

BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK

## Proposal would call for permits, fishing limits

**The upcoming Biscayne National Park Fisheries Management Plan is expected to recommend new fishing restrictions and annual permits to pay for hiring more rangers.**

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The free ride enjoyed by recreational and commercial users of Biscayne National Park soon could come to an end if a proposed user fee is approved.

Anglers also should expect new catch and size restrictions on the fish they're allowed to take from the more-than 173,000 acres of marine habitat in South Miami-Dade.

These are among the key recommendations likely to be included in the park's forthcoming Fisheries Management Plan, said park superintendent Mark Lewis.

"There will be size and catch limits," he said.

"The fish population in a national park should be at least as good, if not better, than anywhere else."

Most members of the fishing community acknowledge that fish size and populations are on the wane. But some worry that permits and other restrictions will be too intrusive or difficult to enforce.

"I wouldn't mind paying for permits if it's for the good of the park, but most of the time things like this are just to harass fishermen," said Paul Pavloff, 43, who said he's fished at the park since childhood.

Lewis said the finished Fisheries Management Plan should be published in the Federal Register in about two months. A public comment period will follow.

The report does not set law or regulations. Lewis said it's a framework for the state Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, which would still maintain authority to make size and catch limits."

The proposed annual permits, expected to cost about \$20 to \$25, will generate funds to help hire three more park rangers.

The park currently employs seven rangers, which is not enough to keep an eye on the thousands of people who boat, fish, snorkel and dive there daily, Lewis said.

"We recognized that we need to raise money to put on the water more patrol rangers," he said.

"We can really make a difference with the extra rangers and deal with the high-population areas on the sandbars where boaters congregate, and out on the reefs to make sure boaters don't drop anchors on the coral."

Many of the anglers who would be affected by the changes are professional flats fishing guides like Jorge Valverde, 46, who has been fishing Biscayne Bay for nearly 30 years. He owns and operates Low Places Guide Services in Cooper City, which runs charters in the park.

Valverde supports the idea of permits, but not if commercial and charter fishermen are the only ones who get checked for compliance. He's also skeptical that will be enough rangers for enforcement.

"Biscayne has so many points of entry, I don't think they have the back-up staff to make sure everyone has a permit," he said.

The park came under scrutiny last month for inadequate funding and staffing by a Washington-based national parks advocacy group.

Biscayne National Park's budget for the 2005 fiscal year was \$3.4 million, up only 2 percent from 2001, said Jason Bennis, marine policy

manager for the National Parks Conservation Association.

According to an association study, the park needs a minimum budget increase of \$300,000 a year -- and ideally \$465,000 -- for law enforcement and maintenance.

The study also noted the dwindling population and size of the park's fish, concluding that 27 of 35 species found there are being over-fished -- both commercially and recreationally.

The numbers came from Jerald Ault, associate professor of Marine Biology and Fisheries at the University of Miami, whose findings likely will shape the new fishing rules at the park.

Ault said that in the 1920s and '30s, the average fish caught in Biscayne Bay weighed 42 pounds, but today, it's down to 12 pounds.

The decrease in fish population is harder to gauge, Ault said, because the state did not begin collecting data until 1983.

Lewis said Ault was deeply involved in drafting the Fisheries Management Plan, which will recommend size and catch limits on several species popular with both recreational anglers and commercial fishermen.

The fishing industry brings in about \$8 billion a year to the state's economy, coming in a close second to the \$9 billion citrus industry.

In Miami-Dade County in 2004, recreational activity of all types on Biscayne Bay contributed \$257 million in tax revenues, said Grace M. Johns, senior associate and economist with Hazen and Sawyer Environmental Engineers & Scientists in Hollywood.

Researchers agree that policy changes must balance those economic benefits with concerns for preservation of natural resources and the environment.

The 27 fish Ault says are being over-fished include various populations of grouper, snapper, grunt and the great barracuda. He said the problem is not limited to the park and extends all the way down through the Keys.

Catch and size recommendations are expected to vary according to the species, Ault said. The goal to maintaining a fishery, he said, is to ensure that a pair of fish lives long enough to reproduce at least once.

Several grouper species are already off limits, either seasonally or permanently. Because they live longer -- up to 50 years -- and tend to reach sexual maturity later, it could take up to 20 years for some populations to rebound from decades of over-fishing even with new restrictions, Ault said.

Commercial fishing often gets blamed for depleting fisheries, but Ault said the culpability in Biscayne National Park falls mostly on recreational anglers.

"When you're talking about four to six million fishing trips per year, you can add it up to a lot of fish on the dock every day," he said.

Florida City resident Ernest Vegas, 52, has been fishing Biscayne Bay since he was 7. He and his 27-year-old son, Ernest Vegas III, fish there almost every weekend, and agree that something needs to be done to maintain current populations, especially in light of South Miami-Dade's housing boom.

"I do think we need new limits," the father said. "The population explosion down here could lead to a lot more fish being taken."

Input for the Fisheries Management Plan was provided by academia, the environmental community, and commercial and recreational anglers, many of whom want to see the fishery better managed.

David Saddler, 44, has been running flats fishing charters at the park since 1982. He supports bringing fish size and populations and back to where they were decades ago.

"Catch and size limits will help us in the long run," he said. "The fish here are simply getting caught too early."

He also supports permits for users of the park because, like Valverde, he believes enforcement is sorely lacking. "You have people killing turtles, keeping undersized lobsters and bonefish that are too small. They need more rangers out there," he said.

But not everyone in the plan's working group agrees that more fishing restrictions are the answer. Ted Forsgren, executive director of the Coastal Conservation Association-Florida, a Tallahassee-based recreational fishing lobbying group, said enforcing the rules already on the books would suffice.

That could be done through hiring more rangers with the money collected from the proposed permits, which he does support, he said.

"Education and enforcement is really important. We need to get people to comply with whatever limits are there already," he said.