

Young Professional Spotlight

Young Professional members of AIFRB represent the next generation of leaders in fisheries science and management. Through *Briefs* and our social media platforms we will be highlighting our Young Professionals as a way to introduce them to the full membership and create opportunities for collaborations. AIFRB's Young Professional Representative, Connor Capizzano (connor.capizzano001@umb.edu), will be showcasing a new Young Professional each month through a series of biographical interviews. This month's Young Professional Spotlight features Leah Baumwell, Florida District and Director of Gray FishTag Research (GFR).



Leah Baumwell – Florida District

What is your current position, with what company/organization, and what do you do?

This past September, I accepted a position as Director of Gray FishTag Research (GFR), an international, tagging non-profit that relies on recreational anglers and professional charter fishermen to enhance data collection efforts for multiple species of fish. As director, I plan and oversee all operations and projects, find ways to integrate our open-access data to that of academics and scientific agencies to increase the utility of their data for management purposes, act as voice for the recreational fishing community, and define clear research questions and goals to benefit both the recreational fishing and scientific communities.

Where did you go to school, and what helped pave your way to your current position?

Academically, I completed a B.S. degree in Environmental Science and Biology from the University of Massachusetts Amherst in 2009. While there, I investigated the over-winter energy dynamics and feeding behavior of juvenile bluefish inhabiting the northern Florida coastal shelf and I also calculated hatch dates and estimated growth rates of juvenile bluefish inhabiting the Hudson River estuary using otolith microstructure. I then moved to Coastal Carolina University where I completed one year of graduate coursework which focused on applied experiment design/analysis, and marine and wetland ecology and processes. Professionally, I worked for the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) for six years where I managed a suite of local and international conservation projects including the IGFA Great Marlin Race (IGMR), the world's largest billfish satellite tagging program. The experience I gained from marlin fishing and tagging events, analyzing satellite tag data, and most importantly, communicating and developing strong relationships with tag sponsors and contributors within the sportfishing industry has provided me with a strong foundation to run an international, multi-species, fish-tagging program.

What is the focus of your research and/or work?

To promote catch & release fishing, assess various aspects of fish populations, and to ultimately provide useful information both fisheries managers and fishermen. We currently supply about 10,000 fishing professionals (charter boat captains and mates) with streamer tags, applicators, data cards, and proper-tagging-education. And in addition to the streamer tag data, we have developed five satellite-tagging initiatives for 2019 which



include the following: (1) Migration and habitat utilization of striped marlin in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico; (2) habitat utilization and long-term distance of roosterfish in Quepos, Costa Rica; (3) vertical habitat and fine-scale movement of swordfish in Florida, USA; (4) habitat utilization and spawning aggregations of Atlantic striped bass; and (5) connectivity among blue marlin caught on FADs and seamounts in Los Sueños, Costa Rica.

All streamer and satellite tag data are completely open-access to the public, and all tag and recovery activity appear on the GFR website.

How does your research apply to fishery management—local, state or federal?

The beneficial effects of angler-based tagging programs can be far reaching, especially open-access programs such as ours. When conducted properly, tagging can yield a wealth of information, including data about movement patterns, population structure, and mortality rates. And when operated correctly, tagging programs can also allow anglers to become actively involved, more aware, and better stewards of natural resources.

What got you started studying fisheries?

My father likes to joke that I could swim before I could walk. I grew up surfing and fishing in South Florida, and I developed a strong passion and tremendous respect for our marine world. It wasn't until I was a teenager when our class took a trip to a sea-camp that I realized "I can do this as a *job*". From then on, I was hooked! (Forgive the pun).

What do you enjoy most about being a fishery scientist?

I love that the work has brought me to worldwide fishing destinations and has allowed me to establish cooperative relationships with other fishing/conservation organizations and academic institutions. I also thoroughly enjoy the science-communication aspect of my job and disseminating technical/scientific information in a manner that recreational anglers can readily understand. Overall, I find it very rewarding to be in a field that is working towards healthy and sustainable oceans.



What drew you to AIFRB, and what does AIFRB do for you?

I was first introduced to AIFRB at the 146th meeting of AFS in Kansas City, and I was immediately drawn to AIFRB for not only the networking opportunities, but also the mentorship aspect. Breaking into this world and finding a niche can be challenging, and I'm glad the institute is now available to current and future students.

Please contact Leah (lbaumwell@gmail.com) to continue the conversation!