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TRANSMITTERS TRACK THE HABITS OF TARPON

BY SUSAN COCKING, scocking@herald.com

Have you ever wondered what a tarpon does all day? The avid anglers who founded Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited were curious enough that they put up $25,000 to find out.

What they have learned so far through satellite transmitting tags will contribute to angling success and may help conserve the popular game species throughout its range.

The group, based at North Key Largo's Ocean Reef Club, purchased four pop-up archival transmiting tags under the direction of University of Miami fisheries scientists Jerry Ault and Robert Humston.

The tags were fastened to tarpon ranging from 80 to 130 pounds to be towed around for predetermined periods, recording every minute how far the fish traveled, how deep or shallow it went, the light level and the time. The tags were programmed to automatically detach from the fish and pop to the surface, relaying all the data gathered to a satellite that would download the information to the computers of Ault and Humston at University of Miami.

Tags were implanted on four fish caught and released between Sept. 3 and Sept. 28 at Cape Hatteras, N.C.; Hilton Head, S.C.; Savannah, Ga.; and Stuart.

The Savannah tarpon's tag popped up Nov. 4 a few miles north of east-central Florida's Sebastian Inlet. The Hilton Head tarpon's tag surfaced Jan. 3 in the same area. The Stuart fish's tag is scheduled to appear Friday, followed by the Cape Hatteras fish on March 4.
Ault said he was ``mind-blown'' by the data he received. ``It's an information trail into a mystery,'' he said. ``[The tarpon] swims off with your tag and you've got what he's doing minute to minute. Before this, who knew what they were going to do?''

The Savannah tarpon, a 110-pounder, traveled about 250 miles in the 43 days he was at large. He was very particular about water temperature, spending most of his time in 77-degree water as he traveled down the coast. His average depth was 26 feet, but he swam consistently shallower during the day and deeper at night. However, during the full moon, the tarpon bounced from deep to shallow water at night, presumably to feed.

The Hilton Head fish showed similar depth and water temperature preferences.
What Ault and his research sponsors really want to know is whether the tarpon they catch and release in the summer in the Keys are the same ones being fished commercially for food and roe during other times of the year in Central and South America. A longer tagging study would answer that question.

In Florida, anglers must purchase a $50 tag from the state in order to keep a tarpon. The annual quota of tags is never filled, because most anglers release their fish alive. The sport fishery's value to the economy is estimated in the billions.
If you would like to learn more about the research programs of Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited, visit website www.tarbon.org; www.bonefishresearch.com or call 305-367-3416; or e-mail btu@reefnet.com.

Keywords: