

Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group

Contributed by Wildlife Conservation Society

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More than 10 years ago, a group of conservation NGOs and fisher organizations partnered with the Belize Fisheries Department in a collaborative initiative to protect and manage the nation's reef fish spawning aggregations.

A national assessment of aggregation sites in 2001 had revealed that many of the known banks for the Nassau grouper had been almost completely fished out. That alarming finding alerted local stakeholders to the urgent need to protect these areas and prompted the establishment of the Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group.

Members of the working group presently include the Belize Audubon Society, Belize Federation of Fishers, Belize Fishermen Co-operative Association, Coastal Zone Management Institute, Environmental Research Institute (ERI) of the University of Belize, Fisheries Department, Hopkins Fishermen Association, Placencia Fishermen Co-operative Society, Sarteneja Fishermen Association, Southern Environmental Association, The Nature Conservancy, and the Wildlife Conservation Society.

This body's initial efforts focused on drafting policy and advocating for legislation to protect the endangered Nassau grouper. Those actions resulted in the successful passage of legislation in 2003 that protected 11 grouper spawning sites as marine reserves while introducing a closed fishing season between December 1 and March 31.

Recognizing the need to consolidate these policy changes with consistent and continuous management, the working group next took on the task of coordinating the monitoring of the spawning areas and helping to raise awareness of the new management measures that the Belize authorities had implemented.

One major focus has been the monitoring of seven spawning aggregation sites during the closed season. Information collected is stored in a specially-designed online database managed by ERI, with key results published in the group's annual newsletter. Refresher training sessions on the fish count protocol are provided for the dive teams conducting the surveys.

The working group also leads a communications and public awareness program. These efforts have included the development of a video documentary on the Nassau grouper, posters and pamphlets, a web site, and television spots that highlight the importance of conserving these important aggregations.

Passing Belize in 1848 aboard his ship the HMS Beagle, Charles Darwin wrote that he had seen "the most remarkable reef in the West Indies." So perhaps it is only natural that the presence of veritable "factories" of grouper dotted along that reef should lead us to contemplate the incredible adaptation of this fish's spawning behaviors, evolved over thousands of years to ensure its survival.

The working group's success owes no small debt to a diverse group of local fishers, who unselfishly shared their traditional knowledge of spawning banks with researchers and managers.

This cooperative effort demonstrates again why partnerships are critical to successful management and conservation. The Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group has benefited from a wide range of diverse partners in government, the fishing industry, academia, and the conservation community over the past decade. Together they have developed a growing body of research that we hope will enable Belize's reef fish populations to survive long into the future.

Visit the Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group's web site at www.spagbelize.org to learn more about its work and the spawning sites.