

African Groupers, Toothy Sharks

Question: I caught these groupers in June off the Island of Principe in the Gulf of Guinea off west Africa. They were caught in 950 feet of water down to 1,200 feet. They averaged 70 pounds each. The largest weighed 205 pounds.

Is the common name for this fish the Warsaw grouper? How deep do they live and is it true they can live for 50 years and older? — Capt. Mark "The Shark" Quartiano, Miami, Florida

Answer: No, the Warsaw grouper (*Epinephelus nigritus*) is a west Atlantic species and isn't found near Africa where you were fishing, but three of its close relatives are: the dusky grouper (*E. guaza*), the dogtooth grouper (*E. caninus*), and the golden grouper (*E. alexandrinus*) are found in the east Atlantic. All are large fish, reaching up to 55 inches (140 centimeters) in length, and are found in deep waters. In all three species, the dorsal fin has 11 spines, and the larger adults are uniform dark brown.

Your fish has about 14 soft dorsal rays, and its length is less than four times its width, which would seem to indicate either the dusky or dogtooth grouper. Your fish's caudal fin has a white margin like the dusky's, but is straight like the dogtooth's.

Nevertheless, our expert, Dr. C. Richard Robins, author of *A Field Guide to Atlantic Coast Fishes*, feels it might be a golden grouper due to its lack of distinguishing marks or prominent teeth. So that's what we'll call it.

When young, the golden grouper has a series of darker longitudinal lines along the body and two oblique dark lines on the opercles that are indistinct in adults. The



Golden grouper.

larger specimens often have a diffuse golden blotch on the sides that disappears quickly after death.

The larger groupers can reach very old ages. Some estimates are as high as 60 to 100 years. Groupers have complex reproductive cycles and, next to sharks, are most easily

overfished because of their biology. Fishermen should limit the number of fish they keep, even in unregulated waters.

Question: I know some sport fishermen who caught a big bull shark estimated between 500 and 600 pounds. They didn't want to kill it, but before they released it they pulled out some of its teeth for souvenirs. Wouldn't this hurt a shark by making it harder for it to feed? Is this a good or a bad idea? — M. Catherwood, New York City, New York

Answer: It's a bad idea for the fisherman who gets his hands too close to the mouth of a live shark, but it probably didn't hurt the shark too much. Most sharks, including bull sharks, are constantly growing replacement teeth. Although they have many rows of teeth arranged in a series of parallel grooves, they generally use only the row on the outside. The inner rows of replacement teeth are folded down out of



Lower jaw of bull shark.