

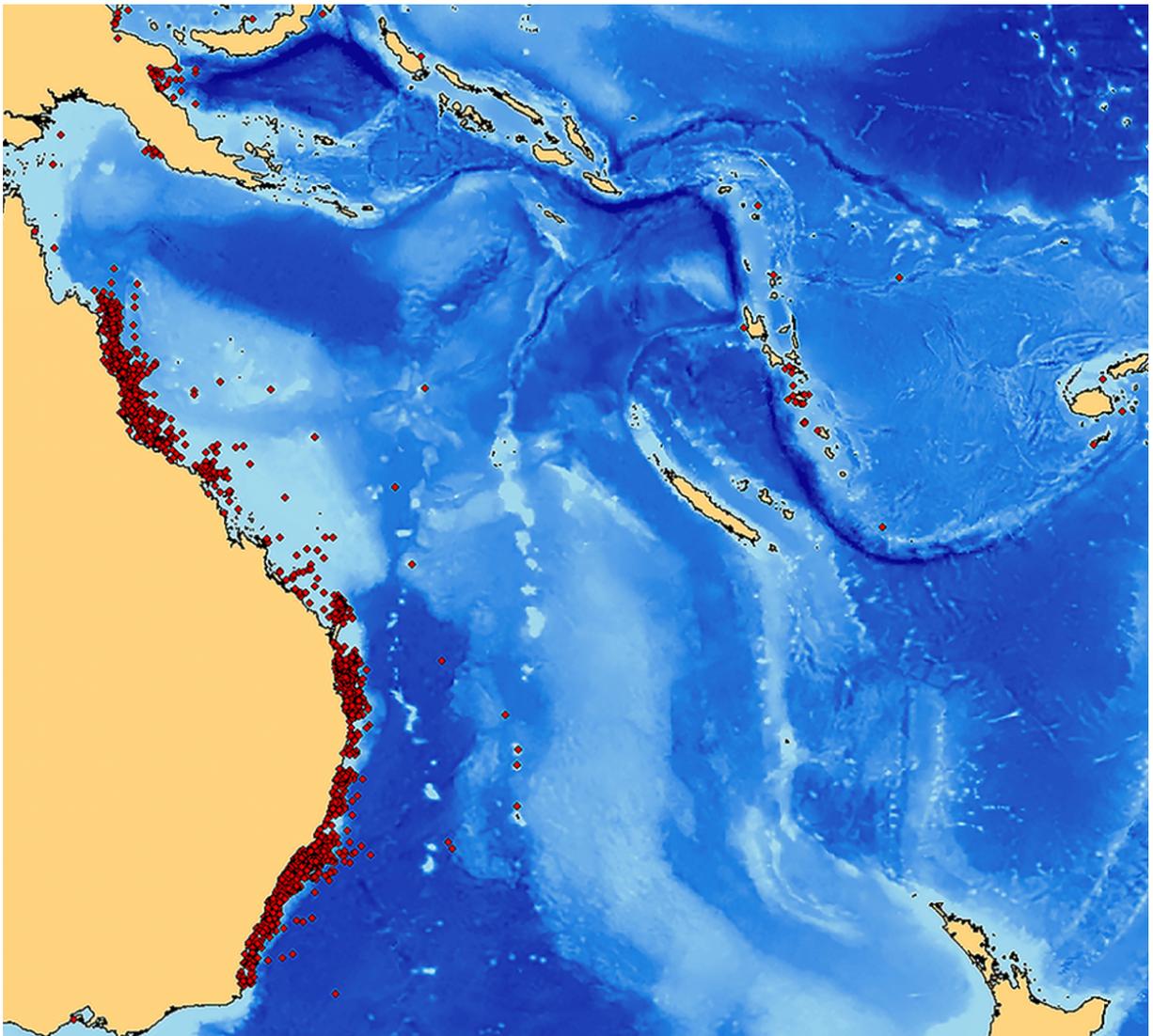
I keep having the same dilemma week after week at the moment... what to write about when there aren't enough marlin stories to write about.

We all have our own thoughts on where the game fish have gone, and you can only sit around the Marlin Bar talking about how good it used to be for so long before someone inevitably brings up the 800-pound gorilla in the room - climate change.

There are many complex elements to the climate change argument, not least of which is how it's affecting our fishing right here, right now, off the Coffs Coast. And take it from me... the fishing is lousy.

That aside, many people may be surprised to learn how recreational billfish anglers are helping scientists understand some of the effects of climate change, and in particular, ocean warming.

As readers will have seen in many of the photos of marlin in past issues of this column, the fish are usually sporting a small yellow tag that's been attached to the marlin just before release. This tag comes with a unique identifying number, and an accompanying data card that is filled out by anglers and forwarded to the NSW Department of Primary Industry.



*Black marlin tagging data from the S.W. Pacific region - reprinted from The Conversation, James Cook University*

The NSW DPI gamefish tagging initiative is the preeminent program of its sort in the world, with anglers from all Australian states and many overseas countries participating by tagging every gamefish they release.

Since the program was established in 1974, more than 400,000 gamefish have been tagged, and the information collected has created a formidable database, which includes the fish species, date of tagging, the geographic location where the fish was tagged, and its size.

This gamefish tagging information is now being studied by climate scientists, and by using the 54,000 tag (and in some cases, the recapture of previously tagged fish) records of black marlin in Australian waters alone, the scientific community has been able to identify a correlation between the El Niño Southern Oscillation Index, the increasing warming of the East Australian Current, and the increasing southwards penetration of these warmer current waters, and with that, the black marlin population.

Among other things, scientists have now been able to show that the black marlin habitat boundaries have moved south at the rate of 88km per decade as a direct result of the warming of the EAC. This use of the gamefish tagging program database was never envisaged back when the program was first established, and the value of the efforts of recreational anglers was probably never more useful than it is now in the ongoing climate change debate.

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