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ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY: IMPACTS ON NATURAL-RESOURCE-BASED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Clean air, clean water and clean land policies, if totally implemented, would have dramatic positive impacts on the economic development of the fishing industry. The clean water policy alone would provide the opportunity for declining fish populations to rebuild. In the southeastern United States, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, 85 percent of the fish species sought by commercial fishermen are estuarine dependent. Estuaries' health determines fisheries' fate. At this point in time, construction near wetlands, storm water runoff, nonfunctioning septic tanks and pollution associated with heavy industry as well as municipal wastes decide the fate of most marine critters.

Some so called "environmental policies" really are not environment related at all. For instance, some conservation associations say banning the commercial harvest of redfish was a good "environmental policy." We view the decision to reserve the redfish resource solely for sportfishermen as a political "taking" decision having nothing whatsoever to do with the environment or conservation. Sportfishermen took the resource away from non-boating consumers. It is as simple as that.

An extreme example of what some people call "environmental policy" is a Florida conservation association's constitutional amendment petition drive to ban *all* gill nets in Florida waters and ban all other net types with more than 500 square feet of webbing. They call this an "environmental effort." The Audubon Society and several other "eco-groups" have endorsed this petition in the name of "conservation." This is not an environmental question. The sportfishing organization merely wants all the fish in the water reserved for the sportfishing angler. These are two examples of what some groups refer to as "environmental policy" but which we strongly argue have nothing to do with the environment or conservation. These types of political situations only decide "*who gets the fish.*" An honest public policy should be developed making sure all citizens have a reasonable and affordable opportunity to share in the commonly-owned marine resources and not just those who have boats, motors and who live near, or can drive to, the shore.

On the other hand, a very true environmental policy is that which has been expressed in the Endangered Species Act. This act requires that species listed as threatened or endangered be protected from harm. Several species of marine turtle, i.e., green, ridley, leather and hawksbill, have been listed as endangered and the loggerhead turtle has been listed as threatened. Our organization was on the cutting edge of the development of turtle excluder devices (TEDs) and by voting to comply with the law in a vigorous fashion and convince the rest of the shrimp industry to do likewise. This caused controversy within the industry and a radical group in Louisiana formed with the sole purpose of *not* using turtle excluder devices. Many of our boat members aligned with Louisiana on this issue and our membership dropped.

As an indication of our success in complying with the law, the Florida shrimp industry has achieved a 99 percent compliance rate in the use of TEDs and National Marine Fisheries Service has reported the turtle stranding in Florida from offshore shrimp trawling has been reduced by 90 percent. We modified our shrimping operations at our own expense by purchasing TEDs by cutting big holes in our nets to let the turtles pass through. At the same time, we have not seen our shrimp landings reduced to the point that shrimping is no longer profitable. TEDs have cost us money. We have lost shrimp production. But the law is the law and until it is changed we will comply with it.

Water quality is very important to the seafood industry. A large oyster industry in Apalachicola, Florida, keeps water quality on the front burner in several agencies. We believe if we could bring all Florida water quality up to the standards required for oyster harvesting, we could assure a highly productive and extremely valuable legacy for future generations. We believe our goal to keep Apalachicola Bay, Cedar Key and other areas open to oyster harvesting is the main defense available to prevent our natural resources from being depleted in the name of coastal development projects. While high rise resorts and golf courses tend to make everything look green and plush on site, they invariably lead to water degradation and to the loss of lifestyles and cultures common to many rural Florida coastal areas.

A strong environmental policy assuring excellent water quality is a must. Without one the seafood producing industry will not survive many more decades.

True environmental policies have a very positive impact on commercial fishing. If a certain species of fish has declined in individual size and cumulative pounds for several fishing seasons, it is reasonable to conclude this particular species is over-fished and in need of a sound environmental policy that will bring the population back to equilibrium.

However, with government regulation today it seems anytime a species shows decline, the “environmental policy” is to close down commercial seafood production and blame that sector for over-harvesting.

For instance, when the regulators wanted to develop a management plan for king mackerel, they decided nets were the culprits and should be curtailed. When the landing statistics came to the fishery management council, however, they showed the recreational fishermen had historically taken 68 percent of the total and the commercial fishery (both net and hook and line) harvested the other 38 percent. Going deeper into the 38% commercial catch, only 47 percent of the 38 percent came from nets. In other words, less than 20 percent of the total king mackerel harvest was being caught by nets but nets were blamed and are still blamed for the decline in the king mackerel fishery. Federal and state statistics show 81 percent of all the king mackerel killed were killed by hook and line fishing. Just another example of who gets the fish. *Who gets the fish* will never be an “environmental policy.”

In the fish wars, “perception is reality.” Some sportfishing groups have convinced some legitimate environmental groups “that in order to save the fish in the sea, commercial fishing must be banned.” One of the most cruel tactics being used in Florida is to show pictures to people of large foreign factory ships with dolphins in their nets and say, “We have to ban the nets in Florida to save these poor dolphins.” There has never been a factory ship in Florida waters or off the coast of Florida and there never will be. We do not have the fishery biomass required for such harvesting techniques. However, many Florida residents believe this propaganda when they read it in sporting magazines and outdoor writers’ columns.

Another vicious tactic is to show a picture of a porpoise in a net somewhere in the world and ask unsuspecting petition signers, “Don’t you want to stop this slaughter?”

Please believe me, Flipper is not in danger from Florida’s fishing nets. If Flipper has an enemy, it is turbo-charged speed boats, jet skis, pollution and theme parks. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection reports that thirty-five porpoises died in captivity from 1986 to 1992 while only seven porpoise deaths were remotely tied to commercial fishing operations during the same time period.

I make these remarks because few people are in a position to know all the nuances of any controversy and thirty years of involvement with marine harvesters of fish and shellfish has filled my database.

Another example of what I call “mythinformation” are news releases written by one particularly mean-spirited group and sent to all

Florida newspapers telling them shrimp trawlers are killing thousands of juvenile red snappers in their shrimp nets.

This is somewhat true for the brown shrimp fishery off the Texas coast during a certain part of the year, but absolutely false as it pertains to Florida shrimpers. For a shrimp vessel to catch a red snapper off Florida it would have to drag on rocks that would tear up the nylon nets. But the perception in the mind of the general public is that Florida shrimp trawlers are killing red snapper. This is a false statement and the people making it know it is propaganda.

So, what does all this have to do with the topic of how environmental policy impacts resource-based economic development? Or whose dollar bill is the biggest? Everything.

If the militant angler clubs can get the media to mold public opinion, which in turn is then used as the basis for an environmental policy that reserves the marine natural resources for sports anglers, then the anglers will have succeeded in totally destroying a food producing industry, savaging an entire culture and, at the same time, eliminating all commercial fishing. If the industry is eliminated, then the economic impacts to commercial fishing that might have been used to prevent unbridled coastal wetland development in order to produce a better environment will have been destroyed. That is certainly a big dollar bill.

The sad part about this entire scenario is that there really are available resources for both commercial and sport fishing. Our credo is to share the fishery resources while the anti-seafood groups seem to want all the fish.

Environmental impacts on the commercial fishing industry can be 1) excellent, 2) tolerable, or 3) absolute destruction:

1. Clean water, clean air and clean land are *excellent* for the seafood industry.
2. Turtle excluders, by-catch excluders, closed seasons, quotas and trip limits are *tolerable* and sometimes necessary.
3. Net ban petitions and federal and state regulations based on faulty science are *absolute destruction*.

The greatest scam that has taken place in the debate between the commercial fishing industry and the sport fishing industry is that a relatively few businessmen from some of America's largest energy and real estate development companies have put up enough dollars to convince some honest conservationists and environmentalists that destroying the commercial fishing industry is environmentally sound, aesthetically pleasing and politically correct. How about those "buzz words"? In reality it will only pave the way for some of these men to build more marinas, golf courses and very expensive houses in the coastal areas of Florida.

Conversely, this proposed corporate takeover of the marine resources under the banner of environmentalism offers a good opportunity to expose the real destroyers of the wetlands and fisheries for what they really are. We have accepted that challenge and opportunity.

Conclusion

Sound Environmental Policy: Positive Impacts

- Provides clean water for maximum fisheries habitat.
- Provides ecosystem management which is more effective than species management.
- Provides for fewer dredged and filled wetlands which equals more marine life.
- Provides opportunity to rebuild any declining fish stocks.
- Provides opportunity to save endangered species.
- Provides opportunity to protect marine mammals that are in need.
- Provides opportunity to leave our planet better than we found it.

Sound Environmental Policy: Negative Aspects

- Short-term economic losses in implementing new requirements.
- Some short-term social disruption among some citizens.

Public policy issues of intensity to be re-examined include: flawed science, netting ban, allocation of resources among user groups, water quality, endangered species, marine mammal protection, coastal zone use, turtle excluder devices, by-catch reduction devices, and transfer of marine resource management to game and fish commission.

The elimination of commercial fishing will have monumental social and economic costs. Some communities will face bankruptcy. County, state and federal assistance programs will be strained beyond their ability. The very real possibilities of disrupted families, divorces, spouse abuse and loss of life do exist. It will be difficult when an entire socioeconomic group is told they can no longer have a job in their chosen profession harvesting fish for others because another group wants to use the fish for recreation and that group had enough wealth and political clout to shut down commercial seafood production in state and federal waters.

There needs to be a well-thought-out public policy toward the production of food from the sea. The policymakers at all levels of government must take a proactive stance in favor of America's first industry if it is to survive the 1990s here in Florida as well as in the other southeastern states.