Necessity Charters Does Its Part for Gulf Coast Research

Wednesday July 25, 2012

On a warm summer morning in Orange Beach, Alabama, Captain Ben Fairey's charter boat, Necessity, launches from Orange Beach Marina to embark on a research trip with a team of scientists from the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in affiliation with the University of Southern Mississippi as well as the Gulf Coast Preservation Society. This was no three hour tour on the S.S. Minnow, but a trip that had the primary goal of catching Red Snapper and collecting information that would lead to the marine stock enhancement of the overfished Red Snapper population of the Gulf of Mexico. Overfishing of Red Snapper has become an issue facing this valuable Gulf Coast resource. Many visitors to the area want to catch this fish since it is an exciting catch and a delicious meal.

Angelos Apeitos, a fish hatchery specialist from the University of Southern Mississippi's Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs, Mississippi, led a team of researchers from the Gulf Coast Laboratory on a joint venture with the Gulf Coast Preservation Society to participate in a *local* strip-spawning effort. *Strip-spawning is the process of collecting the necessary materials from the fish themselves that are required for reproducing with the samples collected used to begin the respawning process with eggs from the female Red Snapper*.

The team was sent to the Gulf for the purpose of collecting these samples as well as several live snapper from each gender to relocate them to a facility in Mississippi. Once in their designated 12" tanks, the snapper are given special hormones to maximize the amount of eggs and sperm produced by each fish. A close eye is kept on these *precious* fish as their survival is vital.

Given a special *National Marine* permit *to be the lone Red Snapper hunters* of the Gulf after the close of the official season, the researchers were eager to spend their day on the water as the light seas began to churn with the incoming *early afternoon* winds. Once on top of the artificial reef, about 23 miles out according to Captain Fairey, the hard working deckhand was quick to get rods and reels into the hands of the team whose mission was to catch Red Snapper.

The pre-rigged lines with the required circle hooks, for *easy unhooking and general safety of the fish, were* dropped the 100 feet to the bottom loaded with either frozen squid or an unsuspecting bait fish caught prior to the charter by Captain Fairey. The first strike didn't take long as a sizeable female was hauled in to get the ball rolling for the research team.

The sides of the back deck of the boat were lined with team members hard at work reeling in beautiful Red Snapper in the "name of science," with the team leader, Angelos, and a few others hastily recording all of the incoming fish's vital information that was being barked out by the team. Emmet Wright, a marine aquaculture technician, described how they collect, "blood samples, gonads, and a record of the fish's age." The live bait well began to show signs of becoming full as the choppy seas contributed to the well spilling over several times on top of the researchers trying to handle the incoming fish.

Once the snapper are induced to spawn and the eggs have been artificially fertilized, they are left to hatch before being moved into larger tanks, or bloodstocks', to mature. The snapper are then tagged for identification and prepared for re-release into the Gulf of Mexico. The Gulf is a self containing body of water that holds the Red Snapper inside for the entire year instead of them migrating to other waters. Apeitos explained how this and the careful examination of the snapper go into ensuring that, "of the fish caught, 80% will live through the process," and have a chance to be caught once again in the waters in which they once lived.