



RETURN 'EM RIGHT
**PROGRAM
REPORT**
2022



MISSION

Improving reef fish survival by equipping anglers with the knowledge and gear to confidently and successfully release reef fish.

VISION

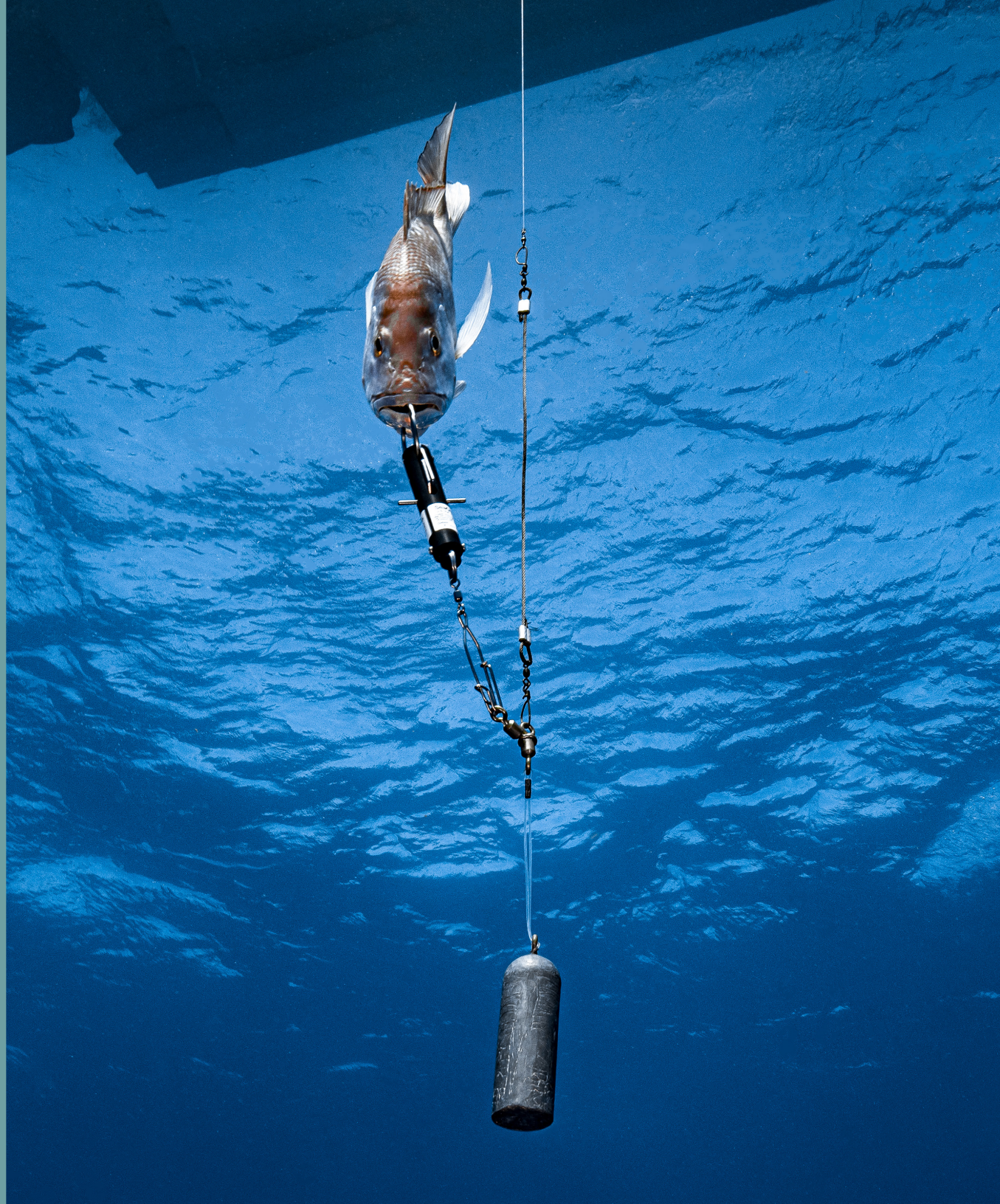
To foster a lasting community of engaged anglers that supports the future health of Gulf of Mexico fisheries.

PARTNERS

Core project partners include Florida Sea Grant, University of Florida, Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission, NOAA Restoration Center and a coalition of anglers, industry groups, state agencies, universities, government, and non-government organizations committed to maintaining healthy fish stocks and fishing access in the Gulf of Mexico.

FUNDING

This \$30 million, eight-year project is funded by the *Deepwater Horizon* Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group as part of the 2019 Open Ocean Restoration Plan. Reef fish species were substantially harmed by the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill — Return 'Em Right helps support their restoration.



