



Deep Diving

Is spearfishing the blood sport we think it is?

BY CAPT. JOHN MCMURRAY

Yes, the photos were offensive: a couple of spearfishermen with big grins on their faces holding up two large, bloody tarpon. If that sort of thing doesn't get your blood boiling, you've probably never fly-fished for one of these incredibly strong, acrobatic, chrome-plated monsters that, once struck, leap out of the water and race off on sizzling runs. Thanks to such traits, tarpon are one of the most iconic game fish in the history of the sport. For better or worse, they have virtually no eating quality, yet have huge economic importance. From Florida to Texas, guides, hotels, restaurants, boat launches, bait sellers, tackle stores and fuel docks can live and die by the arrival of these fish. So why kill them? Simply for sport, only to have them unceremoniously rot in a dumpster? Such photos are infuriating to those of us who revere these fish, but as is often the case, there's more to the story.

The photos (and video), which were widely circulated on the Web, initially appeared on a Louisiana dive club's website. With a club named the Hell Divers, negative impressions are immediately reinforced. The tarpon were apparently speared off the coast of Louisiana, a state that has no tarpon regulations. Nor are there any regulations in federal waters, where the tarpon were likely killed. The fact that, on the Hell Divers' website, a fellow by the name of Dr. William Stein offers a \$100 reward for the largest tarpon over 110 pounds, \$100 for the smallest tarpon under 25 pounds, and a \$300 reward for a spawning-capable female tarpon does not improve the public's perception.

When I contacted Stein to discuss the issues, the picture became a bit clearer. This guy spent a full career as an oncologist, retiring in his 60s. He is an avid angler who has fly-fished for tarpon for more than 30 years in almost every country in the Western Hemisphere that has fishable tarpon stocks. And so, when he retired, he decided to go back to school to get his doctorate in estuarine fish ecology at the University of New Orleans, so that he could study what has

always been his passion and obsession — tarpon.

Stein notes that in the 1960s tarpon began to disappear from his native state of Louisiana, and no one seemed to know why. His goal as a researcher was to try to find out whether there were still substantial numbers of tarpon in Louisiana and, if not, to find out why tarpon numbers had precipitously decreased. With the help of fishing and diving clubs like the Hell Divers, the Louisiana Council of Underwater Dive Clubs and the Louisiana Tarpon Club, he was able to gather the relevant data.

His research was geared toward learning whether or not tarpon were capable of completing their entire life cycle in Louisiana. Some young-of-the-year tarpon reside along Louisiana's coast, but the assumption was that such juveniles were carried there by the Gulf of Mexico's Loop Current and then died when it got too cold for them. Stein found an abundance of such young-of-the-year tarpon in Bayou Black, almost 40 miles from the Gulf. Hundreds and hundreds of them swam in the dark, stagnant water of little ditches, where people were unlikely to look for them. Yet when the water temperature dropped to 50 degrees, the tarpon disappeared without a trace. To find out where they went, Stein enlisted the help of spearfishermen.

Hell Divers went out in the Barataria Bight west of the Mississippi River and found scores of juvenile tarpon, which meant that tarpon were capable of leaving nursery habitat in Louisiana and migrating to near-shore coastal waters to mature. The divers then began to look for overwintering adult tarpon, and they found large aggregations of them beneath the oil production platforms, in 75 to 150 feet of water. Finally, Stein sought evidence of tarpon spawning on the Louisiana coast, something that was not suspected to happen. Although such spawning has not yet been conclusively documented, some spearfishermen claim to have witnessed large "orgies" of spawning activity. Stein found that three of the tarpon that they collected had spawned within the previous 24 hours.

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KILL PERCENTAGE

So while the photos and video of speared tarpon posted online seem egregious displays of needless killing, those spearfishermen may have helped prove that Louisiana hosts its own spawning aggregate of tarpon. And, the number of tarpon killed by spearfishermen is very small. According to Stein, who documents every fish, there have been only 29 killed over the last three years. Assuming a conservative 10 percent release mortality rate (given shark predation it's likely considerably higher), the annual catch-and-release mortality for tarpon in Florida alone is between 700 and 1,000 times higher than the annual loss from spearfishing in Louisiana.

