worked with recreational fishermen and support industries to secure enforcement from the U.S. Secretary of Commerce in December—marking a [big win for menhaden conservation](#).



Improved Sustainability Certification

TNC's strong opposition to sustainability certification for the menhaden fishery led the Marine Stewardship Council to add a new criterion for certification: ecosystem-based management.

Promoted Science-Based Ecosystem Management

Outside stakeholder reviews of the science—such as those provided by TNC at technical stock-assessment meetings—help inspire confidence in and ease the transition to a new and improved scientific foundation.



Guided State Managers in New Ecosystem-Based Approach

A peer-review committee approved new scientific standards in December, and TNC is now helping commissioners from Maine to Florida understand how to translate technical scientific information into conservation-based decisions—including a number of monumental decisions slated for 2020.

Advocated for Historic Menhaden Legislation in Virginia

TNC worked with key legislators, Governor Northam's office, and other partners to pass legislation that transfers authority to manage the menhaden fishery from legislators to the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, ensuring more timely, science-based rule-making.



Mobilized Conservation-Minded Recreational Fishing Captains

Recreational fishermen and related businesses are natural partners, and TNC provides fishing captains with scientific information and platforms for their voices to be heard in support of conservation-minded management.

Using Lessons Learned to Drive Change

Appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce to serve on the Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council, TNC lead fisheries scientist Kate Wilke uses her expertise and vote to drive change in regional fisheries management.

Identifying and Protecting Vulnerable Habitats

TNC is helping identify and map important and vulnerable fish habitats, the first step toward ultimately protecting them from threats.



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