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Feuding While the Fish Flicker Out

By Ted Williams

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Marine Protected Areas, traditional tools for conserving fish and other ocean resources, are not a new idea. America has about 300 of them, and we need more.

In the South Atlantic, for example, the MPA known as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary has made it possible to zone jet-skis out of flats important to sport fishermen and to protect coral reefs and their fauna from commercial collectors.

This stunning victory was accomplished by a politically unstoppable alliance of sportsmen and environmentalists. But now the two groups are engaged in a war about marine protected areas, spawned by the former's paranoia and the latter's political ineptitude. The casualties are the fish stocks both sides seek to save.

Leading the charge against all MPAs in the Southeast is Karl Wickstrom, publisher of Florida Sportsman magazine. "The groups pushing MPAs have been nowhere on the scene for the major reforms we've accomplished, such as the Florida gillnet ban, (fish) trap prohibitions, longline closures and many species limits," he writes, accurately enough.

But then, like so many angling activists, he lapses into such preposterous claims as: "There are no MPAs in the world of any size that have worked."

Likewise, the normally rational and effective Coastal Conservation Association loses it when the subject gets to MPAs. In one screed to members, CCA president David Cummins warns of "radical environmentalists ... conspiring with federal bureaucrats to take away our freedom to fish." Then he asks for money.

The letter alienated allies, including the Norcross Wildlife Foundation, a major funder of the CCA, which promptly suspended all support.

Yet elements of the environmental community and the fish-management establishment have behaved in ways that make it easy to forgive, if not excuse, Wickstrom and Cummins.

Three years ago the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council moved to set up a no-fishing MPA in an area where reef fish such as groupers, snappers and amberjacks spawn. Such a sanctuary made sense for spawning aggregations that are highly vulnerable to commercial and sport fishing.

What didn't make sense was a fishing ban for abundant surface feeders like dolphin and king mackerel that shot in and out of the proposed MPA high above the reefs. Accordingly, the council assured all hands that the ban would apply to just reef fish. So the CCA endorsed the protected area and pushed hard for it. Then, after public testimony, the council announced that it would prohibit surface fishing, too.

The CCA sued, eventually winning a settlement in which surface fishing was reinstated, but not before generating lots of hard feelings and bad publicity for protected areas.

Two years ago the Natural Resources Defense Council hosted a two-day bull session in which 15 marine scientists hatched an MPA wish list. Then, with no public outreach, the NRDC distributed a map of the proposed protected areas.

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There was no word about activities that might be banned, but the NRDC's Web site defines MPAs as areas which "restrict or prohibit fishing" (even though most do no such thing).

The map—which carved a huge swath through mid-Atlantic fishing hot spots, including offshore waters near Cape Hatteras, N.C.—horrified the sport-fishing community.

Stung by bad press, the NRDC is now making a real effort to communicate with sportsmen, but the Ocean Conservancy, which doesn't know fish or fishermen, claims to know what's best for both.

Particularly misguided is the conservancy's "ocean wilderness" campaign. For 40 years environmentalists have attempted to convince sportsmen that wilderness is not a plot by anti-blood-sport fanatics, that hunting and fishing are legal in wilderness, in fact enhanced by wilderness.

But in "ocean wilderness," as defined by the conservancy, fishing (even catch-and-release fishing) is banned, while far more intrusive recreation, such as skin diving and surfing, is permitted. As Dr. Carl Safina, head of the Blue Ocean Institute and a leading advocate of protected areas, puts it: "The environmental community's whole effort to sell MPAs has been a public-relations blunder completely unmatched in its history."

Meanwhile, under a politicized federal-state management system that responds first to ever-ravenous commercial fishermen and second to science, fish stocks continue to fizzle out. <.p>

The resurrection of redfish along the Southeast and Gulf coasts is hailed as America's most spectacular fish-management triumph. But it is just another illustration of what fishing wags call the First Maxim of Fish Management, i.e., we don't manage a stock until we have nearly wiped it out.

Marine Protected Areas are not a substitute for proactive, scientific management; but the right kind of MPAs, designed and sponsored by sportsmen and environmentalists, could help.