

Hooked on Outdoors

I don't see how a man can make a living fishing.

In the 1960s, when there were no laws concerning the numbers of fish a boat could catch or the seasons a man could fish, it was a hard way to make a living.

I realize if something had not been done and laws weren't established we probably wouldn't have any fish left to catch.

It seems that some of these laws were a little stringent and some don't seem necessary, but we have them all the same.

Triggerfish regulations are an example. There hardly is a spot you can

go in the Gulf that triggerfish won't eat everything you put down for snapper. They come to the surface there are so many.



Outdoor Life

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You

might think there is no way we could fish them out, but we thought the same about snapper in the 1960s and we almost managed to do that.

Most boat captains today have found it almost impossible to own a big vessel with all the expenses that come with it and such a short season to fish.

Some boat captains were going out of business before fish regulations and shortened seasons were put in place.

Now try and run a business in 28 days. It's impossible.

That is why a lot of captains are going to smaller boats that carry four or less passengers.

I try to feature some of these guys every so often. One such captain is Jeff Gager.

Jeff spent 20-plus years working for the FWC, or the Marine Patrol as it was first called.

When Jeff first indicated to me he wanted to go into the guide business I was a little skeptical.

Jeff knew every law on the books and could identify almost every kind of fish in the Gulf, but his saltwater fishing abilities were a little lacking.

Wanting to help him in any way I could, I gave him some numbers that I had caught fish on and he started with them and numbers some of his friends gave him.

It wasn't long before he was catching fish like gangbusters.

Now he has more snapper spots than he could fish in a lifetime.

He is hard working and very personable.

If I had a group of kids or was going on a family trip, Capt.

Jeff Gager is the guy I would choose.

If you have a party of four or less and want to have an enjoyable trip in the Gulf and catch some fish, give Jeff a call at 527- 9730.

His specialty is gag grouper, that season coming in July 1.

He also has some pretty good snapper holes, I know because I gave them to him.



Martin Bourgeois weighs a tarpon caught last year during the Golden Meadow-Fourchon International Tarpon Rodeo.

New tarpon rules approved

LAKELAND (AP) — After listening to more than 100 emotional opinions, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission this week voted to move forward with a controversial proposal to modify the type of gear used to catch tarpon statewide.

They also made tarpon a catch and release fish for the first time.

The FWC's proposed rule, passed by a 4-3 vote, would prohibit gear rigged with bottom weights — a technique that is notorious for catching tarpon, even if they are not feeding. Tarpons, also known as "silver kings," can grow up to 8 feet and weigh more than 300 pounds and are prized by fishermen because they jump and fight when snagged.

In Boca Grande Pass, the largest and most prolific tarpon nursery in the world, the hotly debated issue is whether illegal snagging occurs in during the Professional Tarpon Tournament Series' annual round of tournaments.

Conservationists claim that PTTS is responsible for many dead silver kings washing up on beaches during their contests.

Several speakers told the seven-member panel the disagreements have degenerated to threats, intimidation and harassment.

The Save the Tarpon organization asserted that PTTS' reality TV show is the motivation behind the use of the flossing method that allows trophy fish to consistently be caught. The TV show has an audience of 44 million viewers, according to

PTTS claims.

A lawyer for PTTS speaking at the public hearing threatened the commission with a lawsuit if it passed the proposed changes to the gear.

The Boca Grande Chamber of Commerce director Lew Hastings, a proponent of changes that may conserve the fishery, told the panel that the business community supports FWC's draft proposal.

Hastings said the fishery can collapse if not protected and that would bring economic devastation to his small island community.

Hasting's fear might have some basis. Half a century ago, the tarpon fishery did just that in Port Aransas, Texas, a small town that built its fortune on the silver kings and lost it when the fishery collapsed because of runoff pollutants. The town once known as

TARPON FACTS AND FIGURES



- Fossil research shows tarpon have been swimming in our oceans since prehistoric times.
- The life span of a tarpon can be in excess of 50 years. The oldest tarpon in captivity lived to be 63 years old.
- Because of its majestic appearance of size and color, the tarpon is nicknamed "silver king."
- Tarpon are primarily found in shallow coastal waters and estuaries, but they also are found in open marine waters, around coral reefs, and in some freshwater lakes and rivers.
- Tarpon range from Virginia to central Brazil in the western Atlantic, along the coast of Africa in the eastern Atlantic, and all through the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea.
- Because of its strength, stamina and fighting ability, the tarpon is one of Florida's premier game fish.
- Tarpon have a special ability to gulp air at the surface when they are in a habitat that doesn't provide enough oxygen.

PHOTO AND FACTS PROVIDED BY FWC

Tarpon, Texas, is actively trying to restore the tarpon habitat.

Dave Markett, a long-time fishing guide who works Boca Grande Pass, called the acrimony that has destroyed lifelong friendships "a modern day tragedy."

"There is no scientific evidence that this gear causes snagging," he told the panel. "There is no biological issue with tarpons. No tragedy will happen today or tomorrow if you do a study." He urged the commissioners to table the proposal or to vote it down.

Several long-time fishermen told the regulators that numbers of tarpon have declined. They expressed serious concern that without action on the part of FWC, the tarpon will be driven away.

Charter captain Mark Futch of Boca Grande related to the panel that he invented the bottom-weighted circle hook that is currently used by members of the PTTS to snag tarpon.

He says he and fellow anglers quit using it years ago when they saw the resulting carnage washing up on local beaches.

He told the commissioners the snagging gear kills tarpon and harms the vulnerable fishery.

Celebrities who have lent sponsorship in the past to the PTTS include revered illustrator Guy Harvey and New York Times best-selling author and former fishing guide Randy Wayne White. Both have publicly reversed their stance and supported the FWC's proposed restrictions.

The scientist in charge of the Tarpon and

Bonefish Trust, Dr. Aaron Adams, also called on the FWC to protect the unique tarpon resource.

In explaining the FWC's decision to move the draft rule forward, chairman Kenneth Wright said, "As a legal matter, we don't have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt with scientific certainty that it's snagging fish. We'd be studying this to death. I think we have compelling evidence of the need for the rule."

Commissioner Ronald Bergeron dissented. He said he did not have enough scientific evidence to prove the gear is harmful. He said he will request further information before the final passage of the proposed rule is taken up in Pensacola in September.

The commission voted unanimously to make both bonefish and tarpon catch and release only. Possession of a single tarpon will be allowed only when in pursuit of an International Game Fish Association record. Tarpon 40 inches or more must stay in the water at all times. FWC staff determined that larger fish are harmed if withdrawn from the supporting waters.

The PTTS and other tournament organizers have recently adopted a calculation of weight based on measurements that can be taken with the fish in the water, but the new rule will be now applied across the state.

Bonefish will not be allowed to be weighed and must be returned to the water with as little harm as possible. Neither fish is considered edible.