

**Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council
Special Meeting November 17, 2000
Sponging in the Florida Keys
Final Minutes**

Members Present

Rob Bleser	Don Kincaid
John Brownlee	Karen Lee
Fran Decker	Duncan Mathewson
Jim Fryer	Ken Nedimyer
Richard Grathwohl	George Neugent
Debra Harrison	Anita Schwessinger
David Hawtof	Deborah Shaw

Alternates Present

Martin Moe for Virginia Cronk

Call to Order, Approval of Agenda

Chairman Neugent called the meeting to order at 9:08 a.m. On motion by John Brownlee, seconded by Jim Fryer, the agenda was approved as presented.

Billy Causey presented the background of the commercial sponging issue, commenting that the goal is to have an important decision and recommendation by the end of this meeting by the Sanctuary Advisory Council to FKNMS management to present to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Mr. Causey introduced Mr. Manoj Shivlani from the University of Miami who will act as interpreter for the benefit of the Spanish speaking audience.

Mr. John Hunt, Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), presented and reviewed the sponge statistics from 1996 through 1999 (attached).

Public Comment

Frank Hawkins – Islamorada Fishing Club. Mr. Hawkin's remarks are attached.

George Geisler - Islamorada Village of Islands Councilman. Mr. Geisler thanked the Sanctuary Advisory Council for the good work they have done. He said he was skeptical when the Sanctuary first started, but he thinks they have done a wonderful job with their regulations which help maintain the fishery and environment. He said he wanted to reiterate that the Islamorada City Council passed a resolution in support of a total ban on sponging in the near shore waters of the Keys. This is a very complicated and expensive problem to solve; sponges help the environment; they filter the water. He urged the Sanctuary Advisory Council to recommend a total ban on sponging.

Greg Whipple – General Manager of Tropical Shell & Gift, Historic Tours of America. A summary of his remarks are attached. Mr. Whipple emphasized that any decision should be based on the science available, not on emotion.

Don Davis stated he is a resident of Summerland Key and represents Reef Relief. He has 35 years experience with the marine environment as an ecologist. He stated that Reef Relief's position would be they would like to see a continuing effort to gather all the available scientific information from the literature and on-going studies in order to have the facts in front of the SAC in order to come to a decision.

Henry Feddern – Mr. Feddern's remarks are attached.

Emilio Reyes – Mr. Reyes stated there are more than 100 species of sponge and commercial spongers take only three species. Mr. Reyes commented when they "opened up the water" out of the Everglades, they killed fish and all 100 species of sponges. He also commented that commercial spongers do not use motor oil in the water because they cannot see through it; they use shark liver oil.

Duane Hope stated he is a third generation sponger. His father and grandfather sponged in Tarpon Springs; and he has lived on a boat in the Big Pine Key area for 15 years and is happy to live the way he lives. He referred to a letter Mr. Hawkins wrote to a magazine which he thinks showed a lot of unfounded fear. Mr. Hope commented that when he sponges he uses a little vegetable oil cut with isopropene, and never uses bleach. He described his sponging methods and commented about the sustainability of the sponge industry. He also mentioned that hurricanes and diseases eliminated sponge beds, not the spongers. Mr. Hope described the difference in the appearance of the species. He also commented that it is easy for people to get emotional and get erroneous information flowing and make a fear based decision. He suggested that the SAC look at the scientific data, and the experience of spongers who have lived here for generations. Mr. Hope stated he does see some dishonesty among spongers, as well as in commercial fishing and tourism. However, these are enforcement issues, and not a reason to ban sponging.

John Hammerstrom stated that this issue is reminiscent of clashes which have taken place all over the country, i.e. fisheries in the Northeast and logging in the Northwest. He commented that the issue of sustainability in terms of whether generations have been able to carry out their given line of work for generations is not a valid argument. Regarding the clash of cultures, it is unfortunate we find ourselves in this position in so many places around the country and around the world. Mr. Hammerstrom said he believes that sponges are an integral part of the marine environment; and at a time when the Nation, State, and County are spending countless millions of dollars to attempt to protect the environment, something must be done about the removal of sponges. He stated, according to the statistics he heard this morning, the fishery does not appear to be sustainable. He thinks there is a need to balance the financial needs of people who spent generations sponging with the absolute needs of the environment.

