Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program has record-breaking year

By Staff

(March 22, 2013) If you went fishing in Chesapeake Bay in 2012, you may have noticed it was a banner year for red drum. Catches of these and other fishes led to an exceptional year for the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program.

The program—supported by funding from Virginia's saltwater license funds and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science—trains volunteer taggers to provide fisheries managers with data on migration patterns and habitat use of 10 species of recreationally important finfish. It has been a cooperative project of VIMS and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) since 1995.

In 2012, program volunteers tagged more than 31,600 fish, setting a new record. The volunteer anglers who contributed to these records were acknowledged on February 22 at the annual Tagging Awards Program at Bass Pro Shop in Hampton.

Top Taggers: Some of the top taggers of 2012 are pictured with VGFTP officials: Front, L-R: Susanna Musick (VIMS), Carl Stover, Jay Duell, Rob Choi, and Lewis Gillingham (VMRC); Rear, L-R: Ed Shepherd, Jim Robinson, Sheldon Arey, and Ed Shepherd. Photo by Rob Choi.

Taggers were recognized in 12 categories, including most tagged fish overall, most recaptured fish, and most tagged fish of a single species. First-place taggers in each category received a plaque, and runners-up received a tackle bucket with fishing gear provided by Bass Pro Shop.

Susanna Musick, who directs the VIMS component of the program, says the overall number of fishes tagged in the program increased by 63% in 2012, with an 11.8% increase in the number of recaptures. "Red drum had the most impressive increase in effort with more than 18,300 fish tagged," says Musick. "This was a new record for red drum and for any species in the tagging program."

Musick says these numbers are important because they document year-to-year and seasonal changes in the abundance of recreationally important marine fish species. "Because these types of data aren't widely available elsewhere," says Musick, "the Tagging Program's significance continues to grow as it contributes data to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission and other management groups."

She attributes the program's success to "the dedication of the extraordinary group of volunteers who contribute to this important source of recreational fisheries data."

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This year's Tagging Awards went to:

Most Tagged Fish Overall
- Ed Shepherd
- Sheldon Arey

Most Recaptures
- Ed Shepherd
- Carl Stover

Most Tagged Black Drum
- Jim Robinson
- Jay Duell

Most Tagged Black Sea Bass
- Brandon Bartlett
- Mike Perron

Most Tagged Cobia
- Brandon Bartlett
- Jorj Head

Most Tagged Flounder
- Ed Shepherd
- Mike Handforth

Most Tagged Red Drum
- Ed Shepherd
- Carl Stover

Most Tagged Sheepshead
- Jay Duell
- Mike Perron

Most Tagged Spadefish
- Brandon Bartlett
- Rob Choi

Most Tagged Speckled Trout
- Sheldon Arey
- Ed Lawrence

Most Tagged Tautog
- Rob Collins
- Ken Neill

Most Tagged Triggerfish
- Rob Collins
- Mike Perron