

Biscayne Park Proposes Limited-Entry Reef Fishing

No-fishing zone in disguise? Or merely an unwarranted pitch to bring hunting-style access management to salt water?



available mooring buoys and impose a dual-license requirement from both BNP (fee to be charged) and a Special Activity License from the FWC. Initial plans call for Special Activity Licenses to be awarded in a yet-to-be-decided annual blind draw through FWC. Additional proposed restrictions for the SRZ require a logbook of fishing activity provided to BNP each month, no lobstering, no spearfishing except for lionfish or other "bad" species, a limit of 70 licensed guides also chosen in a blind draw by the FWC and the allowance of commercial ballyhoo netting. This new BNP plan is proposed to begin January 2016.

Not Just A Local Issue

The proposed plan spells out "adaptive management," whereby after year 10, BNP may decide to convert the SRZ into a total no-fishing zone. Anglers are justifiably concerned that this limited-entry gambit will start in BNP and spread throughout all of our coastlines from Jacksonville to Key West to Pensacola.

Let's look at five of the most-often heard justifications for the SRZ:

1. "The SRZ concept is the same as the FWC now employs with quota hunt permits for hunting in Wildlife Management Areas."

The reality: It's a total apples-to-oranges comparison. Much easier to keep track of people and animals on land as opposed to what occurs underwater. Limiting numbers of hunters is justifiable on certain WMAs, to minimize the risk of firearms accidents, campfires and other maladies with no equivalent on ocean reefs.

2. "This limited-entry is better than a total no-fishing zone."

The reality: There's really not much difference between them when you consider that even if all 430 anglers and 70 guides were present at the same time on the same day (even half that many would be rare on weekdays), it would be equal to approximately one boat per 30 acres of water. With BNP controlling the anchoring buoys and changing the rules every few years, you can bet that choicest locations would be restricted even further.

3. "Marine zoning is here to stay, so we might as well accept it."

The reality: The political pendulum can—and will—swing via new presidential directives and cabinet secretaries, changes in heads of federal agencies and the makeup of our own FWC. We've already seen this occur, particularly with the FWC once stating, "We do not support closures except where there is a

By Doug Kelly

As if the proliferation of no-fishing zones weren't already a dinosaur bone of contention between federal fishery agencies and recreational anglers, a new scheme has been hatched to accomplish essentially the same thing.

Dubbed a Special Recreation Zone (SRZ), it's the most obtuse and controversial portion of a proposed 264-page management plan under consider-

ation for Biscayne National Park (BNP), a 270-square-mile marine park that encompasses most of Miami's Biscayne Bay. The 14,585-acre SRZ would allow access to only the 430 anglers and 70 guides who may be awarded dual permits each year. The proposal also calls for an additional 4,000 or so acres of slow speed or non-combustion engine use.

The SRZ has preliminary support from the present Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). Previously, in recent times, the FWC has stood firmly in rebuffing the non-stop attempts by federal agencies to "partner" no-fishing zones in the state's jurisdiction of marine waters that extend three miles into the Atlantic and nine into the Gulf. During a November FWC meeting, however, the commissioners were pressured by staff into voting to endorse the concept of this SRZ in Alternative 6 of the proposed BNP Fishery Management Plan, but with the proviso that any rule-making changes will still require state approval.

Other proposed SRZ rules would prohibit the take of any grouper, allow anchoring only at

CLOSURE JUNGLE SEASON CHECKER

For the month of FEBRUARY 2014 as of press time

FLORIDA SALTWATER FINFISH

ATLANTIC COAST

Red snapper **CLOSED** Fed. waters

Warsaw grouper, speckled hind **CLOSED** Fed. waters

Grouper (gag, black, red, other shallow) **CLOSED**

GULF OF MEXICO

Red snapper **CLOSED**

Gag grouper **CLOSED**

Snook **CLOSED**

clear scientific basis and need or other compelling evidence and then, this consideration is only given after other, less restrictive methods have been tried and evaluated first." Unfortunately, the FWC broke that promise in 2007 and again in 2012 by supporting the NPS on a 46-square-mile total no-fishing zone in the Dry Tortugas—twice the size of the proposed SRZ for BNP. Likewise, less restrictive methods (including ongoing rebuilding plans for grouper and snapper) have not been evaluated in this SRZ in BNP, and yet the FWC has again signed onto this angler-unfriendly concept.

4. "The SRZ is only a small percentage of BNP."

The reality: The FWC has already rejected a 10,522-acre no-fishing marine reserve zone on the basis of its size in proportion to the rest of BNP. The new plan is even larger, covering the former proposed zone plus an additional 4,000 acres—about one-tenth of the park. Plus, as FWC Commissioner Ken Roberts noted about the proposed zone in April 2012, "The [plan] fails to include that the Zone would encompass some of the most popular and productive fishing grounds in the Park."

5. "The science justifies it."

The reality: Despite the FWC's April 2012 letter to BNP challenging numerous statements about the lack of science in its plan at that time, new BNP Superintendent Brian Carlstrom still refers to some of the same "evidence" to justify the SRZ in its current plan, citing obsolete studies originating in 1977, 1999 and 2005 for justification of the SRZ. In particular Carlstrom states that the live coral cover in the park has fallen from a high of 28 percent in the 1970s and '80s to only 7 percent based on a 2008 study.

But here's what Commissioner Roberts said in the same letter about this false premise of hanging anglers for declining reefs: "... no data or other scientific evidence is provided to evaluate whether this Zone was designed to provide protection from the full suite of known threats (e.g., water quality and other non-fishing, human-caused stressors) that can affect the biodiversity and long-term viability of coral reef ecosystems."

Don't Jump the Gun

Why has FWC staff recommended moving forward with the SRZ? One observer at the November FWC meeting believes it was due to an over-eagerness to agree to a deal. "It's not a compromise, it's a cave-in," he remarked.

It may also be a case of too much familiarity clouding objectivity. FWC Executive Director Nick Wiley declared at the end of the November FWC meeting that the FWC and BNP staffs "were now a family."

Florida Sportsman is neither supporting nor rejecting all of the SRZ concept until all the ramifications are examined and thought through. This blind-draw lottery permit proposal is long on generalities and short on specifics.

We appeal to each FWC commissioner to demand objective, site-specific science. Demand, too, that existing fisheries management must be proven to have failed before agreeing to cede an inch of authority in state waters to the federal government.

Let FWC success stories on so many species in state waters continue to mount without the distraction and divisiveness of banning or restricting angler access. And let the six FWC commissioners—Ron Bergeron, Richard Corbett, Liesa Priddy, Bo Rivard, Ken Roberts and Brian Yablonski—go forward with the best interests of the resources at heart, while listening more to its millions of constituents rather than banning family-level angling in public marine waters. **FS**

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