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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Leave a place at the bar for the mutton snappers



The writer says spawning areas for mutton snapper need better protection. *Contributed*



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Mutton snapper are a prized catch of Keys fishermen, known for their fight and delicious meat. The species is so tasty some restaurants used to pass the fillets off as red snapper.

Muttons are also very predictable in terms of when and where they spawn. This behavior is an added benefit for fishermen planning an action-packed day on the water, but it also poses a problem for those large keeper-size mutton snapper they crave.

Unlike red snapper, which spawn over vast areas of the continental shelf, mutton snapper will migrate, often dozens of miles, to concentrate their numbers and reproduce at very specific deep reef locations known as spawning aggregations. These sites typically share similar characteristics, such as prominent bottom contours and a close proximity to strong ocean currents, which ensure the larvae spawned from these romantic interludes are broadcast to surrounding waters far and wide.

Muttons aren't looking for attention during this intimate event, but still they find it in abundance, especially from fishermen. When the spawn is on, captains crowd these aggregations to fill their coolers and provide a good day of fishing for their clients. Those who've joined the fray know it's quite easy to limit out. It's like shooting fish in a barrel, except that there are many, many marksmen taking aim.

Nowhere in the Keys is this phenomenon more intense than at a small spit of bottom adjacent to the famed Western Dry Rocks.

During the full moons from May through June, an armada of anglers steams 11 miles southwest of Key West to jockey for position at Boca Grande Bar, the only known mutton snapper spawning site in Florida state waters. Depending on the time of year, fishermen can also expect to encounter similar aggregations of black grouper and gray snapper ripe with roe, as well as large gatherings of permit and various species of jacks.

The crowds there have gotten so bad, a few long-time fishermen have stopped going. To some it's just not worth the hassle. To many more fishermen, it's just not right.

A growing body of commercial and recreational fishermen, me included, has decided that hammering on spawning fish is not only unethical, it also doesn't make sense. Research conducted throughout the Caribbean indicates that overfishing spawning aggregations of Nassau grouper and mutton snapper has time and again lead to local population collapses.

Now, we're witnessing the same scenario here at home, whittling down our breeding populations of mutton and other species in the Keys. Big catches at Boca Grande Bar might have worked when there were more fish and fewer fishermen, but it's no way to manage the resource today.

Fortunately, the solution is simple and proven – protect fish when and where they spawn. South Florida fishermen and scientists have reveled at the rebound of mutton snapper abundance that followed the protection of Riley's Hump — a spawning aggregation site located within the Dry Tortugas Ecological Reserve. Since Riley's was protected in 2001, mutton snapper spawning biomass there has increased 400 percent.

Each of those adults make millions of larval fish that are carried north courtesy of the powerful Loop Current. Fishermen from Key West to as far north as Stuart have witnessed more mutton at local reefs and inshore habitats, as a result. The fishing is better, but if you talk to the old timers it's still nowhere near what it used to be.

This fact is not lost on the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, which are holding a series of public hearings on the Council's proposed mutton snapper amendment 41 this month, including in Duck Key Aug. 16, Key West Aug. 17 and Key Largo Aug. 18. The amendment will ease some of the pressure on muttons through new size and catch limits. It does not, however, take any action to safeguard muttons when and where they are most vulnerable.

Protecting mutton and other spawning fish at Boca Grande Bar is not on the state's radar, but it definitely should be.

Jon Reynolds, charter captain, Brian Reynolds, business manager, Drop Back Charters Islamorada

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