



Observing Today...Conserving for Tomorrow

The IGFTO Observer

A newsletter for International Game Fish Tournament Observers

Volume 10 Edition 3

You Make The Call

Gray FishTag Research An IGFTO Partner

By Art McDonald



One of the satellite tags deployed during the GFR research project off Costa Rica.

By Art McDonald

You are attending a billfish tournament somewhere in the Caribbean and during one of the fishing days, an angler hooks a Blue Marlin, about 150 lbs. As is common, the fish “dogged” it a bit, staying down, but then, it surfaced. The boat aggressively backed down on the fish when, to the surprise of the captain and crew, the marlin turned and headed for the boat, jumping repeatedly. On the last jump, the fish launched itself into the cockpit. In the ensuing chaos, the mate was able to grab and cut the leader and “escort” the marlin out through the tuna door. Was this a legal and successful release?

We consulted with IGFA Chief of Staff Jack Vitek – here is his response:

“Regarding your question, this is certainly an interesting situation. If this had occurred for a potential IGFA World Record, there would be absolutely no issues with it. In fact, this has

One of the important missions of IGFTO is our dedication to the conservation and protection of game fish. In this endeavor, we are closely aligned with several other sport-fishing organizations, including the Billfish Foundation and Gray FishTag Research (GFR). In our last newsletter, we focused on Ellen Peel, the president of the Billfish Foundation. This issue we look at Bill Dobbelaer, president of Gray FishTag Research and his organization's efforts on behalf of conservation.

The Challenge of Gathering Reliable Data

For many years fisheries managers have sought reliable data to support their regulation decisions. They worked with the best available science, but the process for collecting data was often random. This process was adequate for some species, but not for others. Many tagging programs lacked the ability or the desire to share their data, studies, and conclusions to support or refute fisheries regulations.

Bill had a vision to involve charter sport fishing professionals in the collection of relevant daily data. He realized that the fishing industry was regulated and managed often without sufficient data. He also recognized that many groups had agendas of their own.

Ten Thousand Captains and Mates

In 2015, he began organizing the research efforts of GFR, bringing

happened before.

When it comes to the tournament and whether this should be counted as a release, that decision clearly lies with the tournament committee officials. However, by IGFA's interpretation, the fish was brought to leader (albeit in the boat) with no infractions on behalf of the angler and crew. Once onboard, the fish was returned to the water as quickly and as safely as possible (from our understanding) and was not harvested, which would disqualify it from [some] tournaments. Should the tournament have any regulations about removing the fish from the water, we do not feel this should apply as the fish was not removed from the water by the force of the angler or crew.

Therefore, provided all other IGFA and tournament rules were followed, it is our feeling and interpretation of this situation that the catch would be legal, and the fish should count as an official release. But, once again, this decision rests entirely with the tournament committee."

As an IGFTO observer – your job is not to judge. If you see, or suspect, an infraction it is your duty to report it to the tournament director who will make a decision based on the facts presented.

together over 10,000 captains and mates around the globe to gain real time data. This process, which included charter sport fishing professionals, continues to yield accurate data and is the key to the success of GFR.

GFR works with charter professional letting them tell the story. Most of them are on the water more days than not and engage with countless anglers from all around the world. By introducing anglers to fish tagging, GFR creates awareness of the benefits of tag and release while collecting data.

GFR is a not-for-profit, all species, and international tagging program. They offer all tags, applicators, data cards, hand-on training, and support to charter professional at no cost. They also make available all data collected from tag records and satellite studies free to the public. Gray FishTag's goal is to bridge the gap between charter professional and the science community in order to support data-driven decision making.

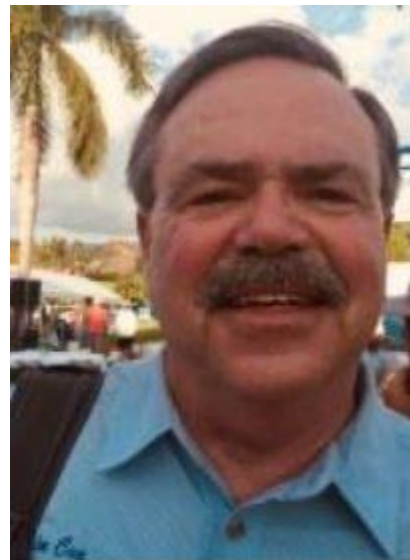
GFR and IGFTO

The GFR advisory board consists of industry leaders who support the program with their time, vessels, planning studies, and by raising charitable donations and sponsorships. IGFTO president Steve Hargett, a GFR board member, participated in a research project in August of this year in Los Suenos, Costa Rica. Steve accompanied a team of fourteen representatives of various



On the last jump, the fish launched itself into the cockpit.

