

New Catch Limits For Sports Fishermen

In the midst of global fears about food security and the total depletion of marine resources came a government announcement to make good on a promise to impose stricter limits of fisheries products caught by sport fishermen.

The excessive amounts caught in this manner has been partially blamed for the over-fishing of certain species and the hemorrhage of substantial amounts of potential revenue.

The implementation date of the new limits is January 1, 2007, according to Agriculture and Marine Resources Minister Leslie Miller.

The rules currently allow for six crawfish per person, but that will be changed to six per vessel. Similarly, sports fishermen will no longer be allowed to catch conch at all in Bahamian waters.

The catch limits for demersal fish - groupers and snappers, etc. - will be changed from 20 lbs per person to 20 lbs per vessel and from a total of six pelagic species - dolphins, kingfish, wahoo, tuna, - per person to six per vessel.

The Minister added that all fish retained must be kept with the head and tail intact while aboard the vessel or transported by air. This he said, would assist in the identification process during inspection.

But the Minister also pointed out that there would be exceptions to the catch limits for persons participating in fishing tournaments, in which the approved rules set different guidelines.

Minister Miller stressed that all marinas throughout the country would be required to have the new regulations posted in a conspicuous area.

"These measures are made to limit the abuse of Bahamian resources and should have little impact on the many visitors who visit for the purpose of sport fishing and recreation," Minister Miller said.

"Such persons are accustomed to fishing within limits and are willing to return a fish to the sea to allow it to grow, reproduce and perhaps be caught again."

The new sport fishing regulations come at a time when international reports indicate that the fisheries resources of the world are in dire straits.

In fact, earlier this year, the Food Agriculture Organization (FAO) underscored the need for governments to establish clear and fair rules for managing access to fishery resources.

Citing figures from the FAO, the marine resources minister said 70 percent of all global fisheries are either over exploited or fully exploited.

"They also claim that by 2049, it is expected that the percentage would grow to some 85 percent unless the nations of the world take effective measures to combat the problems associated with over-fishing," Minister Miller said.

"While the Department of Marine Resources is not in a position to accurately describe the state of Bahamian fishery resources, it has indicated the belief that the main fisheries based on the crawfish, conch and groupers are either being fully exploited or being over-fished at this time."

Based on figures compiled by the Department of Immigration over a three year period, 476,010 lbs of crawfish were caught in 2000, 543,018 lbs in 2001, 539,346 lbs in 2002 and 410,622 lbs in 2003.

During the same period, officials recorded more than 119,000 lbs of conch were caught in 2000, 135,755 lbs in 2001, 134,837 lbs in 2002 and 102,656 lbs in 2003.

When it came to reef fish, 1.6 million pounds were captured in the first of the four years, 1.8 million pounds in the second year, another 1.8 million pounds in the third year and 1.4 million pounds in the final year.

This is the only issue about which Minister Miller expressed serious concern. He also addressed the vexing issue of poachers who operate without any regard for Bahamian laws.

According to the Minister, in the most recent case, some 35,000 lbs of fisheries products were caught after only five days of fishing.

Local fishermen have long stressed the need for additional Defence Force vessels to patrol key areas like the Martinella Shoals on the Little Bahama Bank and on the southern edges of the Great Bahama Bank where

New Catch Limits For Sports Fishermen

poaching is more likely to occur.