

Rhetoric rules on shrimp issue

It's time for science to reveal just where the problem really lies

Your recent editorial, "Shrimping impact study long overdue," omitted some very important information concerning the shrimp industry in your area. You say that because the net fishermen didn't agree to scientific management they were "crushed" Crushed they were, but it wasn't because of scientific information. We endorse a shrimp impact study. All impacts should be studied.

There have been laws on the books regulating fishing since the early 1900s. The size of gillnets used, to catch mullet were such that only adult mullet were harvested. Landings between 19 million and 25 million pounds were normal from 1895 to 1995 and the mullet fishery was healthy right up to the time of net ban.

Check out the science, not the rhetoric provided by Florida Sportsman magazine and its



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Guest Opinion

writers. If there were local declines in mullet, it was due more to dredging/filling and development than it was the fishermen's gillnets. I don't want to fight the net ban vote again, as the folks with the money and power won. Now we have to live with the law of the land. While the net ban is legal, what has been done to the commercial

fishermen and their families is not right.

Shrimping in Southwest Florida created in Lee County years ago many shoreside packing/processing businesses, which are still active and profitable. The Fort Myers shrimping boom occurred when the Tortugas pink shrimp fishing grounds were discovered in about 1949 as well as the shrimp grounds off Mexico that were in international waters until 1976.

In 1952, the Southeastern Fisheries Association (SFA) was formed in Jacksonville, and one of its first policies was to establish a shrimp nursery area off Southwest Florida where no trawling would occur. I came along in 1964 as director of SFA and joined the battle to set aside this very large area as the Tortugas shrimp preserve.

You might be interested to know that Judge Elmer O. Friday Jr., as a state senator representing this area in those days, was my mentor and led the fight in the Florida Senate to finally get a meaningful closed area on the books. If you want to take another look at all the shrimping industry has done to protect this area, why don't you call Judge Friday and ask him for his recollections? He has a wealth of knowledge and no axes to grind.

You really ought to at least do this instead of endorsing a news release from Florida Wildlife Federation, et al., and jumping on their bandwagon to further reduce commercial fishing which would cause unnecessary

economic disruptions to the area served by The News-Press.

The current poster child selected by a few militant environmental groups is all bottom trawling. They have lumped the shrimping industry in with massive factory trawlers in a far-off part of the world who do drag heavy nets on the ocean floor. But even this type of fishing in some areas has been going on for more than 100 years and the areas still produce fish. The point I make is that a 72-foot Gulf shrimp trawler is not the same as a 300-foot Taiwanese trawler.

As far as shrimp nets dragging the bottom, that's not the case. It's more like the tickler chain moves through the mud and sand and the trawl doors glide on the bottom and only part of the net touches the bottom. If you think a shrimp net can drag on rocks or over wrecks, then you haven't done your homework and that doesn't speak well for journalists.

If you haven't looked at our nets, chances are you have not looked at our turtle excluder devices or our bycatch reduction devices. Maybe you are not aware otter trawls drag mostly in mud or smooth ocean bottoms and shrimpers are dragging on the same grounds they have been dragging on for decades. Otter trawling in Northeast Florida began around 1904. Maybe you don't realize the shrimp grounds we are using were international waters until 1976. Maybe you haven't looked at the economic benefits of having a

sustainable shrimp industry in your own area. It is quite significant for a lot of people.

Maybe you haven't examined the history of this giant closed shrimp area in Tortugas and are not aware it was the shrimp industry that provided the state with its first patrol boat capable of keeping vessels out of the Tortugas nursery.

Your editorial also says, "The industry would probably benefit from having fewer boats working less seabed each year." Are you aware that the number of shrimp boats in the Gulf is down about 2,000 from its highest peak? Such a statement is like saying "The News-Press would probably benefit by publishing the paper once a week." Both statements certainly need to be quantified before being accepted as accurate.

There is no need to make us a whipping boy because some "conservation groups and a hook & line commercial fishing group in New England" has filed a lawsuit concerning essential fish habitat. If you want to talk about essential fish habitat, we are prepared to do that also. We endorse proper research and regulations and together maybe we can make it happen.

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