

Giant Sea Bass (*Stereolepis gigas*)

Status of the Population:

In 1981, a law was passed that prohibited the take of giant sea bass for any purpose, with the exception that commercial fishermen could retain and sell two fish per trip if caught incidentally in a gillnet or trammel net. This law also limited the amount of giant sea bass that could be taken in Mexican waters and landed in California. A vessel could land up to 1,000 pounds of Mexican giant sea bass per trip but could not land more than 3,000 pounds in a calendar year. The law was amended in 1988, reducing the incidental take to one fish in California waters. Although this law may have prevented commercial fishermen from selling giant sea bass in California, it did not prohibit fishing over habitats occupied by this species and probably did little to reduce the incidental mortality of giant sea bass, as giant sea bass that were entangled in the nets were discarded at sea. The 1981 rule changes were more effective in protecting giant sea bass in Mexico, since large landings had been historically made by hook-and-line fishermen targeting grouper, cabrilla, and giant sea bass off the Pacific coast of Baja California. Since the banning of inshore gillnets displaced the California fishery from the majority of areas inhabited by giant sea bass, it is reasonable to assume that this closure significantly reduced the incidental mortality of giant sea bass in California. Even so, given the slow growth and reproduction of the species, the California population of giant sea bass remains below historical highs. Anecdotal information suggests that numbers may be beginning to rebound under current measures (Leet et al. 2001). No hard data exist that provide actual or relative numbers of giant sea bass (Leet et al. 2001).

Home Range/Migratory Patterns:

Little is known about the home range of giant sea bass and even less is known about migratory patterns. We do know that giant sea bass aggregate at specific sites early in the summer and disperse in the fall. This is thought to be associated with spawning but fish taken during this period usually display little evidence of spawning. Where fish disperse to after leaving the aggregating areas is unknown. It is unusual to catch an adult giant sea bass when they are not aggregated together.

Current Regulations:

Giant sea bass may not be taken commercially, except that not more than one fish per vessel may be possessed or sold if taken incidentally by gill or trammel net.

Giant sea bass may not be taken by recreational anglers. Incidentally taken fish must be immediately returned to the water.

While these regulations prohibit directed take, they do not prevent incidental take. Giant sea bass inhabit areas where many popular sport and commercial species are taken and are prone to incidental take. While numbers may be increasing, this also increases the risk of incidental take. Aggregations of giant sea bass can be severely impacted by such interactions. These large fish tend to experience overexpansion trauma to their gas bladder when brought to the surface and are difficult for most recreational anglers to release unharmed.

How MPAs May Help:

Reserves in appropriate locations could protect spawning aggregations of giant sea bass. Recent incidents of illegal take by spearfishermen have been documented at both Anacapa and Catalina Islands. These incidents show that though this is already a protected species, take could be further prevented in totally protected MPAs. MPAs would also eliminate the potentially harmful incidental take by hook and line and net gears. They would offer little or no protection to fish when they are not aggregated since they would leave the area protected by the MPA.