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SEMINAR YIELDS SURPRISES

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There's an adage among experienced anglers that says the more you learn about fishing, the more you realize you don't know. That belief was reinforced at last Monday's Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited seminar in Islamorada. A roomful of anglers and guides gathered at the Islamorada Fishing Club to hear the latest from bonefish and tarpon researchers about the species' life history, migration and reproduction. Some of the findings were nothing less than astounding.

For example, many wonder where bonefish go to spawn and what happens to the larvae afterwards. Six years of study by Jerry Ault and colleagues at the University of Miami's Rosenstiel School, assisted by more than 80 South Florida fishing guides and anglers, indicate that South Florida's bonefish, *albula vulpes*, reproduce from October to March on deep reefs south of Marathon. Juveniles 10 inches or less have shown up in the surf line as far north as Stuart. But no one knows where the larvae settle or anything about the species' early juvenile habitat.

Further complicating things was the identification of a second species of bonefish in South Florida - slightly

smaller and caught in deeper water by a party boat - called *albula garcia*.

Aaron Adams of Sarasota's Mote Marine Laboratory seined beaches in 30 locations between Biscayne Bay and Key West, collecting 450 juvenile bonefish up to four inches long. Genetic analysis showed nearly all of the juveniles were *albula garcia*; none was the baby of the renowned 15-plus-pound *vulpes* caught locally.

"We were thrown for a loop," Adams admitted. "Where did *garcia* come from and where are the *vulpes* juveniles?" Almost by accident, Adams and his colleagues stumbled on one of the answers. Seining beaches in Belize for a separate study, the scientists netted nothing but juvenile *vulpes*. Said Adams: "We are not even close to having the information to manage bonefish."

TARPON RESEARCH

Research on tarpon also yielded eye-opening results.

Ault and colleagues put satellite archival pop-up tags in 14 tarpon in 2003 and 2004, releasing them in Florida, Louisiana and Mexico.

These tags track the fish's movements, along with water temperature, depth, light level and time. At a predetermined date, the tag detaches from the fish and floats to the surface, beaming data to a satellite which, transmits it to Ault and his colleagues at UM.

“We had a bunch of fish move from Mexico to Texas and Louisiana,” Ault said. “We’ve had fish go from Venice, Louisiana, to Key West. Their fish are our fish.”

Ault's point is that enacting strict conservation measures to protect the economically important sport fishery for tarpon in the United States might not do much to enhance the species if tarpon stray into waters where they are not protected, such as Costa Rica or Nicaragua. He said more tagging data is needed.

HURRICANE BENEFITS

The seminar ended with some surprising findings from Jon Shenker, a tarpon researcher at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. According to Shenker, this summer's hurricanes proved very beneficial for juvenile tarpon, which use the brackish and muddy mangrove marshes of the Indian River Lagoon as nursery grounds.

“What's bad for us is good for tarpon,” Shenker said. “This summer, larger numbers of juveniles were found in more habitats than ever. These tarpon are riding hurricane currents that are pushing them into nursery habitats. The bottom line is, preservation of essential nursery habitats is vital to tarpon, and Florida is the tarpon nursery in the U.S.”

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