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The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, a group of officials from across the five Gulf Coast states, meets next Monday through Friday in Destin to consider new red snapper protection measures. More information online at [www.gulfcouncil.org](http://www.gulfcouncil.org).

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## Texas judge orders new plan in debate over red snapper

**Larry Wheeler**  
News Journal Washington bureau

WASHINGTON -- Depending on who's talking, Gulf of Mexico red snapper either are on the verge of commercial extinction or more plentiful now than when sailing ships dominated the region's fishing fleet.

This month, a federal judge in Texas ordered the National Marine Fisheries Service to come up with a better plan to restore red snapper populations after years of overfishing.

Environmentalists, who say commercial and recreational fishermen are pulling red snapper out of gulf waters at an unsustainable rate, hailed the decision.

The tug-of-war over red snapper, highly prized for its delicate taste, is the latest example of the ongoing struggle over the world's fisheries.

Few fish are more at risk than the giant Atlantic bluefin tuna, a highly migratory species that is the subject of near unchecked hunting outside U.S. waters by factory boats and spotter planes.

"I don't think it's too late, but I think it's on the verge of collapse if not already collapsed," said Bill Hogarth, director of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

The bluefin tuna is the filet mignon of the sushi industry and commands steep prices in Japanese and European markets. It's also featured in the April edition of National Geographic magazine, which presents a sobering look at the crisis many believe is already upon the world's oceans.

Just four months ago, an article in Science predicted that the seas could be empty of marketable fish by 2048.

"If you extrapolate five decades, we will be eating jellyfish," said Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

But Bob Shipp, chairman of the Department of Marine Sciences at the University of South Alabama, said such fears are unfounded.

"In all probability, there are as many or more snapper in the gulf as ever before, primarily because of increased habitat," Shipp said.

An immense network of artificial reefs -- including old oil rigs and cement blocks -- stretches from Alabama to Texas and has created havens for red snapper where none existed before.

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