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Range-wide status and conservation of the goliath grouper

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Goliath grouper *Epinephelus itajara* nestled in the wreck of a shrimping boat, off Key West, Florida

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This ESR THEME SECTION focuses on the goliath grouper *Epinephelus itajara*, a regionally endangered grouper (Epinephelidae). As the largest grouper species in the western Atlantic and Caribbean, goliath grouper are highly sought after by divers and anglers. Like many of their congeners, goliath grouper are extremely vulnerable to population depletion because they are slow-growing, late-maturing and form small, seasonally brief and site-specific spawning aggregations that are targeted by fishers. Indeed, overfishing has accelerated regional population declines and adult goliath grouper are increasingly rare. Goliath grouper populations are further threatened by widespread loss of mangrove habitat, on which juveniles depend.

Immediate management attention for goliath grouper is needed throughout its range, specifically in the form of critical habitat protection and, in many instances, catch moratoria. The articles herein were compiled from a special symposium entitled 'Wide ranging status and regional conservation needs of goliath grouper (*Epinephelus itajara*, Epinephelidae, Lichtenstein 1822)' during the 60th Annual Meeting of the Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic (7 November 2007). The focus of the symposium was to bring together regional scientists to exchange ideas, boost collaborations, and present new techniques and findings that would direct future research and raise awareness of the species' regional status. These contributions present key findings useful for improving management of goliath grouper and provide further impetus for ongoing and future scientific and conservation action.

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