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STUDYING BONEFISH

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Surprising findings have emerged from a pilot study of bonefish in Biscayne Bay and the Keys recently completed by two University of Miami scientists.

Associate professor Jerry Ault and graduate student Robert Humston got local guides to help them catch, tag and release more than 250 bonefish in local waters starting in January 1998. Here's what the scientists have learned about one of South Florida's most popular recreational species:

* Bonefish move freely between Biscayne Bay and the Keys. A fish tagged on the oceanside flats of Elliott Key in October 1998 was recaptured two weeks later off Fat Deer Key north of Marathon - 100 miles away.

``The guides were telling us there was no movement, that Biscayne Bay fish were discreet from Islamorada fish," Ault said. ``That far-moving one blew our minds. This fish took off ahead of a cold front. Our guess is that [bonefish] migrate south to the deep reef line off Marathon, where they go to spawn."

* Bonefish ``grow like mad," according to Ault. A bonefish caught and tagged last August by captain Darrick Parker near Biscayne Bay's Caesar Creek

weighed approximately three pounds and measured 19 inches. Recaptured in April in the same area by an angler fishing with captain Chris Hsaro, the fish measured 24 inches and weighed four pounds.

* Tagging doesn't appear to harm bonefish nor alter their behavior. Tagged fish were found feeding and frolicking normally amidst schools of bonefish months after their releases, according to the UM report.

``After they're tagged, they're right back in the middle like they were before," Ault said. Some questions, too. But the study raised as many questions as it answered.

``We don't know the size of the stock. We don't know the effect of fishing. If you have animals spawning, where do they go? Where do larvae settle as juveniles? We don't know," Ault said.

To answer these questions, Ault and Humston plan to tag even more bonefish, and add sonic tags so the fish's real-time movements can be tracked with telemetry gear. The scientists will drag local waters with nets to gather independent bonefish data that can be

compared to what they have learned from guides. They plan to develop spatial models that show how bonefish are distributed in local waters.

``To assess a stock, you need to know how it's laid out in time and space," Ault said.

Ault said a hard look has to be taken at how efforts to restore the Everglades and Florida Bay may affect bonefish. He says the plans he has seen so far indicate even less fresh water will make its way to Biscayne Bay than does now.

``The bonefish have a strong relationship to environmental and fishing signals," Ault said. ``We love the Everglades, but we love the coastal environment, too." The scientists' research, which is easily accessed by the public, has sparked the interest of guides who make their living hunting for bonefish for their clients. ``As a guide, I'd love to know where [bonefish] are going," said captain Randy Small, who recaptured the 100-mile bonefish.

Added captain Darrick Parker, who has tagged many bonefish from south Biscayne Bay to Tavernier: ``Where are the juveniles? We don't see a lot of smaller fish. They've got to be somewhere."

Shrinking population?

Captain Mike Collins of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association does not support the UM research. ``If we're going to do research on [bonefish] feeding habits, it ought to benefit the resource - not make it easier for people to catch them," Collins said. ``I don't see the benefit."

But captain Joel Kalman, who fishes mostly in Biscayne Bay, said it's important to find out whether stocks are going up or down. ``I think the population is smaller than 10 or 20 years ago," Kalman said. ``We don't know if our stocks are getting stronger or dying out. I hope this study will find that out."

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If you want to get involved in the UM bonefish tagging study or if you recapture a tagged bonefish, call the UM bonefish hotline at 888-754-7531.

Illustration: photo: Norman Schwarzkopf with Craig Brewer holding a bonefish (a)

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