



As science and policy specialist for The Billfish Foundation (TBF), **ELLIOTT STARK** works on TBF's tag and release database and on fisheries policy issues from around the world. He also does angler and scientific outreach and writes for various media. Elliott is from Austin, Texas, has a Masters degree in Marine Policy and fishes every chance he gets – in the US Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Latin America to date.

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## Take note Australia! – Panama has got it right

Where fish stocks are being unsustainably depleted, action needs to be taken – but there are right and wrong ways to achieve this. As The Billfish Foundation points out, Panama could teach Australian governments a better way to conserve gamefish – and boost the economy at the same time.

**T**wo countries – Australia and Panama – are taking very different paths towards protecting their ocean resources and the prosperity of their economies. You decide which nation is on the path to prosperity.

As Australian anglers are all too painfully aware, Australia's Federal and State governments are strongly considering the closed-zone approach. This strategy blocks sportfishermen from fishing in large sections of the ocean, with the thinking that the oceans will then be healthy. However, when you consider their 'noble' aims against the facts, an alternate approach offers far greater benefits.

Modern sportfishermen practise catch-and-release, and through voluntary tagging efforts provide one of the largest sources of much needed scientific information about gamefish. Sportfishing also generates substantial tourism dollars for coastal communities.

Highly migratory species (such as marlin and tuna) range widely, crossing national boundaries and closed zones. Because of this, restricting anglers from a zone is not a practical means of protecting the species. It's also known that commercial

fishing methods – namely longlining and purse-seining – account for the mortality of the majority of marlin and tuna. The bottom line is that no matter how well intentioned, zones closed to sportfishing are counter-productive. In contrast, President Ricardo Martinelli of Panama is taking a strikingly different approach.

Panama began its commitment to marine conservation in 2008 with the signing of a regional Central American agreement to manage marlin and sailfish as gamefish. This regional management plan, brokered by The Billfish Foundation, was Central America's most comprehensive conservation accord.

In July of 2010, the Martinelli administration prohibited tuna purse-seining in the national waters of Panama (within 200 miles of shore). Purse-seining, especially when nets are set around fish aggregating devices (FADs), is a particularly destructive fishing method. These nets often destroy a bycatch of dolphins, turtles, billfish, and more. Panama was the first nation in Central America to take action against them.

Also, on December 28, Martinelli's administration signed into law a decree that prohibits pelagic longline vessels greater than six tons from operating within the nation's waters. This historic proclamation makes Panama one of the world's most visionary and proactive leaders in fisheries' conservation.

Following Panama's executive order, the protests of commercial fishing interests centred on the economics of displaced longliners.

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