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 EDITORIAL

# PANAMA GETS IT!

W

hen public officials don't recognize the economic value of recreational fishing, they:

- zone sport fishermen off the water along much of the California coast;
- attempt to end requirements for fishing licenses in various states, including Florida;
- allow trawlers to waste thousands of striped bass off North Carolina;
- propose highly restrictive limits for pelagic species with no scientific evidence of need.

For those of us who understand the importance that recreational fishing plays in this country — socially, culturally and economically — examples like these remind us that there are many powerful people in this country who just don't *get it*.

So it came as a breath of fresh air to read the recent public comments of officials who *do*.

"Market research shows that a tourist destination that has reduced overfishing and put in place sound conservation regulations on sport fishing increases the probability that a traveling angler will choose that destination.

A primary objective of this study will be to preserve, enhance and market the fabulous sport fishing off Panama's coasts.



"The international market for eco-tourism is rapidly expanding and seeking new destinations, particularly in the area of sport fishing. To capitalize on the economic benefits that follow strong ecotourism, we must have abundant fish and wildlife. If properly managed, these changes will create new, lasting jobs that are well paying."

Those are but a few of the comments from a recent statement written by two high-ranking Panamanian officials to announce a new sport-fishing study, in cooperation with The Billfish Foundation, aimed at assessing and effectively managing Panama's marine resources. According to the officials, Dr. Ruben Berrocal (national secretary of science, technology and innovation) and Salomon Shamah (minister of tourism), a primary objective of this study will be to preserve, enhance and market the fabulous sport fishing off the country's coasts.

When I use the word "fabulous," I'm not simply borrowing someone else's term. I've been fortunate

enough to fish Panama off the Atlantic twice and several times along the Pacific. Inevitably, in my position, I'm asked, "Where's the best fishing in the world?" I can't answer with one spot but typically offer a few that come to mind, and *always* Panama is in top-of-the-list territory. Aside from its wide-open fishing, the country is visitor friendly and close by (less than three hours from Miami).



In recent months, Panama has announced new laws prohibiting purse-seining and industrial longlining. Now, on the heels of those decisions, comes word of this new study aimed at

protecting Panama's world-class recreational fisheries. That is gratifying news.

While acknowledging the importance of continuing to harvest "safe and healthy seafood," Berrocal and Shamah cite a particular need to "drastically increase the amount of low-impact tourism." Going one step beyond, they write: "It has been scientifically proved that being conscientious stewards of fisheries through conservation programs like those advocated by the sport-fishing industry actually increases the quality and quantity of commercial harvests over time. A robust and responsible sport-fishing industry is in Panama's long-term interest."

How different is their awareness from that of some honchos in the Pew Foundation, who are working actively to close the entire vast Coral Sea off Australia to all sport fishing.

When it comes to understanding the nature and value of recreational fishing, Pew in Australia is clueless. Many individuals/entities in this country, as noted at the start of this editorial, advocate action that would set back the sport. They too are clueless.

Panama, on the other hand, *gets it*.

I wish these officials and their country nothing but the best of luck and certainly advocate that those who can do so should support the country's bold new efforts: *Go fish Panama*. Now there's a win-win for you!