

James C. Thomas

Joint Committee on Natural Resources and Committee on Small Business

Oversight Hearing on:

“Restricted Access to Biscayne National Park and Implications for Fishermen, Small Businesses, the Local Economy and Environment”

Monday, August 3, 2015 at 10:00 AM

Chairman Bishop, Representative Beyer and members of the committee, my name is James Thomas, better known as “Jimbo” and I am a USCG licensed, charter/for-hire fishing guide operating a 42’ sportfishing vessel out of Miamarina at Bayside here in Miami. I also hold state and federal, commercial licenses for snapper, grouper and pelagic species and a commercial dive endorsement for harvest of spiny lobster. I have been self-employed as a fishing guide and commercial fishermen for the past 35 years after graduating from Palmetto High School here in Miami.

The Biscayne National Park’s General and Fisheries Management Plans would have profound, negative impacts on one of the largest charter fishing fleets anywhere in the nation. The proposed Special Management Zone would deny access to more than 10,000 acres of prime fishing territory for snapper, grouper and other bottom dwellers and curtail trolling activity to one of the more productive sailfish areas in what we locally call “sailfish alley.” The big question for me and most fishermen I have talked to is “Why?”.

Fish stocks throughout park waters are in excellent condition and that statement is supported by NOAA stock assessments conducted over the past three to five years giving high marks to all of the key indicator species such as black, red and gag grouper, as well as mutton, yellowtail and mangrove snapper. I really don’t understand why the findings of the National Park Service conflict so dramatically with those of NOAA and the National Science Centers, one of which is located right here in Miami, charged with assessing the status of these species. And I’m not certain that the National Park Service has the staffing and scientific support to make such determinations. National Park Service statements also conflict significantly with my on the water experience with more than 250 fishing days annually and much of it in Biscayne National Park.

The park plans have been under development for an extraordinarily long time. First conceived back in 2000 - 2001, the process has been excruciatingly slow and cumbersome. I know Working Groups developed to work with park managers on reasonable solutions to common problems have not met for more than 12 years. I would hate to think the science they are using to evaluate the health of fish stocks, corals, seagrasses and support their decision making is also that old.

As a holder of a commercial diver permit for spiny lobster, when my brother Rick and I are not on the water, we are under it. I can safely say we have underwater experience over most every area in the park. Overall, the park is in excellent condition. Yes, we see instances of coral bleaching, trampled and damaged corals in areas of high user interaction especially around the more sensitive areas where mooring buoys are present, but overall the health of seagrasses and corals has remained consistent over the years and actually has improved recently since the impact of the 2010 cold weather spell that lingered over South Florida and the Keys.

Closing a large portion of the reef tract and the plan to eliminate commercial fishing would have a major impact on my livelihood. The proposed closed area is a popular spot for catching snapper and grouper, none of which need protecting according to those recent stock assessments. The same holds true for commercial harvest primarily of spiny lobster and stone crab. Almost half of Biscayne National Park is a lobster sanctuary where these animals flourish. However due to their mating habits and the social nature of the animals, they move frequently and ultimately are harvested by recreational or commercial fishermen. If a nuclear reactor and one of the largest landfills in the State of Florida located on the edge of that sanctuary hasn't caused their demise, I'm not too concerned that we will. In fact Florida Power and Light has just sought regulatory authority to build two additional reactors in the same location.

And although I commercially dive for lobster, I can tell you from my underwater experience that commercial spiny lobster and stone crab trap fishermen do not intentionally place their gear on corals. Traps are far too costly to risk entanglement with coral bottom and also less productive on corals and there are both state and federal statutes providing for stiff fines for trapping on live bottom. Hurricanes and tropical storms will move trap gear but we have not had either since Hurricane Wilma in 2005.

To summarize this, spending five or more days per week in Biscayne National Park fishing/diving, I fail to see the problems being identified in Biscayne National Park as being widespread and warranting widespread closures. Size limits, bag limits, spawning closures (if warranted), increased law enforcement and other management tools are sufficient to address problem areas within Biscayne National Park. Large scale closures are unwarranted, unjustified and lack scientific support for their implementation.

Chairman Bishop, Representative Beyer and members of the committee, thank you for your interest and assistance in addressing both the Fisheries Management Plan and the General Management Plan for Biscayne National Park. I'd also like to thank Representatives Carlos Curbelo, Mario Diaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen for supporting our concerns and defending our livelihoods.

Sincerely,

s/James C. (Jimbo) Thomas

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