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## Bonefish totals steadily rising

*The latest census shows an increase in bonefish in South Florida waters, a strong indicator for the area ecologically.*

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Approximately 329,000 bonefish reside in South Florida waters from Biscayne Bay to the Marquesas Keys west of Key West. That's the figure estimated by University of Miami fisheries scientist Jerry Ault based on last month's one-day bonefish census by 48 professional fishing guides split up among 19 zones covering 1,575 square miles.

The number is up from the previous two censuses, when Ault estimated about 300,000 of the silver torpedoes roam the South Florida flats. He said the increase could be due to variations in where the bonefish showed up this year and noted the lower Keys had better coverage than previous counts.

"We're getting a basically consistent view of what's there between years," Ault said. "I'm feeling pretty confident that it's a really good estimate."

Ault and the conservation group Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited launched the bonefish census in 2003 to obtain a population baseline. They enlisted the help of local flats guides and their customers to pole the flats looking for bonefish and counting the number they saw and caught. Ault said an accurate

population estimate is important, because bonefish represent a bellwether of the South Florida ecosystem: How they fare depends on water quality, prey base and fishing pressure.

"Bonefish are a great indicator of ecological change," Ault said. "I would be concerned when the population drops from 300,000 to 200,000."

Bonefish are a major driver of Florida's multibillion-dollar recreational fishing industry. Based on boat and tackle sales, guide fees and fishing licenses, Ault estimates each South Florida bonefish is worth about \$3,500 a year, or about \$75,000 over its lifetime.

Veteran bonefish chasers, such as Miami light-tackle guide captain Bill Curtis, say there once were many more bonefish in South Florida than now. Curtis figures the population is less than 10 percent of what it was during the 1950s. And although relative newcomers find that hard to gauge, Ault said a separate bonefish census conducted last year in Belize tends to support Curtis' glum assertions.

Local guides who poled and walked the pristine and sparsely fished flats of the 230-square-mile Turneffe Atoll counted 1.2 million bonefish, or 5,400 per square mile. South Florida's population is about 209 bonefish per square mile.

Ault wonders how many bonefish might have plied South Florida's flats back then.

"If 300,000 is the number [now], what might the population have looked like historically?" Ault asked.

Ault said the South Florida bonefish census should continue to be an annual event, providing hard scientific data to lawmakers and fish managers amid burgeoning human population growth and development.

Said Ault: ``Here we have something to arm ourselves with to anticipate change."