Jim Winstel – President of Matecumbe Anglers Fishing Club – stated he has lived full time in the Keys for 13 years, and visited for 50 years, so he has been around long enough to witness some of the degradation of the overall water quality. He commented he has heard a lot of eloquent arguments on both sides and perhaps more scientific data is needed. He said that if anyone in a high powered flats boat or pleasure boat were to run aground and kill two percent of the seagrass, they would be highly fined; so when spongers go out and selectively remove an entire species from an entire flat of more than two percent, where is the reasonableness in terms of protection of the environment?

George Scott talked about his experience in 1963 off Conch Reef observing the taking of conch. He said no one took care of the resources then; let's do something before all of the sponges are gone too. He also commented about the observations of some friends that live by Harry Harris Park where there are sponges rolling on the surf, apparently thrown back in the water because they were not commercially usable. He also quoted from a letter from the Friends of the Everglades: "There is no right to destroy our marine environment, please research it, check it out". Mr. Scott stated that we need to stop or slow down the taking of sponges, before there are none left, like the conch.

Tim Fry, a resident of Islamorada, and former general counsel for the U.S. Foreign Aid Agency, stated that his focus was on the environment and protecting coastal resources. Mr. Fry talked about huge resource problems all over the world, commenting that the sponging issue in comparison, in an economic sense, seems manageable. He also said, as the prior speaker alluded to, there is no right to any particular fishing endeavor; a license is required from the government, no matter how long you have been doing it. Given the amount of money and the commitment of the U.S. Congress and the Florida legislature for water quality improvements for the Everglades and to deal with wastewater problems in the Keys, it seems it would be relatively easy to deal with the sponging industry, but it should be done in a very careful manner. The burden should be heavy on those who promote the removal of the resource to demonstrate that it would not be harmful. Mr. Fry stated that it would make a lot of sense to phase this industry out properly and compensate those who would suffer an economic loss as a result.

Ed Swift of Historic Tours of America stated he has been involved with the sponge industry most of his working life. His company sells \$300-400,000 in sponges retail per year. Mr. Swift gave a history of the selling of sponges by his company, and of the sponge industry in Key West, relating to it being a much larger industry from 1870-1900 than it is now. He also talked about his testimony in Tallahassee in the 1970s and 1980s against diving for sponges in the Keys. The sponge beds are now healthy, and as long as hooking for sponges continues, an area cannot methodically get wiped out because hooking is erratic, slow, and good weather related. He also commented that some people think sponges are gone in a particular area when they may be temporarily covered by shifting sand. Mr. Swift also reported on a movie shown in their stores featuring C. B. McHugh, an 80 year old sponger. He also talked about the many reasons why the industry is sustainable, commenting that it would be a shame if the Sanctuary were a party to stopping an industry which is not depleting itself and has been ongoing for

generations. Mr. Swift stated that sponging is hard work and he admires the sponge fishermen; they are heroes and a throw back to another time in our history.

Bill Parks, a former SAC member and a tropical fish collector, stated he defends a proper fishery management process. He mentioned he is disappointed in many of the items he has read over the Internet regarding this issue. People with environmental concerns should grow up and stop using superlatives to manage a natural resource; you have to look at the biology. Mr. Parks said that his family has been coming to the Keys since 1935 and they have watched the Keys degrade. There are activities other than sponging that have more of an impact on the natural resources than sponging such as automobile transmission oil and yard fertilizers. He does not think banning the taking of a few sponges is going to fix anything. Mr. Parks also commended the scientists who served on the panel. Mr. Parks commented you could shut down any industry in the Keys or anywhere in the country with the arguments heard, but spongers should not be held to a higher standard than any other industry. More regulation of sponging may be needed, but gather more information and irrefutable evidence.

