



Move to Conserve Baitfish Will Benefit Game Fish, Waterfowl, and Ecosystem

By Terry Gibson

At the United Waterfowlers-Florida's annual summit last summer, I was reminded why I've been a member of this group since its beginnings. To borrow a phrase from the great conservation writer Wendell Barry, "It all turns on affection."

What shone through the technical and policy information at the summit was how passionately UW-F's leadership and members, and our colleagues in the science and policy communities, care for our fish and wildlife resources. The organization is not only a champion of hunter access; it is also determined to protect our rights to healthy ecosystems that provide high-quality recreational fishing and hunting opportunities.

That's why I want to share some good news about an important initiative—one that UWF has applauded. During the past two years, I have worked with a coalition led by the International Game Fish Association, The Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Florida Wildlife Federation to increase protections for forage fish, also known as baitfish, which serve as critical food sources for ducks and other marine animals.

This work started to pay off in June when the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission adopted a resolution recognizing the importance of maintaining healthy populations of forage fish for birds, fish, and other predators that depend on them. More importantly, this resolution affirms the agency's commitment to managing forage fish species in ways that ensure that these small fish will continue to support bountiful fishing and hunting in Florida, both today and for future generations. Here is a link to the full resolution: <http://myfwc.com/media/3211614/forage-fish-resolution.pdf>.

Most UWF members, who are also avid anglers, know that forage fish are crucial as bait for the larger species we love to catch. We think a lot about baitfish in the context of finding game fish and matching the prey's colorations with carefully crafted fishing lures. We recognize that our fisheries would be in deep trouble if predators didn't have the calories provided by sardines, anchovies, menhaden, mullet, pinfish, and ballyhoo, among other small, schooling fish classified as forage fish.

But many of us are only now learning how important forage fish also are to several species of waterfowl that we hunt in Florida. Among the commonly hunted ducks in Florida, hooded and red-breasted mergansers feed directly upon forage fish, especially anchovies, sardines, and pinfish.

For other ducks, the benefit is more indirect. Some forage fish species, especially pinfish and mullet, play critical roles in keeping seagrass healthy—acting as custodians and landscape architects in these food-rich underwater meadows by feeding on the algae that clings to seagrass. Adult pinfish, for instance, nibble on seagrass leaves and stems, providing a pruning that helps the grass grow thicker and supplies more nutrition and cover for bird species such as redheads, lesser and greater scaup, and ringbills, which dive into those grasses in coastal bays and estuaries to feed mainly on mollusks.

With forage fish so important to the wildlife and ecosystems, such as the Indian River Lagoon, that we treasure, their protection is growing ever more important. Fishing gear restrictions and state monitoring efforts have helped keep Florida's forage fish populations fairly healthy. But global demand for the small species is surging for use in cosmetics, fertilizers, animal and aquaculture feed, and other products.

That is probably one reason the wildlife commission's June forage fish resolution includes a promise to "ensure sufficient abundance and diversity" of forage fish to meet the dietary needs of predatory fish and waterfowl, and to "maintain Florida's reputation as 'the Fishing Capital of the World.'"

So the next time you're talking with our commissioners, please thank them for adopting this resolution and for looking out for the little fish that play a huge role in the health of our fishing and hunting communities. To learn more about forage fish and efforts to conserve them, and to pledge your support, visit www.floridaforagefish.org.

Terry Gibson, an outdoor writer and consultant based in Jensen Beach, Florida, serves as a recreational fishing outreach consultant for The Pew Charitable Trusts, educating the public about the benefits of ecosystem-based fisheries management to wildlife and sportsmen.

*Note: This story was originally featured in the UW-F April 2016 newsletter.