

Fish Traps, the Great Rip-Off?

THOMAS J. MURRAY
Florida Cooperative Extension Service
University of Florida Sea Grant Program
Key West, Florida 33040

RESUMEN

La controversia concerniente al uso de nasas de alambre en aguas de la Florida vino, por primera vez, a la atención del personal Asesor del Sea Grant Marino en Febrero de 1978. Desde entonces los Agentes Marinos han proporcionado programas educacionales enfocados a obtener información objetiva en este asunto extremadamente emocional. Se han auspiciado sesiones que han incluido sesiones de trabajo con aperos para la industria así como de científicos, y foros legislativos con la finalidad de encontrar una manera de regular este nuevo sistema pesquero, y se han realizado entrevistas con diversos grupos comerciales, deportivos y conservacionistas con respecto a este problema, evaluando los potenciales (reales y supuestos) de las nasas de alambre.

El programa, en un esfuerzo de conjunto, ha estado encaminado a reunir a personas para considerar lo que se sabe sobre nasas de peces. El personal del programa procuró auspiciar la objetividad en todos los aspectos de este asunto, del cual puede derivarse una razonable administración pesquera basada en información sólida y cierta y no en opiniones populares.

The title of this presentation is intentionally distasteful, but, nonetheless appropriate. It is the perception of wire fish traps as the great rip-off which has occupied a good deal of everybody's time in South Florida, Marine Advisory personnel not withstanding.

According to popular opinion the use of wire fish traps in our area has exploded in the past 2 years. Reportedly thousands upon thousands of these "death machines" line the outer reef tract from Key Largo to the Dry Tortugas. Testimony to their numbers and effectiveness has been heard wherever fishermen meet. Whether it be a Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council public hearing or a favorite corner tavern, fishermen throughout South Florida attest the demise of our reef fish stocks. Captains testify that they can run from the Lower Keys to the Marquessas Keys and not "mark" a single fish on their fathometers. Statistics are readily available. For example, a local Marathon disc jockey interrupted his show, one afternoon last summer, to read from a scientific study which had proven that each wire fish trap is capable of literally "vacuuming" all fish from a 0.5-acre patch of coral reef. At a rally to ban this deadly gear, biologists hired by a fishing organization summarized their fish trap research with the conclusion that in 1978 the 10,000 wire traps reportedly in use in Monroe County harvested an estimated 9 million lb of snapper and grouper (approximately 10 times the reported commercial harvest). The cries went out to ban the traps before they killed everything as they had done without exception throughout the entire Caribbean. The "evidence" showed that wire traps were indeed the Great Reef Rip-Off.

As a result of this commotion, Sea Grant sponsored a workshop to discuss fish traps. Scientists, fishermen, enforcement people and the public gathered at Tavernier, Florida, to share what they know about this increasingly controversial gear. The workshop provided a good opportunity for all to share their knowledge and ignorance of commercial wire fish trapping. There was no real consensus reached; however, most who attended felt that somehow things didn't seem to be quite as critical as previously read or imagined. If there was any agreement, it was that research in South Florida was needed and in the meantime some types of regulations were necessary. In response to this need, Sea Grant provided a forum for representatives of the commercial industry, fishery management councils and state fishery biologists to meet and propose meaningful gear restrictions.

This meeting spawned the same type of questioning as the earlier workshop; however, a concrete proposal to regulate the traps and monitor the fishery was reached. These proposals would form the framework for a legislative proposal sponsored by the Organized Fishermen of Florida (O.F.F.) and the Southeastern Fisheries Association (S.F.A.). The final bill sent to Tallahassee proposed specifications for minimum wire mesh size, biodegradable door hinges, minimum throat size and a system of registration similar to that of the spiny lobster fishery. As we are all now aware, this bill did not fare well in Tallahassee, where reportedly people spend as much time listening to disc jockeys as they do scientists.

It was becoming increasingly clear that, as one biologist suggested, "Someone is holding a giant magnifying glass between South Florida and Tallahassee."

In an attempt to temper the massive campaign of misinformation, Sea Grant marine advisory personnel visited meetings of sport and commercial fishing organizations, citizens groups and civic organizations in an attempt to partially defuse this increasingly volatile situation, by lending some degree of objectivity. Our role was not as fish trap advocates, but rather that of sounding boards. The main program initiative in dealing with fish traps has been to attempt to expose the few facts regarding the situation in hopes that citizens, and unfortunately some scientists, could begin to reasonably consider benefits and costs from a new type of fishing gear.

Sea Grant's position has not been one of acceptance or rejection, enough is not known. We were not as, one writer indicated, conducting workshops to teach commercial fishermen how to build more traps. Sea Grant's position to date has been the espousal of sound fishery management based on science not hearsay. It is, we feel, this principle which has transcended the so-called gear controversy.

Perhaps the wire fish trap will be shown to be too efficient a competitor for the reportedly stressed near-shore reefs of South Florida. On the other hand, perhaps we should not lightly exclude a seemingly efficient technology from areas and stocks presently under exploited. Any method which can extend bottom fishing time while not increasing trip expenses (increased fuel costs and fishing time) is probably deserving of at least some objective consideration, as hope for the future.

In retrospect, the wire fish trap as an issue has probably had a more significant impact on our waters than the wire trap as a piece of gear. On one side, the controversy, we feel, has been valuable. The issue clearly served as catalyst in motivating the recreational fishing industry to organize and to participate in fishery management decisions. Similarly, it has, I think, helped the commercial fishermen to look beyond their particular gear types, or fisheries, and concern themselves not with simply specifics of fishery regulations, but also the principles of sound management. On the other hand, I suspect the issue has been damaging because some of these same interests have suffered unfortunate losses of credibility and may have, in some cases, burnt commercial-recreational bridges which will be needed in the future.

However, as seen at public hearings, focusing a lot of criticism on our so called adversaries sometimes forces us to look at ourselves with a more critical eye. Indeed the fish trap issue has perhaps even educated some fisheries scientists. The extreme emotions arising from this controversy will hopefully reinforce your resolve to maintain a posture of detached scientific objectivity. The loss of credibility by some principals in this controversy will hopefully carry a very basic message to you here today, simply: stay within your data base. You may not be popular, but fisheries are not be managed by popular opinion. There is something else that scientists should fear even more than unpopularity and that's being wrong.