ACCOMPLISHING OUR MISSION THROUGH EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND MONITORING

Return 'Em Right could not have asked for a better 2022. We owe the success of the program's launch to the offshore recreational fishing community in the Gulf of Mexico — and the best part is, we are just getting started.

Reef fish are recreationally, commercially, and ecologically important to the Gulf of Mexico — sustaining livelihoods, promoting passion for angling, and supporting a functioning ecosystem. Yet, each year, more than 10 million reef fish are released, and at least one million of those will not survive release. Our mission is to increase the survival of these discarded fish, which we are accomplishing through the core pillars of our program — **Education, Outreach, and Monitoring Project Impact.**

As anglers, we are conservationists at heart. Return 'Em Right is here to support anglers, provide training on best release practices, and supply free release gear to ensure the future health of our fisheries. Since the program's launch, we have provided training and gear to over **11,000 anglers in the Gulf of Mexico.** That's 11,000 anglers who better understand barotrauma, and are now better

equipped to return fish back to their habitat where they can continue to grow, spawn, and be caught another day.

While we're proud of providing anglers with the tools and knowledge to help fish survive, it is important we determine whether these efforts are having a positive impact on the resource. A key component of our work is to measure how anglers' use of best practices impacts the resource. In 2022, Return 'Em Right established multiple partnerships to accomplish this goal, and we look forward to reporting on the outcomes of these monitoring efforts in the future.

Our initial success tells us that anglers are invested in reducing catch and release mortality. We have just scratched the surface with our efforts to educate anglers. We believe it is possible to foster a culture in the Gulf of Mexico focused on improving fish survival, but it's not possible without your help. We look forward to continuing this journey with the angling community in the years to come.

Tight Lines,
The Return 'Em Right Team



EDUCATING ANGLERS

In 2022, the Return 'Em Right team developed and launched a short 15-minute online education module to teach anglers how to properly release reef fish.

What's in the education module?

- Best Release Practices
- Barotrauma 101
- Venting and Descending



Eligible anglers were sent free release gear to use on the water.

11,349 OFFSHORE ANGLERS Received Training and Free Gear



Sector breakdown: 266 Federal For-Hire Captains, 182 State For-Hire Captains, and 10,901 Private Recreational Anglers

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Education For Anglers, by Anglers

6,000+

anglers completed a follow-up survey
with highly positive feedback

We use this feedback to improve the
training and deliver the content anglers want

4.9/5

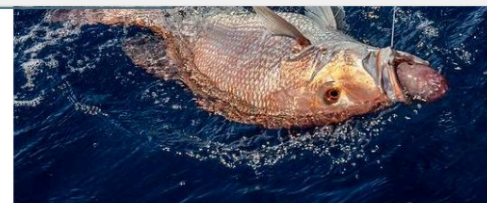
average course satisfaction rating

98%

of anglers better understand
barotrauma, venting, and descending

87.5%

of anglers are extremely likely to
recommend the training to others



As a fish is retrieved from depth, the swim bladder will expand, often causing the stomach to be pushed out of the mouth of the fish.

Signs of Barotrauma

Recognizing when a fish is experiencing barotrauma is crucial to knowing if it needs additional help returning to depth. **Click on each information icon** below to learn about the signs of barotrauma.



Make sure you **click each information icon** before proceeding!



OUTREACH & EDUCATION

2022 BY THE NUMBERS

11K+

Anglers Trained
& Received
Release Gear

403K

People
Reached on
Social Media

67

Times

Return 'Em Right
Mentioned in the
Media

1.2K

Social
Media
Followers

40K

People Visited
ReturnEmRight.org

19

Outreach
Events



Red snapper prepared for release using the SeaQualizer device.

RETURN 'EM RIGHT TO TACKLE BAROTRAUMA IN REEF FISH

BAROTRAUMA: WHAT MAKES FISH FLOAT
Many anglers have experienced the unpleasant sight of a big snapper or grouper floating off after release. We have all seen it before, turned our heads and attempted to ignore it, but deep down it stings. No matter what your thoughts are towards fisheries management, regulations or conservation, reef fish floating off after release is a tough pill to swallow. What makes reef fish float off after release? Most offshore bottom fish experience a phenomenon called barotrauma, which quite literally means pressure (baro) - injury (trauma). As fish are reeled up from deep water (typically 50-60' or greater), the gas inside their body cavity expands, displacing organs and leaving them bloated and unable to return to depth on their own. Fishermen often notice the effects of barotrauma when they see the stomach of a fish protruding from its mouth or feel the fish's stomach and it is firm or bloated.

