

# GULF AND SOUTH ATLANTIC FISHERIES

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In the early 1930s, the Gulf and South Atlantic section of the U.S. coast (North Carolina to Texas) produced only about 10% of the volume and value of the U.S. commercial fishery catch. In recent years, the region has become the most important in terms of total commercial landings--almost two billion pounds a year. This compares with one and a third billion for the northeast coast (Maine to Virginia) and one and a half billion for the west coast and Alaska. Much of the change has been recent--as late as 1950 the Gulf and South Atlantic region produced less than a billion pounds annually (Figure 1).

The dramatic increase in volume of commercial landings has been matched by an increase in value. Nearly 200 million dollars were paid to fishermen for their products in 1970; the figure was well under 100 million in 1950.

## Important Salt-Water Angling

The Gulf and South Atlantic states are also important in salt-water sport angling. The population has been growing faster than in most other sections of the country, tourism is increasing, and the good-weather season is long--year round in southern Florida. The result is that over half of the U.S. salt-water sportsmen's catch now is taken in the Gulf and South Atlantic.

## Post-1950 Developments

What has happened to commercial fisheries is shown in Figure 2. The traditional mainstays have been menhaden, mullet, crabs, and shrimp. Menhaden landings have tripled since 1950, crabs have more than doubled, and shrimp are up a third. Only mullet have stayed at the same level. Also, a new element has entered the picture--industrial fisheries for reduction and pet food, insignificant in 1950, now take about 100 million pounds a year.

None of these figures include the catch of U.S. shrimpers, mostly from the Gulf coast,

who fish far from home waters and land their catches principally in South America. This fishery, brand new since 1960, now produces about 80 million pounds of shrimp a year, almost all exported to the U.S.

## The Future

What is the future of the Gulf and South Atlantic fisheries? Biologists of the National Marine Fisheries Service point out that the record menhaden catches in recent years may be close to the maximum the stocks can produce. On the other hand, blue crabs, the most important crab, could almost certainly support increased landings. (Processing and distribution problems are the industry's main headache.) There is evidence that the yield of shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico could be increased by increasing the average size of the shrimp caught. Spiny lobster fisheries are growing rapidly, now at least 10 million pounds a year worth 10 million dollars or more to the fishermen. Snapper fisheries may have a large potential. Even the mullet stocks could probably support a larger fishery; the market has been the limiting factor.

## Almost-Untouched Resources

There are two major resources in the region as yet almost untouched. The calico scallop is probably capable of producing some 80 million pounds of high-value meats a year, and herringlike fishes in the Gulf might yield 600 million pounds of fish for reduction each year. Thus it seems likely that the Gulf and South Atlantic region could easily produce something closer to three billion pounds a year than to the two billion pounds presently taken.

## Production Can Increase

There is no doubt that fishery production in the Gulf and South Atlantic can and probably will increase--particularly because of the aggressive nature of the fishing industry there. Foreign competition is minor: Mexico takes about 40 million pounds of shrimp a year in

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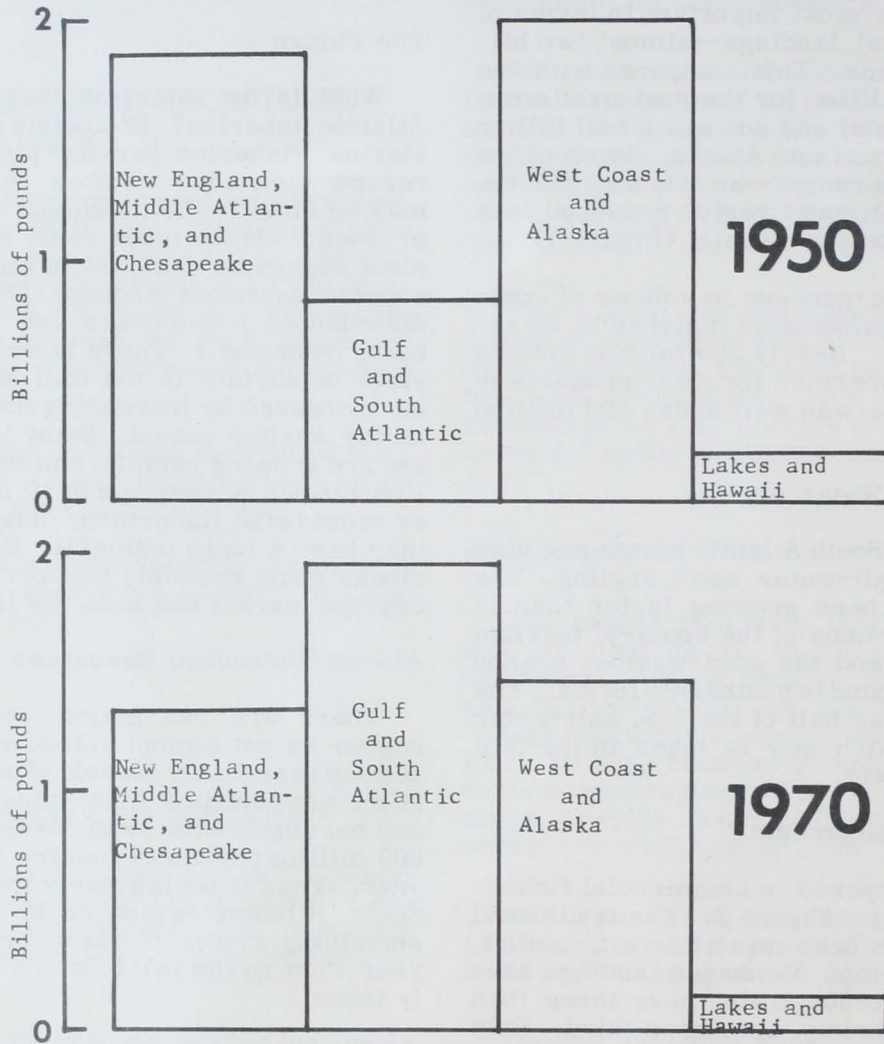


Fig. 1 - U. S. total fishery landings, 1950 and 1970.