Contrary to what's being disseminated online, spearfishers aren't chomping at the bit to go out and shoot tarpon. Knowing the strength of these fish, it's pretty obvious how dangerous that is. Stein has had to offer cash rewards to get specimens. Why didn't he just get them from kill tournaments? Because, he told me, he didn't want to endorse or promote such ill-advised events that kill many more fish than spearfishers do. And why can't Stein's research be completed with photo and tagging studies? Because he needs specimens to dissect so he can examine gonads, take out the otolith bone and establish a maturity date and age of the fish and, through stable isotope analysis, see where the fish came from. He needs to clip the gills for DNA samples, examine stomach contents to see what the tarpon are eating, check for parasites, etc. He also does a blood culture to check for diseases.

RIG REVELATION

A further, unintended consequence of Stein's work may be that it proves that oil production platforms are wintering and maybe even spawning habitat for tarpon. That could someday help prevent the wanton removal of rigs, which are some of the most important habitat in the Gulf. Unfortunately,

such decommissioned platforms are currently being removed with great haste.

Just about everyone agrees that the tarpon resource has been in decline for decades, especially in Louisiana. The tarpon sport fishery is relatively small in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Texas, yet in Florida it's quite large. There's reason to believe that those fish that spend the fall and winter on the oil rigs off Louisiana spend the spring and summer in Florida, where anglers like us pound them. And the larger tarpon that fly-fishers tend to target on the flats are fecund females. The discard mortality on the tarpon that we catch may well be what's causing the stock to decline, although tarpon kill tournaments and the 2,500 kill-tags Florida distributes every year, as well as nursery habitat loss, are likely all contributing. I'm not suggesting we should stop fishing for them, but I don't think we can justifiably point our finger at spearfishers for killing a small number of fish for research, when we're likely doing most if not all of the damage.

COURSE OF ACTION

If we're serious about tarpon conservation, we need to stop putting blame where it probably doesn't belong and focus on four things. No. 1: We should be petitioning the state of Florida to stop issuing kill permits. There is no reason to kill a tarpon these days because skin-mounts are a thing of the past and world records can be confirmed with a length and girth measurement. No. 2: We should be petitioning the International Game Fish Association to stop issuing 12-pound-test world records. Using such a light tippet for tarpon is ridiculous, since the resultant extended fight kills, either through exhaustion or post-release shark predation. No. 3: We should educate/encourage fishermen in Florida to stop feeding tarpon to sharks. Do a search and you'll find more than 200 videos online showing anglers doing just that. No. 4: The Professional Tarpon Tournament Series, which sees contestants consistently overstressing fish as a result of excessive handling times and even dragging them through the water to be measured by an official, needs to go away.

The bottom line is this: As a whole, spearfishermen are conservation-minded people (let's not forget that spearfishing is probably the most selective way to fish). They tend to embrace the ocean and its creatures just like we do. The Hell Divers in particular seem to be known for their conservation practices and devotion to sustaining habitat for tarpon as well as other Gulf fish. And this kind of relationship between researchers and recreational as well as commercial fishermen is critical to the management process. It was unwise to put such "hero" photos of dead tarpon on the Web. I found them offensive, as did many others. But the fact remains that the number of fish killed for research is minimal and each one serves a scientific purpose designed to find out more about the species and ultimately protect it. Indeed, that's a good thing. 🌐

PTTS: For many reasons, the Professional Tarpon Tournament Series has been and continues to be a hot button among the angling community.

THE FACTS

29

Number of tarpon killed by spearfishing in Louisiana in the past three years

700

Percentage of tarpon lost annually in Florida compared to in Louisiana

2,500

Number of kill-tags distributed every year in Florida