

FWC surveys on shark fishing changes

By Rick Catlin
Islander Reporter

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's public forum in Sarasota June 23 drew a number of anglers and fishing guides, many of whom disagreed with an FWC proposal to add great hammerheads and tiger sharks to the banned fishing list.

FWC division of fisheries management analyst Aaron Poday opened the forum by saying the FWC wanted public input statewide on three questions before implementing any new regulations:

- Should great hammerhead and tiger sharks be added to the list of shark species prohibited from harvest?
- Should the FWC ban chumming from shore or within 100 feet of a public beach?
- Should the FWC require the use of non-offset, non-stainless steel circle hooks when using natural bait to target, harvest or possess any shark, or just when catching a shark species that does not have a minimum length requirement?

At present, the FWC requires sharks not on the protected list, such as a great hammerhead, bonnethead, bull or tiger, to be a minimum of 54 inches long for harvesting.

Poday prefaced the forum by saying Florida shark populations are dwindling, particularly the great hammerhead and tiger shark numbers. And many local governments have asked the FWC to ban chumming for sharks, or any fish, from public beaches. The input from the statewide meetings will be used to make final recommendations to the FWC, he said.

But Capt. Bill Goldschmitt of Sarasota didn't accept that the FWC is impartial by getting comments first before making any recommendations. It's a done deal, he alleged.

"The agenda is to prohibit shark fishing in the United States," Goldschmitt claimed.

He said he was a commercial fisherman for 25 years before being put out of business, attends many shark-fishing tournaments and runs his own shark tournament.

There are plenty of sharks in Florida waters, he said, but data showing shark populations increasing is never



Bill Goldschmitt, left, calls himself the "Sharkman of Cortez" and has a self-published book by that title.

published because "this would go against the agenda" of the anti-fishing animal rights groups, Goldschmitt claimed.

"There is no credible evidence that sharks are over-fished" in U.S. waters, he said. If the FWC adds hammerheads and tiger sharks to its prohibited fishing list, Goldschmitt said he has a group of anglers ready to sue the FWC.

Although only Goldschmitt discussed legal action, some boat captains agreed there is an anti-fishing agenda.

Capt. Shawn Paxton said many anglers didn't bother to come because "the FWC does not take into account the word of experienced people" he claimed and this is an "effort to advance an anti-fishing agenda."

Paxton said he wants "practical conservation methods," not "unenforceable laws" such as a ban on chumming from shore or a ban on hammerhead fishing.

"We practice catch and release," Paxton said, and he and his brother don't need a law to tell them to do that. The practice should be encouraged throughout the state, but not mandated for hammerheads and tiger sharks, he said.

Paxton agreed that the use of a circle hook is "very efficient," to release a fish, but a lot of public education is needed on how to safely remove a circle hook from a shark, or any fish, without serious injury to the fish.

"People are trying circle hooks and finding they work. Don't throw a wet blanket on what's working by rushing in a law. Let people learn on their own."

Brooks Paxton, Shawn's brother, said a ban on chumming from shore is a waste of money, time and paper.

"It's not practical. It's an unneeded and unenforceable law, and I don't know anyone who chums from shore. And my brother and I have shark fished from shore for 20 years."

Many anglers and captains commented that public education is needed on how to release a fish caught on a circle hook.

Robert Lavewa, who said he owned an area bait and tackle store for 30 years, said the easiest way to release a shark from a circle hook is to use a pair of wire cutters and cut the lead or the line, leaving the hook in the shark's mouth. Digging out the circle hook improperly will "damage the shark," and it will die when released.

"You've got a catch-and-release program that really is catch and kill," he said.

Additionally, some circle hooks cost up to \$25, Lavewa said, and the average person will wreck the shark's jaw trying to retrieve that \$25 hook. "In fact, I've seen guys wreck a fish jaw for a 25-cent hook."

Other anglers agreed on the difficulty of removing a circle hook, and a few said a j-hook is much easier to remove from a shark's jaw.

There was consensus among the anglers that a ban on shore chumming was unnecessary. Chumming from shore doesn't even work, one angler said.

Poday acknowledged that shark fishing is a popular sport in Florida, and the FWC is not trying to ban shark fishing. The FWC is trying to find a balance to ensure the continued survival of great hammerheads and tiger sharks, but not by eliminating sport fishing.

The catch-and-release program and use of circle hooks are proposals that might solve those issues.

After the meeting, Poday said he believes that whatever is finally adopted by the FWC must include public education on catch and release, circle hooks, and conservation of Florida's shark population.

The recommendations from the FWC's division of fisheries management will be presented to the FWC in September at a public meeting of the commission, but no final action will be taken at that time.