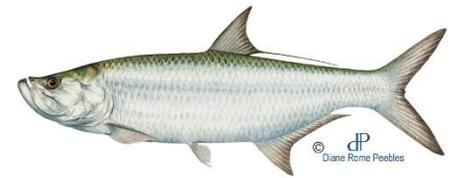
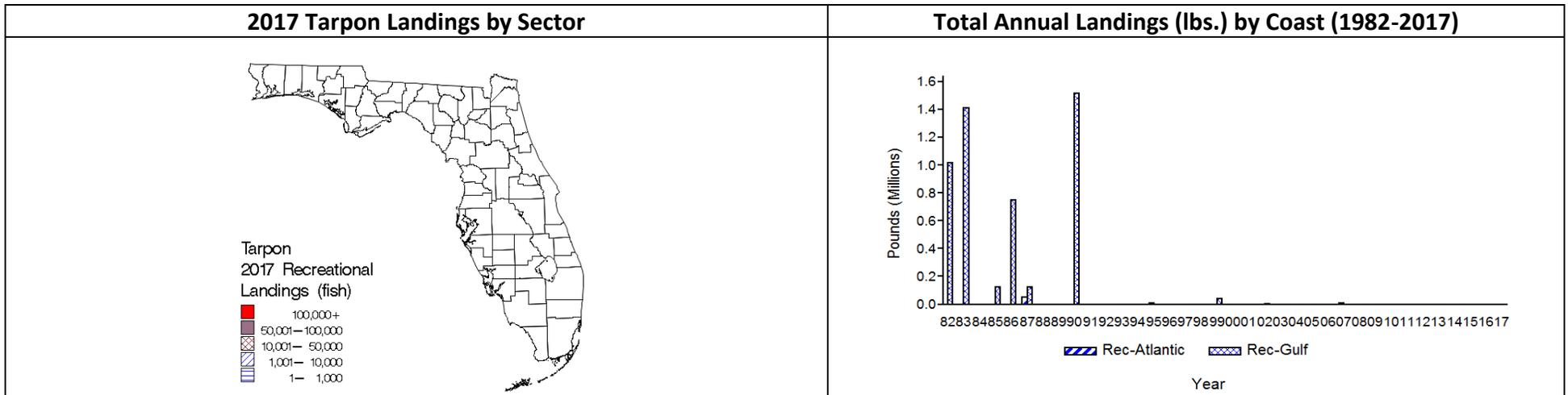


Tarpon, *Megalops atlanticus* (Valenciennes, 1847)



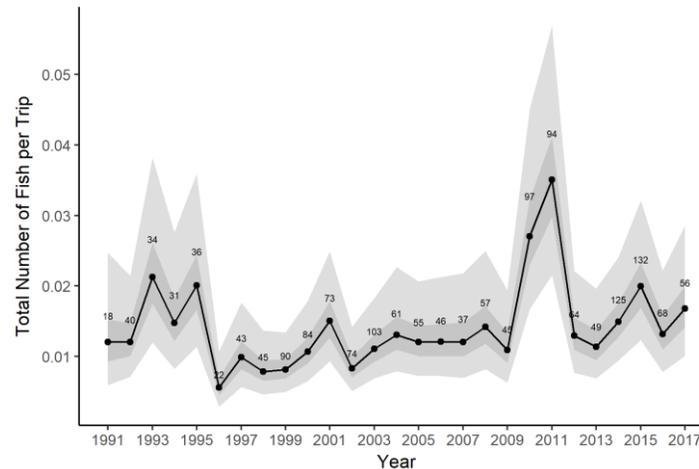
Life History

Tarpon are large, migratory fish that occur in coastal and inshore waters of the western Atlantic Ocean. They are found seasonally in all of Florida's coastal waters and occur in peninsular Florida waters year-round. While generally inhabiting marine or brackish waters, Tarpon are known to travel for considerable distances up freshwater rivers. Spawning seems to be restricted to offshore waters such as the east coast of Florida to Cape Hatteras, the Florida Straits, west central Florida, the southwestern Gulf of Mexico, and the outer continental shelf and slope of the eastern Gulf of Mexico, but the exact locations of spawning are unknown. Females grow more quickly than males and appear to reach older ages (Table 1, Crabtree *et al.* 1995). The maximum observed age for male Tarpon was 43 years, whereas the oldest reported female was 55 years. Females become sexually mature at about 50 inches fork length (FL) and 10 years of age. Spawning occurs during April–August; peak spawning activity occurs during June and July in south Florida waters (Crabtree 1995; Crabtree *et al.* 1997). Larvae and small juvenile (<5 inches standard length) Tarpon are primarily plankton feeders, preying on copepods and ostracods, mosquito larvae, and detritus (Wade 1962, Odum 1971; Robins 1978). Once Tarpon attain sizes of five inches or more they gradually switch from copepods to small fish such as killifish, mosquitofish, silversides, and mullet (Rickards 1968; Odum 1971). Adults feed both nocturnally and diurnally on a variety of fish species, such as mullet, marine catfishes, pinfish, sunfish, sardines, silversides, needlefish, and anchovies, and shrimp, and crabs (Babcock 1951; Wade 1962; Rickards 1968; Odum 1971). Predation of adults is limited to other large predators such as sharks. Young Tarpon fall prey to ladyfish, spotted seatrout, dolphins, alligators, other Tarpon, and piscivorous birds such as kingfishers, pelicans, and herons (Killam 1992).



Note: Tarpon anglers are infrequently sampled by MRIP (Marine Recreational Information Program); therefore, estimates of recreational catch are imprecise. A possession limit of 2 fish (requiring a \$50 kill tag for each fish) is allowed, but few anglers buy the required tag and the distribution of landings do not necessarily reflect where Tarpon are caught in Florida. For example, many fish are caught on Florida's Gulf coast (e.g., in Boca Grande Pass and Tampa Bay area), but recreational interviews of Tarpon anglers who have retained (landed) a Tarpon are uncommon.

Gulf Coast



Standardized Recreational Total Catch Rates: Although of questionable reliability, Tarpon anglers' catch rates appeared to show relatively stable trends on the Gulf Coast. There are little data to model recreational catch rates on the Atlantic coast. Dark grey ribbons represent first and third quartiles while the light grey ribbons represent the 2.5% – 97.5% quantiles.

Stock Status

Current Condition: Tarpon is a catch-and-release only fishery.

Management History: Since 1989, Tarpon have been managed using a permit system that requires anglers to purchase a \$50 tag for each Tarpon that they intend to harvest or possess. A condition of the Tarpon permit (jaw tag) is that the angler must provide the Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) with information on the date and location of the capture, length or weight of the fish, how many other Tarpon were captured, and how many anglers were fishing of the trip by mailing back the angler return card within 5 days of its use. Historically, Florida law required the angler return card to be sent to FWRI within 30 days of the permit's expiration even if the tag is not used. A "used" permit may have been for harvesting a Tarpon or possessing a Tarpon that was subsequently released alive after removing the tag from its jaw (K. Guindon, FWRI, pers. comm.). However, the regulations for Tarpon permits changed in September 2013, when the FWC made Tarpon catch-and-release only, with the exception of the harvest or possession of a single Tarpon when in pursuit of an IGFA record and in conjunction with a Tarpon tag.