



Florida Guides Association

*Dedicated to promoting the conservations and
wise use of Florida's Fishery Resources*

February 2017 Newsletter

Fish or Count Bait?



Florida offers salt water fishing experiences of immense variety, from inshore standards like spotted sea trout and red drum to offshore beasts such as marlin and mahi-mahi. This diversity allows a lot of professional wiggle room for the fleet of fishing guides in the Sunshine State. Whether you generalize or specialize on a single style or species, there is one ingredient that keeps the game fish around, and therefore the guide busy - bait.

With few exceptions, prey species in Florida are fairly local/regional and seasonal. Their presence depends on a variety of factors. Quality habitats and clean waters are a requirement, both of which have been altered quite a bit in Florida over the past 100 years. Throw in episodic events like hurricanes, red tides, abnormal weather patterns, and other natural or man-made events and the populations of bait (a.k.a. forage fish) already suffer through wild swings of abundance or absence.

As the most consistent 'eyes on the water', guides know better than anyone that when bait is plentiful, fishing is good; and when bait is scarce, fishing can be difficult at best. Over time, a healthy amount of forage fish in the water translates to healthier stocks of gamefish. And of course, the opposite is again true - a consistent lack of protein for our 'money fish' translates to poor fish stocks, or just a lack of fish.



Forage fish in Florida have recently gained some of the attention they deserve from a management standpoint. In fact, a group known as the Florida Forage Fish Coalition, which includes groups such as the Snook and Gamefish Foundation (SGF) and the International Game Fish Association (IGFA), cohosted a forage fish data summit with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) and several academic institutions (Dec 2016, St. Pete).



The goal of the meeting could be distilled into one major theme - increasing collaborative research efforts among FWC, anglers, and academic institutions.

The group left the summit with a better understanding of forage fish research needs and powered out a 'wish list' of general categories. Further, it was established that FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) would partner with the coalition in granting support for research projects dedicated to reaching the newly defined goals. Academic institutions or other organizations can submit project proposals to the coalition by February 17th, which will be reviewed by an advisory panel made up of FWRI and the FF Coalition. Awards will be determined based on scientific merit for publication, timeline feasibility, funding availability, and FWRI priorities.



Jason Schratwieser, Conservation Director at IGFA, attended the summit and is looking forward to seeing progress in understanding and protecting our forage fish. "FWC already has a backlog of forage fish data. One main goal of the summit was to partner with local academic institutions who can use graduate students to help tackle the mountain of unused data," Jason said.

He noted that Florida's guides can certainly play a role in protecting our precious bait species, and now is the right time to wade in to the action. "Right now, all we would ask our guides to do is to visit our Forage Fish website (<http://floridaforagefish.igfa.org/>) and take the pledge that shows we all agree that our bait fish need protection. Signing up for our newsletter is a great idea too."

Florida anglers and guides are fortunate that FWC has been willing to collaborate with anglers and independent researchers. With their open minds and our participation, we can ensure a brighter fishing future for generations to come.

<http://myemail.constantcontact.com/-Florida-Guides-Association-Newsletter.html?soid=1101081533671&aid=MxUr2Hr9KoM>

END