Featured Member: Jim Cox



Jim at an IGFTO event

By Art McDonald

This issue, we profile Jim Cox – one of the original IGFTO members and a veteran of numerous billfish tournaments. His first memories of fishing were with his dad at a very

angling organizations.

Their mission was to place GFR tags on Pacific Blue Marlin at the sea mounds and FAD's 100 miles offshore. The tags included two GFR, and eight Stanford University satellite tags. Over the two days of fishing, the teams raised 70 fish with 55 bites. Numerous fish were tagged and all satellite tags were deployed. It was an epic trip.

Each year, thousands of GFR green spaghetti tags are distributed for deployment on over 70 plus species of fish. They continue to build on the past years studies to gain a greater understanding on the behavior and migration patterns of Blue Marlin, Roosterfish, Striped Bass, Striped Marlin, and Swordfish. The first satellite tag study on Yellowfin Tuna will begin later this year.

The GFR tagging program operates thanks to the generous donations from sponsors, research centers, and contributors. IGFTO is proud to be affiliated with such a conservation-oriented organization!

young age for trout in the California Eastern Sierras. While still in elementary school, he learned how to out-fish his father during these adventures.

Later, he spent some time visiting his grandmother in Long Beach, California. Her house was a short distance from a public pier, which had a barge anchored a few miles out. This is where he learned to fly fish for Bonito with light line and live Anchovies. By the time he was in his early teens, he began taking day trips for Albacore Tuna, Yellowtail, Bass, and other species. His angling skills qualified him to participate in a tournament at the end of the season.

When he was older, he had a good friend whose father had a sport fishing boat. His friend was not a fishing enthusiast, but his dad could often use an extra hand onboard, so for several years the three of them would fish the deeper southern California waters. They caught numerous Albacore and an occasional Striped Marlin.

First Taste of Competition - the Balboa Angling Club

Jim joined the famous Balboa Angling Club in the late 1970's and participated in several of the club tournaments in Mexico. These were all marlin release tournaments with points based on whether they fished with 12, 20, or 30-pound test fishing line. He had some success and enjoyed the competition. It was his first taste of tournament fishing.

It was around this time that his wife and he started their family. As his children grew and got involved with sports and other activities,



IGFTO president Hargett and his team during the research project. Steve is third from right.

68th San Juan International Billfish Tournament

August 17-22, 2021



The IGFTO observers who participated in the 2021 IBT. Author Art McDonald is the second from the left.

By Art McDonald

The 68th San Juan International Billfish Tournament is in the books, and a great time was had by all. Fourteen IGFTO

his fishing became less and less frequent, though he did manage to make a few fly-fishing trips to Alaska. It is said that certain types of fishing gets in your blood – and stays there!

Jim and his wife took a vacation to Australia in 2002. They went to visit their daughter who was studying there. He was able to spend two days fishing on the Great Barrier Reef. While they had some action, they did not get the Black Marlin he was hoping for on that trip.

One of the Original IGFTO Members

Around 2004 he was thumbing through a fishing magazine and noticed an ad for an IGFA observer training course being held in southern California. Jim thought this would be a good way to get more involved with the offshore fishing that he loved. He passed the course and signed up for his first tournament in Los Suenos in 2005. Since then, he has participated in some 19 legs of that tournament and looks forward to it every year. He has also observed in St. Thomas USVI, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico. As one of the original IGFTO members, he has seen the organization grow from a handful of people to over 250 highly skilled observers.

In 2016, Jim went fishing in Los Suenos the day before the tournament began. He finally managed to get the Black Marlin he sought in Australia fourteen years earlier. That day, he and his fishing mates also released a Blue Marlin and several Sailfish for a Grand Slam! His son and he went to Tropic Star Lodge in January 2020 with friends. They managed to get four blacks and two blues for their four days of fishing – what a great place!

observers (Mark Tobias, Walter Rowan, Derwood Roberts, Marvin Badler, Ron Teke, Ed Hallis, Pat Moore, Greg Moore, Barbara Evans, Mike McCorkel, Karen Nix, Ollie Bass, Rick Wesley, and yours truly) participated in the tournament which included fifty-two boats. A total of sixty-four billfish were released – sixty-three Blue Marlin and a single White Marlin.

