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Testimony of Randolph W. Smith
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Before the House Committee on Natural Resources and
the House Committee on Small Business
"Joint Oversight Hearing"

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Chairman Bishop, Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Grijalva, Ranking Member Velazquez, and members of the committees – thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for the hearing titled, “Restricted Access at Biscayne National Park and Implications for Fishermen, Small Businesses, the Local Economy and Environment.”

Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Randolph W. Smith, better known as Bouncer. I've been fishing in Biscayne National Park for almost my entire life. I started working full time on party boats and charter boats the summer of 1966. I got my captains license in March of 1968 and started running charter boats the next day. These boats entertain the local population and mostly visitors from around the world by helping these people catch fish. I entertain these groups with over 400 trips per year.

Over the years I have been honored by the Miami Beach Rod and Reel Club and South Florida Fishing Club with their conservation awards. The Met Fishing Tournament honored me with their Henry Hyman Award for contributions to recreational fishing in south Florida. I was the Billfish Foundation Captain of the Year in 1999. In 2014 I was inducted into the International Game Fish Association “Legendary Captains and Crews” one of only 40 inductees. This year I have been chosen to receive the Billfish Foundation “John Rybovich Lifetime Achievement Award”.

I have contributed to the decline of reef fish in south Florida for over 50 years. 50 years ago we caught big groupers at will. We caught 10 to 20 pound mutton snappers in great numbers. We caught 6 pound yellowtail snapper 1 mile off South Beach. “Pork chop”, 11/2 pound white grunts and barracudas were found in big schools. Today we work for days to catch a 10 pound grouper for our guest. We carried a satellite tag for Nova Southeastern University for two months looking for a barracuda to plant it on. We had to give it back, as we failed to find a single barracuda. I never intended or would believe we could wipe out these marine treasures, but we have depleted many of these species to next to none. Every day my charter guest, my crew and myself go out trying to find the last big grouper or snapper off Miami Dade County. So do 5 to 500 other boats.

Our Florida Wildlife Commission is supposed to protect the future of our fisheries. A room full of recreational fishermen, charter fishing guides and divers begged for better protection for mutton snappers, now depleted from a targeted -10 pound average fish, to an occasional 3 pound catch. Over two years later, the Commission has taken no action. Barracuda are in a severe over fishing collapse. Our Florida Wildlife Commission talks of 20 fish bag limits. We can't catch 20 in a month! It is clear that someone needs to do something to protect our fisheries in Biscayne. Because the FWC won't act, the National Park Service has stepped forward.

I am a small business owner. My business depends on catching fish. Some offshore species are holding their own. Most inshore species are holding their own or improving because of good management. But reef fish are in big trouble. Bag and size limits aren't working because snapper, grouper, grunts, hogfish and barracuda suffer from barotrauma when brought to the surface from as little as 20 feet down. Gases throughout the fish expand as the fish experiences declining atmospheric pressure. It expands blood vessels, organs and eyes to paralyzing levels. Some fish will survive, but many die even if they are released. Only a marine reserve will prevent these problems from impacting these valuable fish.

For years I have thought that the fact that there was no place for a big black grouper to swim and live unmolested was a tragedy and I am becoming concerned about the future of my business. A few years ago, I travelled to France to attend a meeting on marine reserves and research showing the success of marine reserve around the world. I learned they are the most viable way to save our reef fish communities.

I believed so strongly in the concept of marine reserves that I worked with Dr. Marty Arostegui and Gil Muratori to create a presentation showing their benefits. For over a year, we have been giving this presentation to local fishing clubs and community groups to try to educate other fishermen about how marine reserves can help prevent the full collapse of fishing here in South Florida. Without marine reserves and other actions to protect reef fish, our businesses and the future of fishing in Biscayne and South Florida are in trouble.

My favorite comparison of Biscayne National Park is to Yellowstone National Park. This was our first National Park and it stopped hunting in a big area of Wyoming in order to protect the species that lived there. Today millions of people go there to see nature at its best. I have been there six times in the last 15 years. Elk, buffalo, deer, bears, wolves and many more roam the area without fear of being hunted by man. The elk hang out right among the hotels. The park and local businesses thrive, the surrounding area has whole communities to cater to tourism and hunting outside the park is world class.

Yes, there are groups who want no hunting anywhere. And yes there are groups who want no fishing on any reef, or any lake, or any ocean. That is not what we are addressing today. We are addressing the closure of a little over 16 square miles of reef in a relatively remote area of one of America's largest marine national parks.

This 16 square miles will offer a black grouper a chance to grow to 50 or 75 pounds, laying millions of eggs every spawning season. This reserve may allow several males to survive to fertilize these eggs, producing a variety of gene pool to produce a better future for grouper survival. These free floating eggs will spread along all the reefs of the southeastern United States to produce more black grouper throughout their range. As time goes on, there will be too many black grouper for their territorial needs and many will move out of the reserve to treat anglers to an angling treat. The same will happen with many reef species.

A major tackle company has a leader who lost the right to fish in his back yard to a marine reserve. So he talks to all the tackle shop owners about how he lost his favorite fishing hole to marine reserves. The tackle shop owners, who buy ads in magazines tell the editors how much bad they have heard about marine reserves and a storm of negative talk arises about marine reserves explodes.

We gave up hunting in many National Parks. We gave up fishing around the cruise ship docks and inside Miami Beach Marina, but good hunting and fishing opportunities still exist in other

places. Today we are talking about investing in the future of reef fishing by giving up a small area of our coastal reefs to no fishing. We will be able to take our kids to this area and show them a huge grouper, a cloud of grunts and the rest of a healthy reef. We need this marine reserve and the ability to make other scientifically sound moves to protect the future of fishing and our businesses in South Florida.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony.