

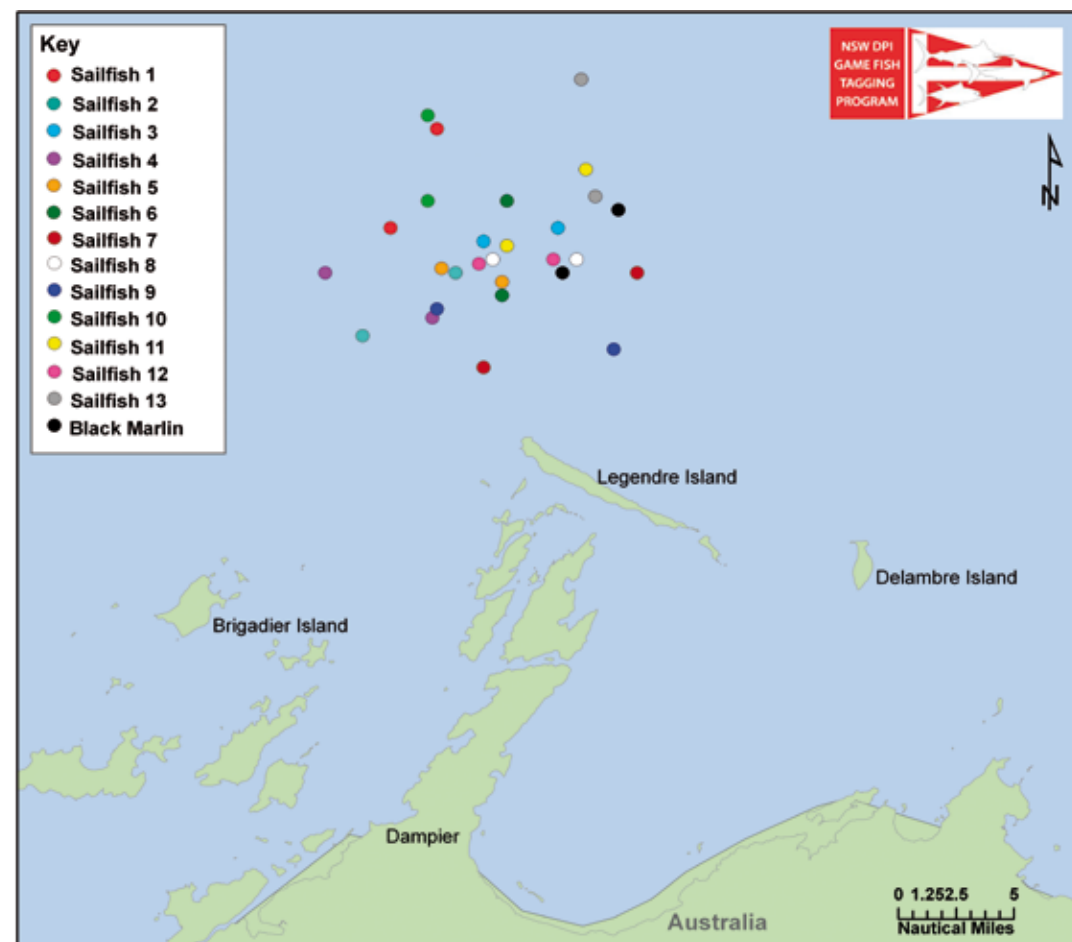
Tagging update – Sailfish galore in Dampier

AN extraordinary number of sailfish were found to be congregated around the large bait schools gathered offshore from Dampier throughout the winter months of 2009. Participants fishing the Dampier Classic in August caught an unprecedented number of fish throughout their tournament. There were 291 sailfish and 53 black marlin tagged for a total of 12 offshore boats. There were reported to be many billfish jumping throughout the area, and one boat tagged 63 billfish over the four-day event!

Since the start of 2009, 728 sailfish have been tagged to date at Dampier. This accounts for the vast majority of all the sailfish recorded on the tagging database by November 2009 (although we are also expecting a significant number of completed tag cards to be returned from the prolific Broome Billfish Classic.)

The majority of sailfish were tagged in August, although the first fish were tagged in February. It was reported that the fish were there in large numbers because of the large quantities of baitfish present that held there for many months.

From all the fish tagged throughout the year, 13 sailfish



and one black marlin have subsequently been recaptured. (A special mention should go Nickol Bay SFC boat *The*

Wench. This boat recaptured and retagged six of these fish and by November 2009 had tagged an amazing 102

billfish since 1 July!) All 14 fish were recaptured in the same general area they were released. The fish ranged

SPECIES/ MAP REF.	TAG NUMBER	REL. DATE	RELEASE/ RECAPTURE LOCATION	EST. REL. LENGTH / WEIGHT	RECAP. DATE	EST. RECAP. LENGTH / WEIGHT	DAYS AT LIBERTY	APPROX. DISTANCE MOVED (NM)
Sailfish 1	B006868	02/08/09	Dampier, WA	150cm / 25kg	06/08/09	20kg	4	5
Sailfish 2	B053252	30/05/09	Dampier, WA	150cm / 15kg	31/05/09	160cm / 20kg	1	0
Sailfish 3	B038106	31/03/09	Dampier, WA	120cm / 20kg	01/06/09	230cm / 25kg	62	3
Sailfish 4	B053324	31/05/09	Dampier, WA	240cm / 40kg	07/08/09	180cm / 25kg	68	6
Sailfish 5	B018602	07/03/09	Dampier, WA	200cm / 25kg	07/08/09	200cm / 35kg	153	4
Sailfish 6	B038055	03/08/09	Dampier, WA	180cm / 14kg	09/08/09	180cm / 25kg	6	2
Sailfish 7	B042213	02/08/09	Dampier, WA	170cm / 20kg	16/08/09	200cm / 25kg	14	1
Sailfish 8	B019595	01/08/09	Dampier, WA	180cm / 15kg	07/08/09	180cm / 25kg	6	1
Sailfish 9	B018550	02/08/09	Dampier, WA	180cm / 30kg	06/08/09	190cm / 32kg	4	4
Sailfish 10	B032554	03/08/09	Dampier, WA	15kg	09/08/09	180cm / 22kg	6	0
Sailfish 11	B042276	01/08/09	Dampier, WA	130cm / 12kg	16/08/09	170cm / 25kg	15	17
Sailfish 12	B038316	05/07/09	Dampier, WA	200cm / 25kg	09/08/09	175cm / 18kg	35	14
Sailfish 13	B053821	01/06/09	Dampier, WA	150cm / 20kg	20/08/09	200cm / 20kg	80	4
Black Marlin	B018623	02/08/09	Dampier, WA	190cm / 50kg	07/10/09	70kg	66	3

in distance from 0nm up to 17nm from site of original release and were recaptured from one day to 153 days after they were first tagged.

High numbers of recaptures like this are not unusual when fish are holding in a specific area that is regularly fished. Recapture rates drop rapidly when the fish are dispersed and are caught in remote fishing locations with little fishing pressure.

Throughout the history of the tagging program 247 sailfish have been recaptured. Of these, only 16 have been recorded at distances of 100nm or more from the original release site, with only 36 sailfish having been caught further than 20nm from the original release site. There have been several fish that have travelled moderately

long distances, and the record is held by a fish tagged off Noosa and recaptured at a straight-line distance of 1242nm at Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, after 253 days.

The general lack of long-distance movements of sailfish has also been reported in other studies throughout the world, where the majority of fish have been recaptured within a short distance of release point. Electronic tagging studies, however, have demonstrated that sailfish regularly move several hundred nautical miles over periods of 30 to 100 days at liberty, and further emphasise the influence of dispersal (particularly offshore movements) on recapture rates.

Interestingly, our recapture records include a number of

fish tagged in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Kenya. These fish demonstrated a high recapture rate, which has been attributed to the relatively high fishing pressure found in these locations, with many recaptured fish caught by local commercial fishermen using gill nets. The majority of sailfish, however, have been tagged and recaptured at a number of hotspots around Australia. These include Mooloolaba, Cape Bowling Green, Broome and now Dampier.

It is good to note that the majority of sailfish caught using bait were targeted with non-offset circle hooks, as this has been proven to maximise survival rates of released fish. There were a number of fish, however, that were still reported to be deep hooked.

Please remember when using circle hooks to match the hook size to fish targeted. The reduced gape of the smaller hook sizes reduces the chance for deep hooking or for catching on the gill arches of the fish. Hook sizes of 7/0 and 8/0 are generally well suited to sailfish (and small marlin) rather than 10/0 or 12/0 hooks, which are best suited to medium-sized marlin.

The Industry and Investment NSW (I&I NSW) Program issues tags to individuals and fishing clubs and is funded by the NSW Recreational Fishing Trust. If you would like to participate in the program please phone (02) 9527 8411 or email gamefish.tagging@industry.nsw.gov.au. ■

– **Phil Bolton**
Fisheries Manager
Tagging I&I NSW

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