A Historic Tournament

A little history: The International Billfish Tournament (IBT), at 68 years, is the oldest, continually running, salt-water big game fishing tournament on the planet – a fact the sponsors at Club Nautico take very seriously. The past four years have been trying. In 2017, the killer hurricane Maria (Category 5) made a direct hit on San Juan. The tournament has been plagued by COVID-19 problems since 2019. Each year the tournament had to change dates several times, yet it persevered and proceeded so as not to break the chain. This year the tournament took place on the date originally planned a year ago.

Marlin Magazine touts the IBT as one of the top ten saltwater tournaments in the world! The IBT is a truly international tournament with anglers from several countries participating. In earlier years, teams consisted of four anglers, one of whom would fish from a different boat each day. The rotating angler functioned as a de facto observer. Anglers also rotated rod positions every hour thereby assuring each angler equal opportunity at

Jim still works full time for the same company he started with upon his graduation from college. He holds a degree in electrical engineering. The company manufactures specialty magnetic cores used in the electronics industry. They sell parts all over the world; have a factory at their headquarters in California, and two factories in China.



Jim with a nice yellow fin tuna.

Industry News

IGFA Rule Change on Gang Hooks and Lures

IGFA announced a change to its International Angling Rules. The recent change comes after

the desired pitch-bait position.

Over the years boat owners disliked the idea of breaking up their teams, which resulted in a rule change that allowed teammates to fish together – provided an experienced observer was aboard. It was at this point that the IGFTO became involved. Teams were permitted to fish together, provided an IGFTO observer was assigned to their boat.

The Opening Ceremony

IGFTO members got together at the registration party on the evening of August 17, and mingled with participating anglers and crews. The following day, observers attended a mandatory rules meeting which emphasized IGFA rules as well as those specific to the tournament. These included hourly rotation of anglers, bait position relative to teaser placement, pitch baiting protocols, and more. This was followed by a formal International Flag Ceremony which included introductions of those representing the participating countries. Yours truly was chosen to represent the United States – quite an honor!

A New Championship Sport Fishing Series Announced

During the ceremony it was announced that the San Juan International Billfish Tournament would participate in the *2022 Sport Fishing Championship International Offshore Series*. This will be an eleven-event competition that will award one grand champion in the sport

feedback from the angling community regarding the use of soft-bodied lures where hooks are embedded into the lure itself to enhance the lure's swimming ability.



Previously under IGFA International Angling Rules, this was considered illegal as the hook was not considered “free-swinging”, even though the hook could become free swinging after the fish has taken the bait. The IGFA has changed their rule to the following:

“Gang hooks are permitted when attached to plugs and other artificial lures that are specifically designed for this use. Gang hooks must be free swinging and shall be limited to a maximum of three hooks (single, double, or treble, or a combination of any three). It is permissible to imbed or securely attach a gang hook to a lure provided that the hook becomes free swinging once the fish takes the lure. Gang hooks may not be used with natural bait. A photograph or sketch of the plug or lure should be submitted with record applications.”

Prior to making this rule change, the IGFA consulted several prominent fishing captains/guides, as well as reputable angling organizations including the Game Fish Association of Australia (GFAA), the Japan Game Fish Association (JGFA), the New Zealand Sport Fishing Council (NZSFC), the Big Game Fishing Club of France (BGFCF), and

of offshore fishing. The San Juan IBT will be the concluding tournament in 2022 which will include such prestigious tournaments as the Louisiana Gulf Coast Billfish Classic (Venice, LA), Club Nautico de Santo Domingo White Marlin Tournament (Punta Cana, DR), 50th Annual NEFMA Bluewater Tournament (St. Augustine, FL), Gulf Coast Masters (Orange Beach, AL), Mississippi Gulf Coast Billfish Classic (Biloxi, MS), Emerald Coast Blue Marlin Classic (Miramar Beach, FL), Charleston Offshore Classic (Charleston, SC), Texas International Fishing Tournament (South Padre Island, TX) Oak Bluffs Bluewater Classic (Martha's Vineyard, MA), and the Pirates Cove Billfish Tournament (Manteo, NC). Think NASCAR circuit with an overall champion decided at the last event, which should certainly encourage more anglers to participate next year.

