

Economic Value of Aquatic Resources in Florida

Before moving into the exciting area of economic values let me take you back in time to a period before Florida was discovered by all our cold-natured brothers in the North and before most of our wetlands and precious estuaries were dredged and filled to build houses, hotels and condo's for the steady flow of immigrants, both from within and without the United States. In other words, let me tell you a little bit about commercial fishing from the perspective of a Native American whose ancestors were in Florida long before the white man.

Information from recent archaeological studies indicate that the prehistoric people of what is now Florida established permanent villages along the coasts of Florida. These Paleo-Indians lived in Florida 15,000 years ago and had a number of skills, including making fishing nets and fabric weaving and were good at gathering food from their immediate surroundings.

"The prehistoric coastal inhabitants of northeast Florida were probably the most accomplished fisherfolk the area has ever seen", says Dana Ste. Claire.¹ This style of coastal living by the native population was prevalent in 1565 when Pedro Menendez brought people from Europe to colonize St. Augustine.

Some of the immigrants who arrived in St. Augustine to establish the first city were net fishermen who came from Spain's Isle of Minorca. Several fishermen were among the original Minorcan settlers and listed in the cargo manifest of one of the first ships were "100 fishing nets".² The virgin fish population must have been a sight to behold in all inland areas of the Florida peninsula. Florida's pure waters were a perfect fish growing environment before the "yellow caterpillar" invasion moved in to devour massive portions of "La Florida", the land of flowers. There were probably mullet everywhere.

Speaking of mullet, mullet fishing is still a popular pastime on Florida's East Coast, particularly in St. Augustine. When someone announces there are "Mullet on the Beach", many businesses have been known to close for the remainder of the evening so that the proprietor and employees can get their castnets and rush to the beach to catch mullet. A local dignitary once said, "if a person has never dined on grits and mullet roe for breakfast, he or she really hasn't lived."³

In 1895 fishing records were being kept and in this year Florida had a well-established infrastructure available to the commercial net fishing industry. The shore industries were reported to consist of fish, oysters, sponges, green turtles and alligator processing. The mullet harvest in 1895 was 20,733,734 pounds worth \$310,000. The shrimp landings were 62,625 pounds valued at \$2,397.⁴

Around 1900, offshore commercial shrimping began. In 1902, Sallecito Salvador, a Sicilian immigrant living in Fernandina Beach, Florida, developed a shrimping technique using a small horsepower engine on his boat. Utilizing this engine provided enough power to pull the shrimp seine across the ocean floor in deeper waters.

In 1906, he started his own company, S. Salvador & Sons. Anecdotal information obtained from descendants of Sallecito Salvador have stated that his true name was Salvador

¹ *Arts & Sciences magazine*, Feb-May, 1995, pages 8 & 9

² *St. Augustine Historical Society Archives*.

³ *Gary C. Usina. Descendant of Florida's 1st 700 families who arrived in St. Augustine in 1599.* (pers. com.1975)

⁴ *Florida Fisheries Outlook*. University of Florida, 1953, page 53.

Sallecito but upon his arrival his name was transposed and not wanting to do anything that might prevent his entry into America, he accepted the changed name.⁵

During World War II, Florida produced record amounts of mullet and mackerel for the war effort with a combined landing of over 50 million pounds to help feed the soldiers and citizens.⁶ Gearing up for this war effort led to the formation of many seafood companies in Florida and throughout the southeast. Many are still in business.

The Florida fishing industry established Southeastern Fisheries Association in 1952 and this group has remained active in politics and governance since that time.

In 1953, the Tortugas shrimp grounds located off Key West were discovered by Felix Salvador, son of Sallecito Salvador, the Italian immigrant mentioned previously. The pink shrimp fishery of Florida blossomed and still is the most valuable commercial fishery resource in the state.⁷

This was the last major shrimp ground discovered in Florida and its adjacent sea. However, other offshore fisheries such the calico scallop fishery was developed⁸ in the early 1960's and the offshore rock shrimp and Royal Red fisheries have been exploited from time to time over the past few decades.

Florida also has a potential to develop the cannonball jellyfish fishery if the weather would only cooperate.⁹ Jellyfish are a nuisance to beachgoers but are an aphrodisiac according to some Korean buyers.¹⁰

With the regulations Florida has in place either in statutes or in Marine Fisheries Commission rules, the baseline for sustainable fisheries has been set. All saltwater fisheries exploited exclusively in Florida waters are under some kind of management plan. Unless public policy transfers more fish to the sports fishermen and away from the marketplace, the industry should prosper in the next decade.

Besides impacts from the ever increasing number of boats and personal water craft crowding many a river and bay, the biggest threat to Florida's aquatic resources and therefore its associated economic impact is pollution and indiscriminate waterfront development.

The net ban which was passed by plebiscite in 1994 and became effective in July of 1995 has reduced the number of commercial fishermen by several thousand.¹¹ Florida banned the use of gillnets in all state waters (3 miles on the east coast and 9 miles on the west coast) and limited other type gear to 500 square feet of mesh in inshore and nearshore areas.¹² These harsh restrictions had a very negative impact for many historical fisheries, for instance, mullet landings dropped from a 20,000,000 pound average before the net ban to about 5,000,000 pounds after the net ban.¹³ As stated in the Florida Marine Research Institute's report, "Overall landings for species or species groups referred to in the compensation bill passed by the Florida Senate in 1995 were down 66% on the Atlantic coast and 83% of the Gulf coast."¹⁴

⁵ Conversation with Florida's 1st biological scientist and historian *R.M. Ingle*, Sept. 6, 1995

⁶ *Florida Fisheries Outlook*,. University of Florida, 1953

⁷ *Florida Fisheries Statistics*. FMRI. 1996

⁸ *An Economic Report on the Calico Scallop Fishery*. Dr. Charles Rockwood FSU

⁹ *A Report on Cannonball Jellyfish*. RP Jones & J. Rudloe. Governor's International Affairs Commission 1994.

