

Environmental groups want thorny skate on endangered list

November 11 2015, byPatrick Whittle



This undated photo released by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows a thorny skate, a bottom-dwelling fish whose habitat in the In the north Atlantic Ocean ranges from Greenland to South Carolina. The thorny skate population has declined since the 1960s, and environmental groups want the skate added to the list protected under the Endangered Species Act. Fishing groups say the listing would add onerous new regulations that they can't afford. (T. Curtis/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration via AP)

A pair of environmental groups wants the U.S. government to add a species of skate to the list of animals protected under the Endangered Species Act, touching off a drive from some fishermen who say they are already burdened with too many regulations.

Animal Welfare Institute and Defenders of Wildlife say the thorny skate's decline in the northwest Atlantic Ocean is troubling enough that it should be afforded protections reserved for endangered animals. Their request is before the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which has a year to make a decision about whether to protect the bottom-dwelling fish.

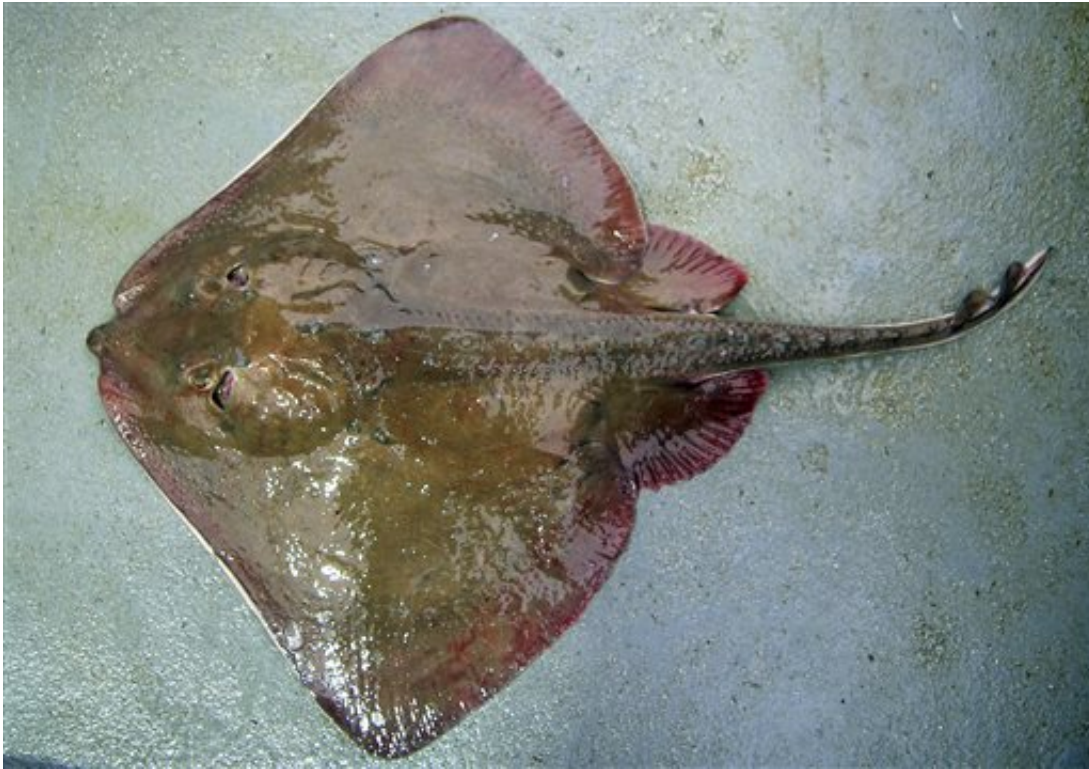
Federal surveys state that the fish's population has declined since the late 1960s, and it was only 3 percent of its target level in the early part of this decade.

The thorny skate is one of at least three species in the Gulf of Maine, a key New England fishing area, that are up for potential listing. Listing a species under the Endangered Species Act can lead to habitat protections and fishing restrictions, and some fishermen plan to oppose listing the skate.

The listing would be especially bad for New England lobstermen because some use skate as bait, said Beth Casoni, executive director of the Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association.

"With all the reduction in groundfish and the cutting houses slowing down, there isn't as much bait," she said. "It's not good."

The thorny skate ranges from Greenland to South Carolina and has been prohibited from being fished commercially since 2003, said Jennifer Goebel, a spokeswoman for NOAA. However, they can be captured as bycatch in other fisheries, including cod, scallops and other skates.



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NOAA has said the groups' petition includes "substantial" information that indicates the listing could be warranted. However, the proposal must first undergo a long review that includes a public comment process, Goebel said.

Animal Welfare Institute wildlife biologist D.J. Schubert said the push to protect the skate is part of a larger effort by conservationists to preserve

marine species.

"There are a lot of species in the ocean, and unfortunately, a lot of them are in trouble," he said.

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