

## Printed in: *Citrus County Chronicle(FL)*, Wednesday July 10, 1985

### Vindictive "leaders" will not find the answers to fisheries debate.

By: Russ Fee

The date was Nov. 1, 1981. I remember it well because it was the last time I fished the surf at Cape Hatteras, N.C. and the first time I had ever seen back-to-back demonstrations of the damage that can be wrought to fish by sportfishing hook-and-liners and commercial netters, alike.

It was the first long-planned fishing trip from which I returned more troubled and distracted than before I had left. It was the first time in a long sportfishing history that my thought echoed Shakespeare's in *Romeo and Juliet*, "A plague on both your houses!"

On that Monday my three companions and I arrived at Cape Point at the crack of dawn expecting to find at least one choice spot on the beach where a spit of sand points like a finger eastward into the boiling surf toward that infamous Diamond Shoals.

We didn't know that we would be competing for position with participants in the 24th Annual Invitational Inter-Club Surf Fishing Tournament that is sponsored by the Cape Hatteras Anglers' Club. Four-wheel drive vehicles were lined up for miles along the beach and a thousand surf rods were stuck in a thousand sand spikes and bumper-mounted rod holders.

It did not begin as a good fishing day. From dawn, when only one stray, 40-pound redfish was hauled ashore, until 2p.m., even the sea birds refused to search the waves for food. And then, suddenly - inexplicably - all hell broke loose.

The blues began to blitz that beach and what a blitz it was! From a three-foot surf, clouds of porgies and other baitfish leaped and rained onto the beach in their frenzy to escape the carnage they heard behind them.

Hundreds of rods were unlimbered, hundreds of wadered anglers walked into the surf and hurled spoons and jigs and baited hooks into the boiling, frenzied action before them. And for two hours rods bent, lines were crossed and tangled, lures and fish were lost and the frenzy on the beach was almost as great as in the sea.

It ended as suddenly as it had begun. The fish were there and then they were gone - just like that - and 10 to 30-pound bluefish were stacked like cordwood along a mile of sand.

Those fish lay on that hot beach another two hours before pickup trucks came to haul them away to the scales and the public dump - a whole school of adult, breeding blues torn from their environment in the name of sportfishing, fame and money.

### **The Commercials Enter the Scene**

The next day a similar blitz of blues occurred on Ocracoke Island, just to the south. Along the beaches of Hatteras Island it was quiet. There was no surf. There was no fishing and a haze hung over the water and land.

It was an almost mystical day, eerie and unreal until about noon when two light aircraft flew along the Avon town beach, circled for a half hour and departed. Three hours later the purse seiners arrived.

There were two mother ships each bearing two smaller craft to deploy the sets. With their arrival the spotter planes reappeared. During what remained of daylight that day and for the next two days those ships seined the waters from Buxton northward to Salvo - about half the length of Hatteras Island - for the huge schools of porgy that had attracted the bluefish from their oceanic lairs.

And for the rest of that week, so far as I was able to learn, not another fish was caught

along that shoreline. I cannot believe that only porgy were in those nets. The bycatch of juvenile bluefish, sharks, redfish and others must have been immense for they left behind them a biological desert.

### **Hopes Destroyed**

The memory of that experience on the beaches of North Carolina's outer banks returned to me last week as I attended a meeting of the Marine Recreational Fishing Steering Committee of the National Marine Fishery Service's southeast region.

Present for the two-day affair for national policy reasons was William Gordon, assistant administrator for fisheries of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration. Jack Brawner, director of NMFS' southeast region, focused on management policy in the south Atlantic, the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. It was Brawner who created the committee to provide a communication link with marine recreational fishermen.

Also present as committee members were Walter Fondren, Texas millionaire, founder of the Gulf Coast Conservation Association and member of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council; and Alex Jernigan, Florida member of the Gulf Council and chairman of the board of the Florida Conservation Association.

I mention Fondren and Jernigan (there were others present of equal importance) because they are conceived to be the anointed leaders of the saltwater fishing constituencies of Texas and Florida.

As you have read in this space before, I have held out high hopes for the Florida Conservation Association as a long sought voice of reason and influence that would bring legitimacy and credibility to the case that must be made for the state's sportfishing industry. I have expressed the hope that FCA would speak in a knowledgeable and reasoned way in the policy councils of this state.

Those hopes have been dashed. Fondren proved to be a voice of condemnation, rather than of moderation. He was obsessed with what he views as the evil inherent in the country's commercial fishing industry, in general, and netters, in particular. He admits to no similar excesses on the part of recreational anglers.

He granted not an iota of credit to Brawner for his efforts to communicate with the marine recreational fishing community of the southeast, nor did he appear to see in the presence of Gordon a portent of the growing realization at the national policy-making level of the importance of recreational fishing.

And Jernigan, who is Fondren's Florida emissary and who was once chairman of the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (and so should have some touch with reality) topped his mentor by proposing that all finfish that swim in the Gulf of Mexico, except for menhaden, be given gamefish status and removed from commerce.

It was not the audacity of the proposal that disappointed me; it was its unfairness. It was what it revealed about the man and, through him, the likely future policies of the Florida Conservation Association.

### **Statesmen Needed**

We desperately need statesmen; we have acquired labor leaders. The marine resources we must share with each other need managers with vision and vigor and fairness. Instead, if Fondren and Jernigan are any indication, their future is likely to be dominated by men with historical myopia who are motivated by vindictiveness.

We need philosophers who understand that the future of our marine resources rests with resurrection of habitat and the halting of the environmental pollution and contamination that is

turning our estuaries into leprosariums and our food fish into poison vectors.

Instead, we get political hacks - ward heelers, if you will - who play the game for short term stakes and the thrill of combat.

I recall Cape Hatteras in November 1981 and I say "A plague on both your houses." When uncompromising men like these represent fishing industries and not the resources on which they rely, fish and fishing may die slowly, but they will surely die.

###