¹⁰ Jay Han. Jellyfish Buyer. Seoul, Korea. (pers.com. 1995)

¹¹ *Article on the Impact of the Net Ban*. Michael Browning. The Miami Herald. September 1998

¹² *The Florida Constitution*. 1998

¹³ *Report to FMFC*. Florida Marine Research Institute. 1998

¹⁴ Florida's Inshore and Nearshore Species: Status & Trends Report. FMRI. Page 13 Dec. 2, 1996

The ban really hurt, however, using cast nets with 500 square feet of mesh as allowed by law the commercial fishermen produced 5,000,000 pounds of mullet in 1997. These mullet were a lot more valuable than before the ban and will become more valuable as time goes by. Higher prices will help ease the pain a little.

The 500 square foot of mesh allowed under the net ban has led to some innovative net making in the baitfish fishery of Northwest Florida.

A Tarpaulin baitfish net was developed in Destin and Port St. Joe.¹⁵ While being a most inefficient way to harvest baitfish, it does have a near zero bycatch rate¹⁶ which makes it the most environmentally friendly piece of fishing gear in the country.

Now that we have made a quick trip through time, let me present some current economic values of the commercial fishing harvest in Florida.

In 1996, the latest published landing reports from the federal government, Florida harvested 134,038,000 pounds of saltwater fishery products with a dockside value of \$205,203,000. Florida ranked 4th among all states in value of fishery products and 13th in volume.¹⁷

As a comparison, Key West ranked 37th and Cape Canaveral ranked 43rd among the top 60 ports. A comparison of value however places Key West in the 4th position and Tampa Bay area in the 35th place out of the 60 top fisheries ports in the United States.¹⁸

Using a multiplier of 3.5, this means that the Florida commercial fishing industry had an economic value of \$718,210,000 to the state in 1996.¹⁹ With relatively good harvests the 1998 value of saltwater aquatic products in Florida is probably approaching \$800,000,000 in economic impact.

Suffice to say, there will certainly be no increase in the amount of wild harvest in Florida in the foreseeable future but while the harvest levels remain the same, the overall value should rise dramatically as the demand outstrips the supply meaning that an annual one billion dollar economic impact from commercial saltwater harvest should be reached within the next decade.

The other segment of fisheries harvest is the pond raised or aquacultured products.

Florida's Aquaculture industry is experiencing growing pains. The potential importance of this food-producing segment is great if the restrictions placed on it years ago can be relaxed. The recognition of its potential by state political leaders has resulted in significant legislative actions in recent years.²⁰ State lawmakers are trying to help this industry help itself. Many of us believe the industry will grow by leaps and bounds once the permitting systems are better defined and made user friendly.

Total aquaculture sales in Florida reached \$102,000,000 in 1997. This compares with \$79,000,000 in 1995 and \$72,000,000 in 1973. This growth has been significant considering that the first survey made in 1985 showed total sales at \$35,000,000.²¹

Tropical fish are far and away the most valuable generating \$57,200,000 in sales in 1997 through the combined efforts of 203 growers. In 1987, total sales from tropical fish were only \$21,700,000.

¹⁵ *Observer Report of the tarp seine* presented to DEP. 1998

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Fisheries of the United States 1996*. US Dept. of Commerce, CFS # 9600. Page 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Page 5.

¹⁹ *Report on the Economic Costs of the Net Ban*. Tom Murray. 1995 (pers.com.)

²⁰ Florida Aquaculture legislation passed in the 1998 session.

²¹ Florida Agricultural Statistics Service, *AQUACULTURE*, June 1998. Page 1

Florida farm-raised catfish sales were \$640,000, cultured clams reached \$12,700,000, cultured oysters were at \$ 370,000 while Tilapia rose to a record \$1,040,000.²²

Between the wild harvest and the aquaculture harvest, Florida is in a leading position to continue providing a steady, affordable and safe supply of seafood for years to come. Our residents and our visitors come to Florida to eat seafood. God Bless em.

Before I conclude my remarks, let me quote some facts about Florida, provided by the Sea Grant folks.

"We have 14 million residents and 43 million visitors. Nowhere else in the United States are so many people so close to such an extensive and economically valuable coastline. Recreational fishing activity creates 100,000 Florida jobs. The seafood industry creates 40,000 jobs. Together, fishing annually contributes between \$4-5 Billion to the Florida economy, more than any other state. Seventy-five percent of Florida tourists have a coastal county as primary destination. Eighty - five percent of sport and commercially harvested shellfish and finfish species in Florida depend on estuaries. Sixteen of Florida's twenty-one metropolitan areas are built around an estuary, or lie at the mouth of a river that flows into the sea. Florida has more artificial reefs than any other state. Miami lies closer to the capitals of 16 Latin American and Caribbean countries than it does to Washington, DC Florida is the main port of entry to thirty countries."²³ Florida has a global economy.

In closing, Florida's fishing industry is highly valuable economically and while this paper doesn't address the social aspects or contributions of this very old industry, it must be noted for the record that many of us are working to preserve this culture.

Thank You.

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²² Florida Agricultural Statistics Service, *AQUACULTURE*, June 1998. Pages 1,2,3.

²³ Florida Sea Grant College Program Strategic Plan 1998-2001. TP-90. Pages 3 & 4