



# The International Game Fish Association

300 Gulf Stream Way, Dania Beach, Florida, 33004 U.S.A.

Phone: 954-927-2628 • Fax: 954-924-4299

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Comisiones Legislativas IV

Asamblea Legislativa

Established in 1939 and originally housed in the American Museum of Natural History, the IGFA is a non-profit and non-governmental organization committed to the conservation of game fish and the promotion of responsible, ethical angling practices through science, education, rulemaking, record keeping and recognition of outstanding accomplishments in the field of angling. Currently the IGFA has members in over 109 countries with official IGFA Representatives in 65 countries.

The IGFA's commitment to fisheries and habitat conservation is marked by its research and advocacy/policy work, especially regarding billfish species which include marlin, sailfish and spearfish. Billfish research and conservation is of primary importance to the IGFA evidenced by our flagship research program, the IGFA Great Marlin Race, that has deployed over 560 satellite tags in 24 countries on 7 species of billfish to track their movements and diving behavior to learn more about their behavior and habitat utilization. The IGFA was also instrumental in the United States' passing of the Billfish Conservation Act of 2012 and subsequent Amendment in 2018 that prohibits the importation or sale of billfish products in the continental United States. IGFA staff and Representatives actively participate in numerous fisheries management bodies such as international regional fishery management organizations and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. As the foremost authority in the field of recreational angling, the IGFA is the only recreational fishing organization to receive accreditation by the United Nations Environment Programme.

A primary goal of the IGFA is to promote responsible and sustainable angling practices to maintain recreational fishing opportunities for the future. Of paramount importance to maintaining healthy fish stocks is proper management of fisheries. For billfish, this includes the practice of catch and release fishing. Over the past 20 years, the mentality toward killing billfish has drastically changed. With the standardized use of non-offset circle hooks by recreational anglers and the US commercial longline industry, the post-release mortality of recreationally and commercially caught billfish has significantly decreased. In the US and along Central America's Pacific Coast, the practice of recreational catch and release is largely the norm. It is accepted among this community that a fish released alive is worth much more than one killed and commercialized. This fact has also been confirmed through economic studies. The benefits of catch and release are well-studied. This practice represents an ecologically sustainable and economically beneficial model for recreational billfish fisheries. In fact, a review article published in 2015 by Musyl *et al.* states, "the majority of istiophorid billfish survive when released from recreational and longline fishing gear, clearly implying catch-and-release as a viable management option that permits fishing activity while protecting parental biomass and the fishery".

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The economic impact of the recreational billfish fishery is significant in Costa Rica. A study performed in 2008 by the University of Costa Rica found sport fishing contributed approximately \$599.1 million to Costa Rica's gross domestic product. Although Costa Rica is home to many recreationally important species, a vast majority of those traveling to fish in Costa Rica's waters target billfish species. Conserving sailfish with the goal of increasing abundance would see higher catch rates thus increased tourism and economic impact.

Sailfish are more coastal in nature than other billfish in the eastern tropical Pacific however, they have been found to travel long distances along the Central American coast. These fish pass through multiple national jurisdictions each year where their commercial capture and sale is managed differently in each location. This is a single stock of sailfish being managed by multiple nations, few with the same regulations. Guatemala represents the nation with the highest recreational catch rates of sailfish in the region and has enacted laws to prohibit their commercialization. The same has been done in Panama and Nicaragua to an extent. The IGFA recommends Costa Rica follow the path set by these nations and explore options to limit fishing mortality of sailfish by removing the incentive to target the species in commercial longline fisheries while maintaining the current capacity of the recreational and charter fleets. Given the low fishing mortality of sailfish in recreational fisheries and the economic benefits of a robust fishing tourism industry, maintaining recreational angling access through individual and charter operations is critical.

To date, the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) has not been able to properly assess the sailfish stock due to a lack of necessary information. The status of the sailfish stock in the eastern Pacific remains unknown. The level of sailfish catch is unreliable and the likelihood of accurately determining historical catch is low. Across the region, reported catch has decreased in the 2015-2020 estimate compared to 1993-2007. This decreased catch level is concerning given that abundance is thought to be constant or increasing since 2009 as stated by the IATTC. Given the lack of reliability in the attempted assessment of sailfish by the IATTC, the IGFA recommends Costa Rica take the precautionary approach by decreasing fishing mortality from the commercial fishery at all scales. The recreational fleet contributes very little to overall fishing mortality thus the IGFA does not recommend limiting access to anglers or charter boat operations given the economic benefits drastically outweigh the detriment of the few fish that die due to catch and release.

The IGFA is delighted to learn the Government of Costa Rica is interested in conserving sailfish within its exclusive economic zone. The IGFA is also happy to see the acknowledgement of sailfish as both ecologically and economically important through recreational fishing tourism. The primary goal of the IGFA is to advocate for healthy fish populations and habitats as well as reasonable recreational access to fisheries. By labeling sailfish as a National Symbol, the IGFA hopes to see sailfish stocks properly managed and the benefits of a robust recreational fishery realized.

Sincerely



Jason Schratwieser  
IGFA President