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Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partners Initiate Black Sea Bass Habitat Research Project in the Mid-Atlantic

The [Atlantic Coastal Fish Habitat Partnership](#) (ACFHP) has established a new collaborative project with the [University of Maryland Eastern Shore](#) (UMES), [Mid-Atlantic Fishery Management Council](#) (Council), and [National Fish Habitat Fund](#) (Fund) to study black sea bass habitat characteristics, fish abundance, and fish diets in the Mid-Atlantic. The project, led by Dr. Brad Stevens of UMES, is titled 'Hab in the MAB: Characterizing black sea bass habitat in the Mid-Atlantic Bight.' The new study will combine SCUBA, photography, videography, controlled angling, and stable isotope analysis techniques to better understand the importance of habitat and prey community structure on black sea bass feeding ecology.

"ACFHP and our collaborative partners are excited about the unique opportunity to work together over the next few years to collect data that will inform both science and management, and support healthy fisheries in the Mid-Atlantic region," stated Kent Smith, ACFHP Steering Committee Chair.

In the summer of 2015, ACFHP applied for and received funding from the Council to manage a short-term research project focusing on Mid-Atlantic habitat (natural and/or artificial reef) and fisheries productivity. Black sea bass was chosen as a focal species because it is managed by both the Council and the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), and because the species is structure oriented. ACFHP formed a subcommittee of representatives from the ACFHP Steering Committee, Council, and ASMFC Artificial Reef Committee to develop a request for proposals dedicated to black sea bass habitat research and/or restoration in the Mid-Atlantic region.

After careful review of several strong proposals, the ACFHP subcommittee chose to provide a \$216,000 award to Dr. Stevens and his PhD student, Cara Schweitzer. Their study will determine if there are differences resulting in the use of artificial vs. natural habitats.

In particular, study objectives include:

1. Determining the preference of black sea bass for particular habitats by assessing their abundance, size structure, and feeding ecology within natural and artificial reefs;
2. Improving the understanding of benthic habitat structure by quantitatively assessing biodiversity, rugosity (e.g., surface roughness measurements routinely used by reef biologists), and other habitat characteristics of natural and artificial reefs; and
3. Determining if increased connectivity of habitat type increases fish recruitment, by experimentally manipulating connecting areas between isolated habitat patches.

“I’m glad that the Mid-Atlantic Council was able to work with the NFHP Board to support this important research,” said Chris Moore, Executive Director of the Council. “The outcomes of this project will significantly improve our understanding of black sea bass habitat and productivity.”

ACFHP is the first of the 19 Fish Habitat Partnerships (FHPs) throughout the U.S. to support a habitat research project using the NFHP Beyond the Pond Fund. The Fund is a 501(c)3 entity created in 2015 to provide the FHPs an opportunity to connect with the private sector and maximize funding and collaboration opportunities. It supports the leveraging of resources and grassroots actions to achieve maximum impact in protecting and restoring fish habitat from the local to national levels.

Since 2006, NFHP has been a partner in 599 projects in 50 states benefiting fish habitat. The National Fish Habitat Partnership works to conserve fish habitat nationwide, leveraging federal, state, tribal, and private funding resources to achieve the greatest impact on fish populations through priority conservation projects. NFHP implements the National Fish Habitat Action Plan and supports 20 regional grassroots partner organizations. For more information visit:

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