

I'm a Florida Sportsman

The Scientist

Behind the scenes of Florida's diverse and abundant marine life are ranks of scientists committed to documenting the life histories and inter-relationships of fishes. Much of the vital field work is performed by graduate students who, in many cases, literally plunge into their research.

Meaghan Faletti, a 2013 graduate of Florida State University, came to the attention of Florida Sportsman recently. A recreational diver and spearfisher, Faletti ran the FWC Lionfish Outreach program from 2014-2016. For her Master's thesis at the University of South Florida College of Marine Science in St. Petersburg, she is currently studying hogfish ("The best-tasting fish in the world," she opines). Also, Faletti is working on an intriguing new population study of pinfish, funded by the Florida Forage Fish Coalition, a recent partnership of private conservation groups.



Inspired by the ocean, empowered by Florida universities, Meaghan Faletti is among the new generation to study marine life great and small.

When did you decide you'd be a marine scientist?

I'm originally from New Jersey, but I grew up in Orlando, and we visited the beach often. I used to vacation with my family at Cape Cod, Massachusetts—and that's probably where my first interest in marine science arose—walking out to tidal pools, finding horseshoe crabs, hermit crabs. Then in high school, I went to a marine science camp at the University of Delaware. I lived and worked in the lab, and that hands-on experience—exploring salt marshes, working trawl samples—is what really drove me to decide I wanted to do this as a career.

You're an avid diver. Where are some of your favorite places?

I love the entire Gulf of Mexico. I've spent a lot of time diving off the Panhandle—probably my favorite place in the world. The reefs there have a lot of lionfish—and one of my favorite things to do is hunt lionfish. Also snappers, groupers and triggerfish—in season. Lately I've been doing a lot of diving and spearfishing on the natural ledges here off St. Petersburg and Sarasota.

What about pinfish? What can we learn and why?

Pinfish are one of those bridges from primary production—algae, seagrasses—to higher level predators. They provide food for anything from snook and tarpon inshore, to gag grouper offshore. They are known to move from seagrass beds to offshore as adults, and they are important to both of these habitats and the different fisheries they support. We're analyzing pinfish population data from four different estuaries to see if populations are in sync—find out when they are migrating or recruiting. A second component of the project will use a process called stable isotope analysis to estimate spawning locations.

What's next for you personally? Any specific career goals?

I may be interested in staying in research, as I love learning things—finding things out on my own instead of looking them up on Google. But, I also love education and outreach. I think it's extremely important to get the general public, especially kids, excited about and involved in the sciences.

To learn more about the Forage Fish Coalition, visit www.floridaforagefish.org

—Interview by Jeff Weakley

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