

Game-fish taggers visit “Hot Ditch” for annual event

(February 3, 2011) A hardy group of recreational anglers braved winter’s chill and a biting wind to take part in a catch-and-release tagging event at the “Hot Ditch” on the Elizabeth River—the anglers’ name for the warm-water outflow channel below Dominion’s Chesapeake Power Plant.

The anglers are members of the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program (VGFTP), a collaborative effort between the Virginia Institute of Marine Science and the Virginia Marine Resources Commission. The program was established in 1995 to engage anglers in the conservation and management of marine finfish—in particular species not regularly targeted by scientific surveys. It is supported by sales of Virginia’s saltwater recreational fishing license.

Susanna Musick, a marine recreational specialist who manages VIMS’ role in the tagging program, says it “gives conservation-minded anglers a chance to assist in collecting scientific information about the movements and biology of red drum, flounder, black sea bass, tautog, speckled trout, and other recreationally popular species.”

To date, program participants have tagged more than 170,000 fish in 10 species (VGFTP taggers have also targeted black drum, cobia, spadefish, sheepshead, and gray triggerfish). More than 17,000 of these fish have been recaptured, for an average recapture rate of 10 per cent.

Ed Lawrence of Gloucester, who has participated in the program since 1997, says one of the speckled trout that he caught and tagged during a previous Hot Ditch event was re-caught in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He says the fish “must have had afterburners,” making the 400-mile journey in just 23 days.

During the latest Hot Ditch tagging event, a small group of anglers caught and released between 30 and 40 fish. These were mostly “puppy drum” (the anglers’ nickname for juvenile red drum), plus a few speckled trout, or “specks.” The fish overwinter in the Hot Ditch and surrounding waters to take advantage of the manmade warmth. On this day, water temperature in the Ditch was 57°, compared to the 37° elsewhere in the Elizabeth River and lower Bay.

This year’s Hot Ditch event differed from previous affairs in that only catch-and-release fishing was allowed. Dominion Virginia Power modified its fishing policy for the Hot Ditch in the fall of 2010 based on catch data suggesting that overwintering red drum and speckled trout are old enough to reproduce.



VIMS marine recreational specialist Susanna Musick and tagger Ed Lawrence measure a red drum from Dominion’s “Hot Ditch.” Photo by David Malmquist.

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Musick says “The size of the fish tagged in the Hot Ditch and the citations reported nearby suggest that this area holds red drum and specks that are reproductively mature. Dominion’s new catch-and-release policy should help to protect the Hot Ditch as important over-wintering habitat for these recreationally important fish.”

Dominion Virginia Power has given the tagging program access to the Hot Ditch for several years. “The data collected here have helped to show important patterns in habitat utilization and movement,” says Musick. “Recapture data from puppy drum show that some fish overwinter at the Hot Ditch and some move back to the lower Bay and North Carolina waters. Recapture data also show that speckled trout overwinter here.”

Training for Tagging

The 200-odd anglers enrolled in the tagging program undergo annual training to gain or hone their skills. VIMS researchers, VMRC staff, and some returning taggers teach rookie and less-experienced taggers how to accurately measure the condition, size, and location of their catch; select and attach the appropriate tags; and carefully release the fish back into the water. Later re-capture of the tagged fishes by program members and other anglers provides important information about the fishes’ life history and migratory patterns.

Data from the program, compiled in a series of annual reports, have thrown new light on the population dynamics of these fishes in Virginia waters, the timing of their seasonal entry and exit from Chesapeake Bay, the timing and pattern of their migration in the coastal Atlantic, and other information of interest to fishery managers.

Retired marine recreational specialist Jon Lucy of VIMS, who established the tagging program with Claude Bain of VMRC in 1995, says program results are particularly important for species like red drum whose juveniles are seldom captured during the VIMS Trawl and Beach Seine Surveys.

“Survey data for juvenile red drum are sparse,” says Lucy. “Before the tagging program, we had very little information on the fish’s seasonal movements or habitat preferences in state waters. More importantly, we had no long-term time series of data on their abundance and size distribution.”

“The tagging program works because of good teamwork across the fishing community,” says Lucy. “Its results are of interest both to anglers and to fishery researchers and managers. The number and size distribution of the tagged fish are of special interest to fishery managers because they compliment other research-based data sets.”

The Hot Ditch is on private property and closed to public fishing for safety and legal reasons. Dominion supports the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program by providing occasional access to the Ditch for research purposes.

For information on becoming involved in the Virginia Game Fish Tagging Program, visit www.vims.edu/vgftp