Bob Johnson, owner of Papa Joe's Marine, presented the attached comments.

Jim Cantonis, Acme Sponge, stated that the independent scientists at the last meeting said the density of the population of sponges in the areas that were transected in the Florida Keys fish areas were greater than the density of population in areas where fishing is restricted. The reason is that 30 percent of the sponges taken grow back and are young, vibrant sponges that spore. Mr. Cantonis commented that decisions need to be based on the science available. You need to look at historical landings. There has been a rebound in the population of sponges because the algal bloom caused by the freshwater out of the Everglades subsided. Mr. Cantonis also commented that sponging is controlled; there is a licensing process. He also said bleach is not used, because bleach eats sponges. The term bleaching refers to the lightening of sponges which is done using muratic acid and bicarbonate of soda. It is not done by the spongers, but by the wholesaler. He also mentioned his company employs two certified engineers at their wastewater treatment plant at their facility.

Mimi Stafford said, at the October SAC meeting, there was a very good scientific presentation, and those scientists concluded that sponging is a sustainable fishery. Ms. Stafford stated she is a fisherperson, charter boat operator, Reef Relief member, and a TNC volunteer. We are all users and all part of the problem because sponge beds are affected by water quality. The only way we are going to find solutions is not to make it a holy war of one group of people against another, but to really look at what the problems are. We need to look in our own back yards and ask what can we do, how can each of us make a difference, and how can we repair some of this damage for our children and their children, and on into the future. Ms. Stafford encouraged everyone to work together to find solutions to the problems and to base things on real science and real information, not on anecdotal things that get blown out of proportion when they are repeated.

George Archbold, who owns a fishing vessel and is a sponger, referred to an article in National Fishermen in which Billy Causey was quoted. Mr. Causey indicated that he was misquoted in a portion of the article as well as a recent Miami Herald article, but essentially what he was pointing out was that there are a lot of social issues embroiled with the fisheries issues.

Grady Sullivan, a marine life collector since 1972, stated he is in favor of fisheries management. He has some problems with sponging, but loves the sponge fishermen. Sponging is the oldest fishery in the Florida Keys, but like every fishery, it needs to be managed. Mr. Sullivan talked about the use of oil, the size limit, and that there is no sponge license. He suggested that sponging not be allowed within 1/2 mile of the shoreline. Mr. Sullivan apologized for concluding that bleach is being used. He also commented that this sponging meeting has to be one of the most historical events in the history of the Sanctuary—where fishermen, environmentalists, homeowners, and tourists are working together. He also said he used to collect live sand, and it was determined to be critical habitat, and the taking of live sand was banned by the Sanctuary with no scientific data—don't let this happen to the sponging fishery. The spongers need to protect their fishery, and we also need to protect the environment.

Jose Orma – Manoj Shivilani, interpreter, read a statement from the Fishermen of South Florida (attached). Mr. Orma stated (Mr. Shivilani interpreted) the spongers make their living off the water and it is often the only activity they have. By removing sponging you don't know the economic and social damage you could do to their families because they rely on sponging to bring food to their tables. Mr. Causey asked how much “by catch” is there in sponging? Mr. Orma replied that he can hear and feel whether it is the right type of sponge before he hooks it. He said he thinks he hooks the wrong kind of sponge only one in a thousand times.

Barry Hoffman stated that more enforcement is needed. He has observed huge bundles of sponges staked out in waters in the Upper Keys, apparently left there for the spongers to come back and reclaim them while they bring in the day's catch. He said he is alarmed they are allowed to do that. Mr. Hoffman said he is a fishing guide and supports catch and release fishing. He also said he believes everyone who has the ability should do everything they can to preserve our natural environment. The economy of the Keys is not dependent upon sponging. He stated that he does not understand why sponging is banned in the Everglades and Biscayne National Parks, but not in the Sanctuary, and would like to see better policing of the industry.