PUT 'EM ON ICE OR USE A DEVICE
For many years anglers have primarily mitigated barotrauma using venting techniques. Venting involves using a hollow hypodermic needle or tool to release the excess gas in the body cavity of the fish. Although effective when done properly, venting requires knowledge of the anatomy of a fish, precision with the use of the tool, and can cause further harm if not performed correctly. More recently, the use of descending devices has taken off as one the most effective and easiest methods to mitigate barotrauma. Descending devices are weighted devices that carry fish back down and release the fish at depth, allowing them to naturally recompress upon descent. Descending is proven to be extremely effective at increasing long-term survival of fish suffering from barotrauma. Despite their existence for years, the phrase "descending device" is still relatively uncommon to the majority of anglers across the Gulf. As the



Red snapper suffering from barotrauma with its stomach protruding from its mouth.



Red snapper being released with a SeaQualizer descending device. The device has an incorporated pressure-sensor that releases the fish based on a set depth.

MEASURING PROJECT IMPACT

Return 'Em Right is focused on measuring our impact to help the resource. To do this, we're working with partners on the following:

- Improving release mortality estimates
- Evaluating depredation rates to address anglers' concerns
- Monitoring descending device use

Surveying the Fleet

To better understand Gulf of Mexico anglers' attitudes and perceptions regarding best practices, Return 'Em Right surveyed more than 4,200 Gulf of Mexico recreational anglers in the fall of 2021.

In addition to the findings on the right, the survey found the majority of anglers believe returning fish to depth improves survival.

UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCE



90%
**RECOGNIZE
AT LEAST ONE
SYMPTOM**
of barotrauma



32%
**ARE AWARE OF
DESCENDING
DEVICES,**
and about half of
those use them



71%
**AWARE OF
VENTING**



11-15%
**USE A NON-HOLLOW
VENTING TOOL**
that doesn't meet
requirements, like a
knife or an ice pick



56%
get their
REEF FISHING
info from other
anglers



7%
**RECOGNIZE
LESSER KNOWN
SYMPTOMS**
of barotrauma



MERCURY

OBSERVING THE FLEET



At-Sea Observer Programs

Starting in April 2022, Return 'Em Right began providing support for state agencies to collect data through the Gulf of Mexico For-hire At-sea Observer Programs. Participating agencies are:

- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- Mississippi Department of Marine Resources

Program goals are:

- To better understand the use of release tools
- To improve the science relating to catch and release mortality
- To identify trends in best practice use

To date, Return 'Em Right has supported data collection on 568 for-hire offshore reef fishing trips.

There are so many aspects I love when doing our At-Sea Program! I love being able to tag fish and getting the recapture data to see all the changes in the data from when it was first released. A lot of people are fascinated by what I do and want to know the reasons behind it.

*Lauren Jakubowski (pictured left)
Alabama DCNR, Marine Resources Division*

A man with a grey beard and mustache, wearing a green knit beanie with "FWC" on it, a white hoodie, and tan overalls with "GRUNDÉNS" on the pocket. He is looking off to the side. The background is a blue sky and water. The text "In Memory" is written in a white, cursive font on the left side of the image.

In Memory

of our good friend and colleague, Oscar "Butch" Ayala, for his over 15 years of dedication and service to marine fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico. Butch was instrumental in establishing Florida's observer program and exemplified what it meant to be a fisheries biologist through his passion, commitment, and love for the resource. His place was on the water, and we're fortunate to have joined him in doing what he loved most.

- The Return 'Em Right Team

STATE REEF FISH VALIDATION SURVEYS

In 2022, Florida's State Reef Fish Survey, SnapperCheck in Alabama, and Tails n' Scales in Mississippi started collecting dockside angler information on fish descending device usage for reef fish species. State managers collect information by interviewing private and for-hire recreational anglers at the dock as they return from completing a trip.

1,845

Trips Surveyed

41%

Had a Descending
Device on Board





FISHERY-INDEPENDENT FUNDED STUDIES

Return 'Em Right funds four ongoing studies across the Gulf of Mexico to evaluate the effectiveness of release gear and assess the impact of predators on released reef fish. Priority species in these studies include red snapper, gag grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack.

Auburn University

Location: Mississippi / Alabama Coast

Compare release mortality and survival of descended red snapper across depth zones

Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries

Location: Louisiana Coast

Compare efficiency of release, characterize depredation, and survey anglers' device type preferences

Mississippi State University

Location: Gulf-wide

Evaluate depredation rates of released reef fish

University of Florida

Location: West Florida Shelf

Estimate seasonal release mortality of descended gag



OUR PARTNERS

We are grateful to our partners who are committed to helping us promote best release practices to ensure a bright future for our fishery.





EARN ANOTHER **FIGHT**

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returnemright.org



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@ReturnEmRight