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In Florida, the Seafood Becomes Less Local

By **DAMIEN CAVE**

ISLAMORADA, Fla. — The postcard Florida experience: sun, fun and plenty of local seafood. It was the latter that brought Gary and Vicki Haller from Kansas to Wahoo's here last week, with its waterfront views, toucan colors and promise of fresh food "from our docks."

"We live in cow country," Mr. Haller said. "Here we eat fish."

But the fish in his "belly buster" sandwich actually traveled farther than he did. It was Pangasius, a freshwater catfish from Vietnam. The grouper and tuna were also imports, according to Wahoo's managers. And the "local" label on the menu? It still applied, they insisted, because their distributor was down the road.

Florida, from sea to plate, just is not the seafood buffet it once was. Reeling from a record, fish-killing cold snap and tougher federal limits on what can be caught, commercial fishermen and charter-boat captains are struggling. Distributors and restaurants are relying more and more on imported seafood — some of it clearly labeled, a lot of it not.

Federal fisheries managers say that a law reauthorized by Congress in 2006 now requires them to take more aggressive action against overfishing. They cut back the legal catch for some kinds of snapper last year, and 11 species of grouper are now off limits from January through April on the Atlantic coast. It is the longest ban on record for grouper and the first to include both commercial and recreational fleets.

In a state that bills itself as "the fishing capital of the world" — with a commercial industry worth \$5.2 billion and a recreational one worth \$4.4 billion — thousands of anglers are angry.

"For a fisherman that works 12 months a year, you've just taken a third of his livelihood," said Tom Hill, whose family has owned Key Largo Fisheries since 1972. "You've also taken away the ability of someone who comes here to enjoy a local piece of fish."

Last month, several thousand fishermen from all over the country held a "sea party" protest in Washington to demand that federal fishing limits be loosened.

They were especially concerned about a series of proposals that would continue a ban on catching red snapper in federal waters, as well as close off an area from North Carolina through the Florida Keys to bottom fishing for all 73 species of fish in the “snapper grouper complex.”

The proposed area for closing has since been shrunk by the [South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council](#), but fishermen who depend on the 6,161-square-mile area of water from Savannah, Ga., to Melbourne, Fla., remain fearful of bankruptcy.

Robert Johnson, the owner of Jodie Lynn Charters in St. Augustine, Fla., estimated that if the closing plans are approved this spring, at least 600 boats and 1,800 fishing jobs would be lost — more if bait shops, marinas and dockside bars are included.

“They’re not just saying you can’t catch red snapper; if that was it, we might survive,” Mr. Johnson said. “But when you come in and say you can’t even fish where they live because you might catch one, we can’t.”

Fishermen also argue that the science driving the fisheries’ decisions comes from limited models that exaggerate declines in fish stocks and the role fishing plays.

Jerald S. Ault, a marine biologist at the [University of Miami](#) and an expert in statistical assessment of underwater populations, acknowledged that scientists were still struggling to assess the damage from coastal condominiums and houses, which have destroyed many of the mangroves where fish develop.

But he said that peer-reviewed statistical models showed clear reason for concern. Populations of most of the snapper and grouper species once so common in Florida waters are down 30 percent or more from their historic highs, according to recent estimates.

Keeping hooks and nets out of the water is simply the clearest path to improvement, Mr. Ault said. He noted that while the state’s commercial fleet had declined by 11 percent since the 1960s, to about 24,000 registered vessels, the number of recreational fishing vessels had soared to 944,000 in 2009, up from 128,000, in 1964.

“Unfortunately,” he said of today’s fishermen, “certain people have to pay a price for other people not paying attention to the resource.”

The result — and the disconnect between marketing materials and reality — is evident not just on restaurant menus, but at fish houses like Mr. Hill’s.

Sitting on the edge of a marina, it is an open warehouse with melting ice on concrete floors, brochures bragging about Florida fish and very little actual fish from Florida. Workers in white coats were busy on a recent morning cutting snapper flown in from Mexico, and on the blue sign for shoppers, nearly everything came from far away.

Mr. Hill, 59, a serious-sounding man in a flowered shirt, ran down the list. The [salmon](#) was from Norway. The yellowfin tuna? Frozen, from Ecuador. And the dolphin, or mahi mahi? Ecuador as well, Mr. Hill said, adding that in about a month, it could be caught locally.

It was a similar scene in the coolers at Independent Seafood in West Palm Beach, where the salmon came from Scotland and the largest crates stamped Florida held frogs' legs and alligator meat. The food from Independent Seafood will end up on white tablecloths at some of the area's fanciest restaurants, from South Beach to Palm Beach. But most of it will have come from abroad.

"We're sourcing stuff all over the world," said Mike Molina, a co-owner. "If you have product that's not readily available all the time, the restaurants don't put them on the menu."

Does it matter? Some say no. "It's still good fish," said Luis Garcia, the owner of Garcia's, a seafood restaurant on the Miami River that buys its grouper from Mexico.

But others, like Doug Gregory, a marine biologist with the [University of Florida](#), say that overall quality has decreased because of looser regulations in other countries and longer shipping times — if you can even believe what the menu says.

Since 2006, grouper prices have climbed, and it has become one of the most commonly misrepresented [food items](#) on Florida menus, with 241 complaints investigated by state inspectors. Even the Eatz Capital Cafe a floor below the Florida Department of Agriculture was found in 2007 to have been selling a "catch of the day" that was supposedly grouper. In fact, it was catfish.

Mr. Gregory said he had almost stopped eating seafood because of the problems. Others, like the Hallers from Kansas, may feel differently. When told of his fish sandwich's provenance, at first Mr. Haller was appalled.

"Well that's not good," he said. Then he took a bite.

"It's pretty good fish," he added. And at least he was still in Florida.