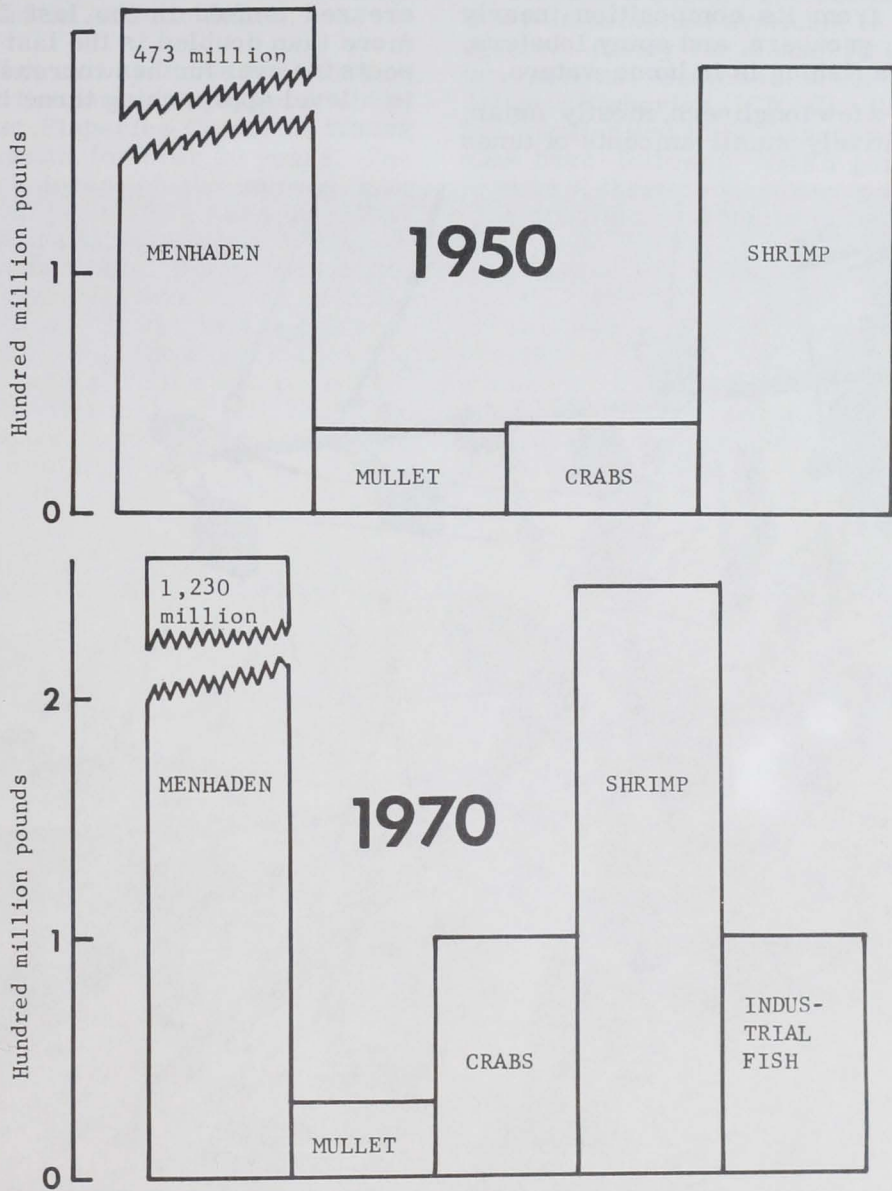


Fig. 2 - Principal Gulf and South Atlantic landings, 1950 and 1970.

the Gulf of Mexico. With the Mexican government's emphasis on fishery development, this fishery probably will increase. (A large part of the Mexican shrimp catch is exported to the U.S.)

Cuba's total catch is now over 170 million pounds a year, more than doubled since 1960. But, to judge from its composition, nearly 60% snappers, groupers, and spiny lobsters, most of Cuba's fishing is in home waters.

Except for a few longliners, mostly Asian, that take relatively small amounts of tunas

and billfishes, there are only very minor fisheries in Caribbean, Central, and South American countries, in all the waters from North Carolina to northern Brazil.

In summary, commercial fish catches in the Gulf and South Atlantic region have increased tenfold in the last forty years, and more than doubled in the last twenty. Prospects for even further increases are likely--to a level approaching three billion pounds a year.



Shrimp trawling in Gulf of Mexico off New Orleans. Trawl and otter boards, suspended from outrigger boom, are being lowered back to fish again. Part of last mixed catch of fish and shrimp is on deck. (C.H.B.)