The 2021 Tournament

Expectations were in full bloom at 5:30 a.m. on the morning of August 19 – the first day of fishing. On this day the world famous “San Juan Bimini Start” took place with the backdrop of Castillo San Felipe del Morro – aka “El Morro” – the magnificent fortress built by the Spanish between the 16th and 18th centuries to guard the entrance to the Port. Picture more than fifty sport fishing boats waiting for the magic countdown to 8:00 a.m. to throttle up in search of the motherload of Blue Marlin – a spectacular site to see. Once lines hit the water it did not take long for Alberto

the International Women's Fishing Association (IWFA),
“As tackle and techniques continue to evolve, it is important for the IGFA review the relevancy of our International Angling Rules as necessary,” said IGFA President Jason Schratwieser. *“Rule changes are something we take very seriously and do not happen often, however, we feel confident in this change as it fits within the intent of our rules and has been vetted by top angling authorities around the world.”*

Upcoming Observer Training Courses

November 13, 2021 - OTC in Fort Lauderdale

New Venue Offers Travel Expense Savings

Our next Observer Training Course is scheduled for Saturday, November 13, 2021. The course will be conducted at the Holiday Inn Express located just 3 miles from Ft. Lauderdale airport. This will be the third OTC held at this location. We have received favorable reports about the convenience of having our venue near the Ft. Lauderdale airport. The location also reduces the travel expense to and from the OTC. The Holiday Inn Express provides transportation to and from the airport and is located near numerous restaurants and shops. It also offers parking for those driving to and from the OTC.

Attendance is Limited

Serra to hook up on the *Reel Affair*, subsequently releasing of a Blue Marlin at 8:32 a.m. The tournament was off to a roaring start! For the rest of the day and the subsequent two days many fish were hooked. When the smoke cleared at the end of day three, the 54' Hatteras, *First Class*, claimed first place with four releases. She was followed by the 61' Viking, *Pasion* with three releases, and the 40' Cabo, *Pink Lady* taking third place. A total of 38 boats released at least one fish!

The Awards Banquet

A gala awards banquet followed with presentations galore. Sadly, at the end of the evening it was time to call it a tournament with all observers leaving the following day. Old friendships were renewed, and new friendships were initiated. A special thanks goes to Roger Casellas, the IBT Tournament Director who has persevered over the past couple of years with tremendous obstacles thrown before him with this dreaded virus. Roger overcame every one of them. Also, a tip of the hat to Ricky Jaen and Ricky LaFranc both members of the Tournament and Rules Committee for their confidence in the IGFTO Observer program. We are proud to be associated with such a wonderful tournament.

Let us not forget the members of IGFTO who traveled a significant distance to participate in this event, and in some cases sacrificed their bodies when Father Neptune decided to greet us with 8-10' seas on two of the three mornings.

Attendees can also save money with an IGFTO group room rate. To take advantage of the discounted room rate, reservations must be made by October 12, 2021. At press time, Covid-19 restrictions remain in place at the Holiday Inn Express, requiring that masks be worn during the program and limiting the attendance to thirteen people.

The course runs from 9 a.m. until 1:30 p.m. Content includes IGFA international angling rules, billfish identification, observer best practices, and numerous billfish identification slides and videos.

Registrations are currently being accepted at www.igfto.org. Please spread the word to family and friends you think would qualify as observers. This program will fill up quickly.

Welcome Our New Members

It was my great pleasure to share the IGFTO Training Course with nine new members. We met in Virginia Beach on July 31. The course went smoothly with enthusiastic interaction with the attendees. I look forward to seeing our new members in upcoming tournaments. Congratulations to all.

Steve Hargett,
President

Jay Brooks, Norfolk, VA
Lara Doran, Kitty Hawk, NC
Patrick Hanna, Arlington, VA
William Harrington, Ft Lauderdale, FL
Robert Hicks, Souderton, PA
Mike Peterson, New Braunfels, TX

Thankfully, the seas settled down as the days wore on. If you have not participated in this tournament, look for the call for observers early next summer – you don't want to miss it!

Steve Reynolds, Virginia Beach, VA
Alan Siperstein, Eatontown, NJ
Bryan Titus, Oakwood, GA

**We're here for you.
Director contacts:**

Steve Hargett
President & Director
steve.hargett@igfto.org

Evan Hipsley
Director & Webmaster
evan.hipsley@igfto.org

Art McDonald
VP and Director
art.mcdonald@igfto.org

Terry O'Neill
Director & Treasurer
terry.oneill@igfto.org

Bob Stimolo
Director & Marketing
bob.stimolo@igfto.org

John Treat
Director Emeritus
john.treat@igfto.org

IGFTO
P.O. Box 7333
Gainesville, GA 30504-0017

+1 (404) 386-3388



International Game Fish Tournament Observers Inc. is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt charitable organization dedicated to the preservation and conservation of game fish worldwide. We provide trained and insured observers to authenticate the “catch and release” of billfish and game fish during international big game fish tournaments.
