

Problems with Unofficial and Inaccurate Geographical Names in the Fisheries Literature

WILLIAM J. RICHARDS

Introduction

Over a century of fishery and oceanographic research conducted along the Atlantic coast of the United States has resulted in many publications using unofficial, and therefore unclear, geographic names for certain study areas. Such improper usage, besides being unscholarly, has and can lead to identification problems for readers unfamiliar with the area. Even worse, the use of electronic data bases and search engines can provide incomplete or confusing references when improper wording is used.

The two terms used improperly most often are “Middle Atlantic Bight” and “South Atlantic Bight.” In general, the term “Middle Atlantic Bight” usually refers to an imprecise coastal area off the middle Atlantic states of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, and the term “South Atlantic Bight” refers to the area off the southeastern states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida’s east coast.

Confusing Terminology

The names themselves are also confusing. “Middle Atlantic” could refer to the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, although “bight” certainly suggests a shoreline. Specifically, the word bight, in reference to a shoreline is defined as a “bend that encompasses a bay” (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1999). While the shore from Maryland to New York does curve inward, it certainly does not form a bay.

The term “South Atlantic Bight” causes the most serious problems, even

though it has its roots in the parochial but imprecise usage of “South Atlantic” by the predecessor agencies of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). References to the southeastern U.S. coast off the Carolinas, Georgia, and east coast of Florida as the “South Atlantic,” in the sense that it is the Atlantic area off the southern states (but not including the Gulf of Mexico) thus has a fairly long history. Today, the U.S. Department of Commerce’s South Atlantic Fishery Management Council, with jurisdiction over marine areas from Virginia through Florida’s east coast, formally uses the name. In addition, NMFS routinely refers to “South Atlantic” as an area when reporting fishery statistics (Holliday and O’Bannon, 1995).

The chief problem with this usage is that the officially recognized South Atlantic Ocean is located south of the Equator, quite some distance from the U.S. area, and is bounded by Africa and South America. International readers unfamiliar with the colloquial concept of the term “South Atlantic” would look long and hard for it in the wrong place. To make matters worse, with the advent of computers and electronic databases, computer search engines would normally include any papers having “South Atlantic Bight” in the title or abstract with other proper South Atlantic Ocean area references.

Another confusing term is “Slope Sea” which I saw used in a manuscript to denote the area between the U.S. east coast and the Sargasso Sea. This term was cited as the creation of the eminent oceanographer Henry Stommel in his treatise on the Gulf Stream (1965). However, Stommel only coined the term “slope water” and did not name

the area as “Slope Sea.” I urged the authors to not use this term but they had cited other papers that purportedly used the term “Slope Sea.”

The first two terms are often, and unfortunately, used in technical literature. While I was editor of the *Fishery Bulletin* (1983–1986) and *Bulletin of Marine Science* (1974–1997), I tried to discourage their usage, but I know that a few slipped by me. As I explained to the authors, the terms are not listed on any charts (National Geographic Atlas of the World, The Times Atlas of the World, or Philip’s World Atlas), nor are they found in specialized dictionaries or even specialized geographical dictionaries (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1997). Thus a person unfamiliar with the areas involved would have a difficult time determining the locations that are implied.

Establishing Official Names

Geographic names are made accepted and meaningful by an authoritative body such as the Board of Geographic Names of the U.S. Department of the Interior (Board). The Board must first approve them or they must have widely accepted and clear usage. One interesting example of such a geographic name problem was the change of Cape Canaveral, Florida, to Cape Kennedy, Florida. Benson and Faherty (1978) in their history of the Moonport noted that in the immediate aftermath of President John F. Kennedy’s tragic death, President Johnson renamed the Cape Canaveral Auxiliary Air Force Base and NASA Launch Operations Center as the John F. Kennedy Space Center and Cape Canaveral to Cape Kennedy. In an Executive Order No. 11129, President Johnson the next day named the two facilities

The author is with the National Marine Fisheries Service, NOAA, Southeast Fisheries Science Center, 75 Virginia Beach Drive, Miami, FL 33149. E-mail: Bill.Richards@noaa.gov

but not the Cape. With this confusion, both NASA and the Air Force formally changed the name and the U.S. Board changed Cape Canaveral to Cape Kennedy. The names for the launch facilities received local approval but there was a campaign not to change Cape Canaveral, as it had a long history of usage dating to the earliest days of Spanish exploration. Nine years later, the State of Florida passed legislation to retain Cape Canaveral and the Board of Geographic names followed this.

Although nations seem to routinely change names for political reasons, changing non-political names is unnecessary and often confusing. In addition, much consideration of the many ramifications of changing long-held place names must be given. In the cases that I wish to emphasize (Middle Atlantic and South Atlantic Bight), official place names do not exist, and some researchers have simply invented names for areas instead of using simple descriptors, which would be far clearer to a world audience. The Board has officially approved neither of the names; neither are they in common usage nor are widely known outside of a few specialized scientific journals and government publications.

Those who insist on using the terms Middle Atlantic Bight and South Atlan-

tic Bight should first make a formal application to the Board and secure them as official and clearly defined geographical entities. Lacking that, I would hope that a suitable substitution could be agreed on for them to avoid the listed difficulties and imprecisions.

Clarifying Current Terminology

As noted above, the definitions of bight do not really describe the areas so often miscast as the "Middle Atlantic Bight" or "South Atlantic Bight." For authors and editors who must deal with these areas in question, here are some suggested phrases to replace the imprecise terms. The most northerly area could be referred to as "off the middle Atlantic states" or even more precisely as "off Delaware, New Jersey and New York" or "off Maryland and Virginia." Another phrase that could be substituted would be "coastal waters off the middle Atlantic U.S. states."

More precision would be achieved for "South Atlantic Bight" by specifying "coastal waters of the southern U.S. Atlantic states" or "coastal waters off the Carolinas," or whatever area is specified. While these suggestions may take three or four additional words, the precision and clarity gained would far outweigh the supposed value of the ill-defined wording now used. And, should

other authors or editors have additional suggestions to clarify these areas, their submission is invited.

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