

CONFLICTING INTERESTS OF SPORTS AND COMMERCIAL FISHING

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I wish to open with this statement--there is more misunderstanding than conflict between the interests of the sports and the commercial fishermen in the fresh water of Florida. Before I can go further, I feel I should outline my definition of each man and his interests: If I am incorrect in my definition, then I am wrong in my conclusions.

The average Florida sports fisherman is a fellow who works hard at his trade, business, or profession for five and one-half days a week to satisfy the material needs of himself and his family and the equally urgent need of a man to accomplish something in which he may take pride. His hobby is fishing, although he may lay aside his tackle for a gun in the fall, and he averages one fishing trip each week.

Sometimes he takes his family, but mostly he goes with one or two other men who share his enthusiasm. His favorite method of fishing is taking bass with an artificial lure, but when this method is not effective he will fish with live bait for bass, crappie, bream, or even catfish when they are "biting" best. In short, he likes to catch fish.

What does he consider a satisfactory catch? Well, he's always trying for the big one and usually for the legal limit, but he enjoys his outing thoroughly when he catches 3 or 4 bass weighing about 2½ pounds each, or enough of the crappie or bream to invite his non-fishing friends in for a back yard fish fry.

In describing our sports fisherman friend, I think I have fairly well defined his interests in the matter of the conservation of our fresh water fisheries resources. He wants a supply of fish sufficient to allow him to catch a "mess" of fish almost every time he goes out (he expects to come home fishless a few times each year--how else could he substantiate his pet theories concerning the weather, the moon, the barometer, and other sports fishermen?) He also wants to understand the reasonableness of the laws which apply to his avocation, and to be sure that the restrictions placed thereon are for his benefit, commensurate with providing the same quality of fishing fun for his children. In this respect, he has found it very hard in the past to understand why he was allowed to take only 25 bream or 25 crappie when the commercial man with his much more efficient methods was marketing millions of pounds of these species each year. He is very much inclined to blame the commercial man for many of his unsuccessful fishing trips.

Let us now look at the average Florida commercial fisherman and his place in our fresh waters. He, too, is an average citizen who is seeking to support his family in the trade for which he is best qualified by training and experience. Although he may not have gotten a formal education or gone through an apprenticeship in the manner that other skilled workers have, he has certainly put in a great deal of time and much hard labor to learn his trade--and a very skilled trade it is. He is more aware of the productive capacities of the waters he fishes than is the sports fisherman, but he is also inclined to over-estimate these capacities, to the detriment of both interests.

Like the sportsman, he translates his poor fishing luck in terms of weather, moon, migration, and other "acts of God," but unlike the sportsman, he very seldom feels that his activities and those of other fishermen (whether sports or commercial) are the guilty

factor. This factor, better known as "over-fishing" is generally recognized by him only after a fishery has been exhausted. Then he lays the blame on the authorities charged with administering the fishery, and claims that "he told them so" all along. The history of many of the marine fisheries will support me in this.

What are his interests? Basically, I believe that he, too, wants to be assured of making a catch sufficient to fill his needs, and wants his son to have the same opportunity he has had to earn his living from those resources. He certainly does not wish to exhaust those resources, for unlike the old-time logger he does not believe in clear-cutting and moving on, for where would he go?

Where, then, is the conflict between the interests of the two men? Simply this-- each man is wrong in his interpretation of the other's perspective of the same resource. The sportsman feels that the commercial man is wilfully destroying the source of his pleasure--the commercial man feels the sportsman is interfering with his right to earn his living in the manner he chooses. Each is right and each is wrong.

What is the answer? The answer lies first in sound research to determine the place of each man's interests in each individual body of water in question. Most scientifically collected evidence in Florida to date indicates that there is a place for both the commercial man and the sportsman in many of our larger freshwaters, and that the activities of one may compliment the other. Unbiased collection of facts from each body of water must be carried on to determine the species, amounts, and methods involved. Secondly, each man must be educated to understand the other's place in the utilization of that resource to provide the greatest good to the greatest number of people in the state as a whole, whether or not they are fishermen. Commercial fishing in fresh waters in 1945 contributed approximately 2 million dollars to the economy of the state. In 1947, sports fishing in fresh water produced in excess of 52 millions of dollars from persons pursuing fishing for pleasure. In matters concerning "conflicting interests," where should the balance lie in order to provide this greatest good to the greatest number?

Fortunately, those charged with the administration of the fresh water fisheries of Florida are not blind to the interests of either side. They are now seeking to determine the methods necessary to permit activities of both the commercial and the sports fisherman, so that these activities may compliment each other and protect the interests of all. These interests, I repeat, comprize more misunderstanding than conflict.