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# Information Circular No 1: The Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group

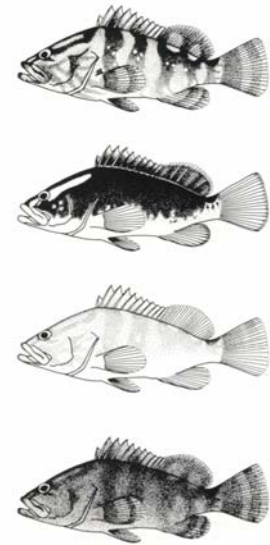
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## January 2004

Shown at right: Four color-phase changes of the Nassau Grouper,  
*Epinephelus striatus*.



The Belize Spawning Aggregation Working Group (SPAG) was formed in 2001 to specifically address the declining Nassau grouper population in Belize. The committee was formed in response to a workshop convened by Green Reef. Members of the committee represent the following Government and Non—Government organizations: Belize Audubon Society, Belize Fishermen Cooperative Association, Belize Fisheries Department, Coastal Zone Management Authority and Institute, Friends of Nature, Green Reef, The Nature Conservancy, Toledo Institute for Development and Environment, Toledo Association for Sustainable Tourism and Empowerment, University of Belize, Wildlife Conservation Society and the World Wildlife Fund.



Photo by Lisa Carne

The committee's first goal was to locate and survey all known Nassau grouper aggregation sites in Belize. Because initial monitoring has shown that many aggregation sites attract multiple species, the long-term objective for the Spawning Aggregation Working Group is to collect regular census and catch data from each active site and create or modify existing fishing regulations to ensure commercial viability. So while the current focus is on the Nassau grouper, future collaborative studies will examine the Black Grouper, Goliath grouper and other relevant

commercial species such as snappers, lobster and conch.

With cooperation from fishermen, and an unprecedented collaboration between the above organizations, over 25 sites in Belize have been surveyed over the last two spawning seasons (2001/2 and 2002/3). Because the Nassau's numbers are so small (see table on backside), only two sites will remain open to fishing, Maugre Caye in Turneffe and Northern Two Cayes in Lighthouse Reef. **Fishermen at these sites require special licenses granted by the Fisheries Department and all catch data must be reported to Fisheries.** So far only two licenses have been requested.

## Maximum Grouper Counts for 2003

Site	Number Fish	Site	Number Fish
Rocky Point	0	Dog Flea	1500
St. George's	5	Calabash	2
Goff's Bank	5	Soldier	0
Rendezvous	1	Ropewalk	6
Sandbore	1800	Deadman	1
Half Moon Caye	2	Crawl Caye	3
South Point	1	Bokel	1
NE Pt., Glover's	2400	Gladden Spit	250
Middle Caye	0	Rise and Fall	0
SW Caye	0	Nicolas Caye	52
Caye Glory	1000	Frenchman's	0
Maugre Caye	0	Elbow, Sapodillas	0

Monitoring will continue this season and indefinitely, at the following sites which are now permanently protected: Dog Flea Caye, Sand Bore, Caye Glory, Northeast Point in Glover's, Gladden Spit and Nicholas Caye. Catch data will be collected from the two remaining open sites, Maugre Caye and Northern Two cayes

It is now illegal to have any Nassau during their spawning months, December-March, with violations subject to \$500 fine and/or up to six months imprisonment.

Belize is not the first nation to protect the grouper; it has been fully protected in the United States' waters for almost twenty years and is a candidate for the Endangered Species Act. The Nassau is also listed as "endangered" on the IUCN's Red List. Because the recovery rate for the Nassau is slow even in the US, and populations have crashed all over the Caribbean, it is the SPAG committee's hope that other Caribbean countries will follow suit to ensure survival of this species.

The SPAG working group was instrumental in passing these recent regulations in Belize, and education is key to their goals. Two posters, an informative brochure, and a television spot have all helped to enlighten the Belize public about their declining resources and the need for immediate action. Additionally plans are in place for a single monitoring protocol and database, and a data sharing agreement between all the organizations involved has recently been finalized. Monitoring for this year's spawning season has already begun.

If you would like more information about the Nassau Grouper, the Belize Spawning Aggregation Committee, or anything mentioned in this newsletter, please contact Roberto Pott, Chairperson, Spawning Aggregation Working Group, at the Belize Audubon Society, 12 Fort Street, P.O. Box 1001, Belize City, Belize, Central America. Tel: (501) 223-5004/4987/4988, Fax: (501) 223-4985, E-mail: [research@bas.bz](mailto:research@bas.bz).

