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1 BONEFISH, 2 BONEFISH

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More than 317,000 bonefish inhabit South Florida waters from Biscayne Bay to the Marquesas Keys.

The largest proportion, 36 percent, live around the Upper Keys; 30 percent in the Lower Keys; 14 percent in the Middle Keys, and 20 percent in Biscayne Bay. The Upper Keys bonefish population is densest on the Florida Bay side, where bait funnels between the flats and the reef.

These are among the major findings of a one-day bonefish census conducted Oct. 7 by the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School, with the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association and Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited.

On a windy day with higher-than-normal tides, 40 fishing guides and their customers were divided among 19 zones covering 1,736 square miles from Bear Cut south to the Marquesas Keys, 30 miles west of Key West. Their mission was to count, catch, tag and release bonefish.

Only 23 fish were caught out of 1,899 spotted. But the count established a baseline for future studies, according to University of Miami professor Jerry

Ault, who crunched the numbers to arrive at a population estimate.

The importance of counting bonefish is twofold - economic and ecological - according to Ault. He calculates that each fish is worth \$3,150 annually to the recreational fishing industry, for a total of \$57,000 over its estimated 19-year lifespan. Bonefish also are considered an indicator species of the health of the South Florida ecosystem.

"They are a transitional species that live their juvenile life inshore, then when they grow big and strong, they move to offshore barrier islands," he said.

With restoration of the Everglades, Ault said, the redirection of fresh water across the peninsula and into Florida and Biscayne bays will impact bonefish populations.

"We need to do environmental monitoring," Ault said. "What are those impacts going to be on the resource?"

Ault wants to conduct another census, but he also wants to find out more precisely where bonefish go during various times of the year. He plans to tag more bonefish in the Middle and Lower Keys and to implant sonic tags and set up listening stations.

"This is like CSI: Miami - forensic biology," he chuckled.

Flats guide Joel Kalman of Key Biscayne is one of those assisting in Ault's research.

``I'd rather the truth be known because of all these really weird ideas people have about [bonefish] - like that they don't travel," Kalman said. ``Plus, it will help me know if I have a job in ten years."

Illustration: photo: Jerry Ault (A)

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