

February 13, 2005

TO: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners  
FROM: Nora Egan Demers, Assistant Professor of Biology and Interdisciplinary Studies  
RE: Tarpon Fishing Regulation in Boca Grande Pass

Chair Rodney Barreto,

I request that the FWC Commissioners limit the tarpon recreational fishery to the traditional live-bait technique. It is clear that this is a controversial and highly important issue. Differences between hook location and the fight time of fish using the two different strategies in Boca Grande pass were recently document in an FWRI study. Please impose regulations that support traditional methods until data and information are provided that demonstrate that the break-away jig technique is not negatively influencing the sustainability of the industry.

The FWRI tarpon study *clearly demonstrates* significant differences between the two fishing techniques used in Boca Grande Pass. For example, in live-bait landed fish, the hook was located in the jaw itself. No fish that were caught with live-bait were hooked in the clipper, nor with an outside/in hook orientation. The jig fishing technique, however, resulted in almost equal numbers of fish hooked on the clipper as on the mouth, and also results in fish being hooked in the gills and head rather than in the mouth itself. Foul hooking was significantly different between the two methods, with live-bait rate of 0%, and approximately 10% for the jig fishery. Snagging, which is often considered illegal, and perceived as un-sportsmanlike in game fishing, affects fishing regulations. For example, a cursory search reveals that regulations in Oklahoma, New York, California and Massachusetts define snagging as any fishing technique that does not result in the fish **intentionally taking the bait into their mouths** (URL's are provided in the citations). There is no evidence to indicate that tarpon hooked in the clipper plate are intentionally taking the bait.

There are obvious differences in fishing techniques, with the newer jig-fishing leading to longer fight times, a practice clearly discouraged by FWRI's guidelines. Jig fishing trips landings resulted in average fight times of 26 minutes. On the other hand, live-bait fight time was just 11 minutes. Jiggers tend to use lighter tackle (30 pound monofilament line); while live-baiters use heavier tackle (80 pound braided Dacron line). The FWRI suggests that "large pelagic species, such as sharks and tarpon, should be brought alongside within 20 minutes of being hooked" and heavier tackle be used if fish are consistently exhausted upon landing (Taylor, n.d.). It seems obvious that live-bait tarpon fishing techniques are more consistent with FWRI's fishing recommendations.

Claims have also been made that the increased outboard motor boat activity is another stressor to the tarpon, who are responding by altering their feeding behavior in the pass during the critical pre-spawning time. The fishing guides also present anecdotal data to indicate that the fish were leaving the pass earlier in the season. Do we know whether the

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fishing pressures are negatively impacting fish feeding during the critical pre-spawning period?

Limiting tarpon fishing to the traditional live-bait fishing in Boca Grande pass may provide significant benefit to the environment. Increases in the amount of breakaway jig fishing may account for the excessive amounts of lead collected during the annual Boca Grande Pass clean up. Over 6250 pounds were retrieved in 2002, and over 7500 pounds in 2003. As a result, the FWC has already prohibited the use of breakaway gear during certain times of the year (Rule 68B-32.002-68B-32.004).

I am not aware of any data yet available about air quality in the pass. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the increased outboard boat traffic could also be responsible for unhealthy levels of carbon dioxide in the air in the pass during especially busy fishing times. Further study should examine this possibility.

I believe that encouraging a conservation philosophy through regulations is necessary to protect this valuable resource. Mandating traditional fishing techniques for the Boca Grande tarpon fishery could model an ethic of conservation and sportsmanship for Florida's recreational fishing and provide a helpful stimulus to the local economy.

Sincerely,



Nora Egan Demers

Resources:

Fish Biology, FWRI, (2004) Incidence of Foul-hooking in FMRI Boca Grande Pass Tarpon Catch and Release Mortality Study, accessed Dec. 11, 2004  
[http://www.floridamarine.org/features/view\\_article.asp?id=21825](http://www.floridamarine.org/features/view_article.asp?id=21825)

Taylor, Ron (date unknown) Catch and release fishing  
[http://www.floridamarine.org/features/view\\_article.asp?id=5913](http://www.floridamarine.org/features/view_article.asp?id=5913)

Fishing regulations URL's:

<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/fish/fishregs/fishregschangespubcomgrlk.html>

[http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/recreationalfishing/rec\\_index.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/recreationalfishing/rec_index.htm)

[http://www.plpt.nsn.us/rangers/htmls/hunt\\_fish.html](http://www.plpt.nsn.us/rangers/htmls/hunt_fish.html)

Cc:

Luiz Barbieri, FWRI