Jorge Blanco reported that an experienced sponger can tell by the feel of the hook if the right species is hooked, and that vegetable and shark oil are used, not motor oil. Mr. Blanco stated it is easy, in clear water, for a sponger to recognize a commercial sponge.

Discussion was held, which included interaction with the members of the public in attendance, regarding where sponges are purchased, the history of the areas where sponges are taken, who owns the sponging boats (individual owners), the measuring of commercial sponges, and the many uses for commercial sponges.

Mr. Hunt continued his presentation of the sponge landing statistics. Discussion was held regarding these statistics.

Mr. Causey facilitated a review of the “Summary of Sponging Workshop, 17 October 2000” (attached). The following items were added to the summary by the Sanctuary Advisory Council:

Science Panel

- Impact of commercial sponge species on water quality (scientific quantification).
- Survey of harvest methods and quantification and impacts of each.
- Licensing—number of vessels, number of individuals (get accurate data).
- Use of different species (landing data).
- Effect on the ecology of the three different species.
- What percentage of total commercial sponge population is being removed?
- Update on sponge health in Florida Bay since 90s die-off
 - populations
 - status of species
- Investigate limited entry to fishery/grandfather clause.
- Sponge endorsement.
- Stop use of oil.
- Phase limitations.
- Feasibility of sponge mariculture.
- Normal accumulation of “rollers” (quantify).
- Reproductive physiology/Minimum size requirements/life history information.
 - e.g. spore release after harvest?
 - e.g. greater populations in cleaning areas?
- Stock assessment of entire species.
- Regrowth after harvest of sponges
 - assess current practices
 - gear modifications that would change regrowth.
- How do you define full-time?
- Impacts of fishery on local biodiversity
 - e.g. fished vs. unfished areas—compare to benthic species.
- Data on habitat utilization of commercial sponges by other species.
- Define fishery.
- Eliminate the 100 lb. recreational catch (from industry).

Citizens Panel

- Oceanside sponges have reduced in number over time.
- What controls/regulations on discharge are placed on commercial sponge boats?

Sponging Industry Panel

- Sponging does occur on both Bay and Atlantic sides.
- Gap between growth rates cited by spongers vs. scientists.
- Sponge fishery has long history in Florida Keys.

- Many uses of natural sponges should be explained.

Mr. Causey mentioned a letter from Warren Johnson who was not able to attend this meeting, regarding his position on this issue which was mailed to the SAC members. Debra Harrison moved that the Sanctuary Advisory Council not consider taking action on any positions proposed outside of SAC meetings. The motion was seconded by Don Kincaid, and passed unanimously.

Review of the sponging workshop summary continued. Items discussed included marine sanitation devices, and what organisms live in commercial sponges.

Mr. Moe and Mr. Nedimyer presented a video tape taken November 14, 2000 of the ocean bottom and shoreline in an area near the mouth of Tavernier Creek where Mr. Hawkins had claimed that spongers had destroyed the sponge growth. The video tape clearly showed the area is rich in sponge growth, including commercial sponges.

Chairman Neugent suggested the SAC consider at this point in the meeting if they feel confident that this process will result in a satisfactory recommendation. Mr. Nedimyer moved to proceed. The motion was seconded by Mr. Brownlee, and passed unanimously.

Karen Lee read two resolutions adopted by the Water Quality Joint Action Group (attached). She moved a resolution based on the Water Quality Joint Action Group recommendations. The motion was seconded by Debra Harrison, and upon vote, the motion failed, with two yes votes and eleven no votes.

Chairman Neugent talked about being in favor of limited entry in the Florida Keys. Mr. Nedimyer discussed the need for the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission to define a sponge fisherman from other fishermen, stating that we need to recommend there be a designation of a sponge collectors endorsement on the Saltwater Products License. Ms. Shaw made comments relating to if the use of fish oil were stopped, that the old method of using glass bottom buckets be considered. Discussion was held regarding limited entry with a possible grandfather clause.

