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## Discard, Photo, Text: Better data for tomorrow's fisheries

If you often fish for finfishes like snappers, groupers, amberjack, triggerfish, and cobia in the U.S. Gulf of America, you've probably caught some individuals that you were required to release (i.e., discard) based on fishing regulations. These regulations can include bag limits, which determine how many fish an angler may keep per day, size limits that establish minimum, maximum, or slot size requirements, and seasonal closures that prohibit fishing during certain times of the year, particularly during spawning periods. Although regulations function to reduce fishing-associated mortality and thereby protect fish stocks, they also generate increases in discarded fishes, colloquially called "discards." Discarded fishes are an important component of recreational fisheries. Understanding how many fishes of each species are released, along with the reasons for release, can support stock assessments and, in turn, future management decisions.



*A rod and reel meet an offshore sunrise.*

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## Collecting Recreational Fisheries Data

Recreational anglers' fishing effort and catch data are important for fish stock assessments. These data are documented via the [Marine Recreational Information Program's](#) (MRIP) [Fishing Effort Survey](#) (a mail survey), which estimates effort, and [Access Point Angler Intercept Survey](#) (an in-person survey), which estimates catch rate. Because recreational discards are difficult to quantify, they've been largely overlooked in the past. However, acknowledging the significance of recreational discards, MRIP and fishery management agencies are currently exploring and trialing methods for collecting discard data.

One such method is "catch cards," physical (i.e., paper) data cards distributed to anglers before fishing trips that engage anglers in the data collection process. The anglers record data while they fish, which helps reduce reporting issues that can occur when information is collected after a trip has ended. For instance, recording discarded fishes in real time improves accuracy by

minimizing incorrect recall, where anglers may unintentionally misremember the number or species of fishes discarded throughout the day. It also reduces the occurrence of rounding, as reporting after a fishing trip has ended can often lead to estimated numbers that commonly end in zeros or fives. Catch cards are typically returned via drop boxes or pre-paid postage. So far, they have been proven successful by Connecticut's Released Fish Catch Card Survey, with a 52% card return rate helping to provide important data about discards. Additionally, testing of another catch card, the Marine Angler Released Catch card developed by the Atlantic Coastal Cooperative Statistics Program, is presently underway in seven Atlantic coast states.

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## Enter: The disCARD

On Jan. 1, 2026, [NOAA Fisheries](#) and the [Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission funded a new project](#), led by Marcus Drymon of Mississippi State University and Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, titled "The disCARD: A Novel, Hybrid Catch Card for Quantifying Reef Fish Discards Across the United States Gulf of America." The goal of the project is to collect information about the numbers and species of discarded finfishes across the U.S. Gulf of America using electronically submitted catch cards. This project represents an extensive collaborative effort between recreational anglers, state agencies, academic researchers, and private industry partners. Specific entities include Texas Parks & Wildlife Department, Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries, Mississippi Department of Marine Resources, Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, and Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, as well as Mississippi State University and [Bluefin Data](#).



*The disCARD, developed by Marcus Drymon of Mississippi State University and Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium.*

The catch cards, cleverly termed “disCARDs,” are paper cards that are currently being distributed to anglers at dockside intercept locations across the five Gulf states by each state’s fishery management agency. State agencies began distributing cards to anglers on May 15. The cards vary slightly in appearance by state, as each agency included its most relevant species. Across the Gulf, the cards collectively encompass five species: red snapper, greater amberjack, cobia, gray triggerfish, and gag grouper.



*A gray triggerfish is released using a fish descender device.*

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## DisCARD Details

How does the disCARD work? In short, the disCARD combines a physical catch card with electronic submission by text message, allowing information to reach state agencies quickly and supporting more timely management decisions and stock assessments. Anglers fishing offshore receive a disCARD before their fishing trip and record any fishes they release during their fishing trip. After their trip, the anglers take a photo of the back of the completed card and submit the photo via a messaging app of their choice (e.g., SMS, WhatsApp, iMessage). Unlike traditional catch cards that rely on mail service or physical drop boxes, the disCARD allows anglers to electronically submit information after their trip – without needing to download and install a dedicated app. Once a disCARD is submitted, image and optical character recognition software are used to process data automatically in near real-time by Bluefin Data's existing VESL infrastructure. The data are subsequently provided to each Gulf state as well as NOAA Fisheries.

Once anglers submit a photo of the back of their completed disCARD, they are entered into a monthly giveaway drawing for a \$50 gift card as an incentive for

contributing to fisheries science. One winner will be selected per Gulf state every month. The giveaway component of the project is intended to encourage continued participation by anglers and increase the number of completed cards submitted.

*“Collecting details about discarded fish is difficult, but the fish you release still matter! The disCARD is a simple card anglers can fill out while on the water to provide real-time data. The goal of the disCARD program is to modernize the ways we collect data today to improve our fisheries for tomorrow.”*

– Marcus Drymon

## Enduring Effects

Collectively, recreational anglers possess an abundance of experience targeting and discarding fishes across various conditions, seasons, and regions. The disCARD program provides a new opportunity for anglers to contribute their important firsthand information toward fisheries science and management efforts across the Gulf. Combining anglers’ knowledge with these efforts will help strengthen fisheries management decisions for popular Gulf finfishes.

Ultimately, the disCARD team hopes to improve and modernize finfish discard reporting through a hybrid paper and electronic approach that involves optical character recognition to advance fisheries data collection and processing techniques. This exciting collaboration among state agencies, academic researchers, private industry partners – and most importantly, anglers – will support stronger science for better fisheries.

For more information about the project, please visit the Marine Fisheries Ecology Program website [here](#) and the disCARD project website [here](#).

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