Rob Bleser moved a resolution based on the resolution offered by Ms. Lee, beginning with the eighth paragraph. The motion was seconded by Fran Decker.

Discussion was held regarding concerns with completing a research program by December 31, 2001. It was decided to change this requirement to the completion of a preliminary report. Discussion was also held regarding including the suggestions of the sponge industry presented by Mimi Stafford. Discussion continued regarding different types of limited entry systems relating to whether or not limited entry would be feasible for the sponge fishery, and the designation of sponge fishing added to the Saltwater Products License.

Mr. Bleser moved to amend the resolution to include the recommendations of the sponge industry. The motion was seconded by Ms. Decker. Mr. Moe expressed his concerns

regarding the difficulty in completing a preliminary report of the sponge industry by December 31, 2001, because the subject is so enormous and broad. Mr. Fryer concurred, and suggested that compiling of information on some of the topics discussed should continue. Ms. Harrison made comments regarding the importance of having a realistic timeframe which will be acceptable to the public, and offered a motion to move forward with the resolution as amended. The motion was seconded by Mr. Brownlee. Upon roll call vote, the following resolution was adopted with seven yes votes, and five no votes:

**RESOLUTION #00-5
A RESOLUTION OF
THE FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL
REGARDING SPONGING IN THE FLORIDA KEYS**

BE IT RESOLVED that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council recommends to managers of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary that they coordinate a field and literature research program on sponges and the commercial sponging industry in the Florida Keys, with a preliminary report to be completed no later than December 31, 2001. Study topics should include, but not be limited to:

- Impact of commercial sponging on the biodiversity of the ecosystem,
- Importance of commercially targeted sponge species as habitat,
- Significance of sponges related to water quality,
- Commercial sponging methods,
- Socioeconomic analysis of the sponging industry,
- Conflicts between the commercial sponging industry and the Florida Keys residents and tourists.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, after completion of the aforementioned study, the Sanctuary Advisory Council recommends to managers of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary that they support the adoption of comprehensive sponging regulations throughout the waters of the Florida Keys.

BE IT THEREFORE FURTHER RESOLVED that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council recommends to the Sanctuary managers they recommend to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission the following management options:

- The commercial sponge fishery be a restricted entry industry,
- The recreational sponge fishery be reduced to six to ten pieces per day,
- The use of oil be restricted to fish oil only,
- The size limit be 5" diameter (across the top),
- The feasibility of reseeded areas be researched.

Ms. Shaw asked if the Council wanted to address recommending a moratorium on the issuance of new sponging licenses, based on those licenses being passed from generation

to generation, or sold. Mr. Brownlee commented, as Mr. Nedimyer reported earlier, there is no such thing as a sponge license, so the first thing we would have to do is recommend that the FWC create a sponge endorsement. Discussion followed regarding restricted species.

Mr. Nedimyer moved that the Sanctuary Advisory Council recommend that the Sanctuary Managers recommend a sponging endorsement be required to commercially harvest sponges. The motion was seconded by Mr. Brownlee. Discussion was held regarding creating a moratorium. Mr. Brownlee moved to amend the motion to include a recommendation for an immediate moratorium on the issuance of those endorsements limited to people who have landed sponges for a specified number of years. The motion was seconded by Mr. Nedimyer. Upon roll call vote, the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

**RESOLUTION #00-6
RESOLUTION OF
THE FLORIDA KEYS NATIONAL MARINE
SANCTUARY ADVISORY COUNCIL
REGARDING CREATION OF A COMMERCIAL SPONGE ENDORSEMENT IN
THE FLORIDA KEYS**

BE IT RESOLVED that the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary recommends to Sanctuary Managers that they recommend to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission the creation of a commercial sponge endorsement for the Saltwater Products Licenses and recommend an immediate moratorium on the issuance of those endorsements to be limited to people with landings in one of the previous three years.

Next Meeting

December 12, 2000, Key Colony Beach City Hall

The meeting was adjourned at 3:48 p.m.

Submitted by,

Sharyn Collette